

Rabbi Greg Weitzman
HHD Sermon 2015

The history of the Jewish people is made up of many books and stories. I'd like to begin this High Holy Day by telling you a personal *story*, about a book. One of them. This story begins in 1930s Germany facing a major turning point in its history, which resulted in Adolph Hitler becoming Fuhrer.

Prior to the rise of Nazism and Adolf Hitler, life in Germany for the Jews was relatively prosperous. In the 19th century, the Emancipation of the Jews led to the creation of the Reform Movement and the establishment of our own Rodeph Sholom in NYC. Intellectuals such as Moses Mendelsohn, Samson Raphael Hirsch, and Abraham Geiger paved the way for twentieth century thinkers like Albert Einstein, Martin Buber, and Karl Manheim. Nine German citizens were awarded Nobel prizes, five of whom were Jewish scientists.

Established in the late 19th century by Abraham Geiger, the Hochschule fur dis Wissenschaft des Judentum was the first liberal seminary in Berlin. By 1933, the institution had ordained such giants as Rabbi Leo Baeck, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Rabbi Solomon Schechter. With Nazism closing its grasp around all Jewish schools and universities, lecturer Rabbi Leo Baeck and Julian Morgenstern, the President of Hebrew Union College in the United States arranged for an exchange-student program. On June 20th, 1935 – just over 80 years ago – five students from Berlin were saved from the fires that had already started to be lit in Europe. This self-named “gang of five” included Gunther Plaut, the author of *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, Alfred Wolff, Wolli Kaelter, Herman Schaalman, and the one that is most significant to my story, Leo Lichtenberg. All of these men made unique and profound contributions to the North American Reform Community.

Over the summer I told this story and a story about a book that I received following my ordination from my childhood rabbi. A book that has become very special to me; a book that I now consider an old friend. As I unwrapped the frail pages and opened up the inside cover I noticed two inscriptions:

The first read: “Dear Adam, I feel that Leo is with us at this moment. May his blessing be with you always. Fondly Hilde.”

And the second read: “Dear Greg...it is my pleasure to pass on this historic book to you – historic in that it was published so long ago and historic in that it has important ties to Rabbi Lichtenberg and the saga of his coming to the US and his rabbinate.”

This book is literally a Book of Life. It is a copy of the classic rabbinical text known as *Midrash Rabba*, an edition that was published in Warsaw in 1874, and it was the volume that Rabbi Leo Lichtenberg used along his life's journey. Rabbi Lichtenberg was literally pulled out of the fire lit by the Nazis in Germany in the 1930's and came to America to be ordained by HUC-JIR with the rest of the self-named “gang of five.” He served the Jewish people of Texas, our armed forces, served as the president of the National Association of Hillel, and at Hofstra University on Long Island, where he ultimately met my childhood rabbi who eventually received the book from Rabbi Lichtenberg's wife Hilde.

Rabbi Lichtenberg was one of the few who made it out of Nazi Germany to go on to live a full life. Over the summer I had the opportunity to speak with Rabbi Lichtenberg's daughter who told me

that the “gang of five” always carried an extra chip on their shoulder, an extra sense of responsibility to make their life one of meaning. For they knew it could easily have gone the other way.

As I found out in my conversations with his daughter and Rabbi Hermann Schaalman who at 101 is the last remaining member of the “gang of five,” there were actually six who President Morgenstern tried to get out of Nazi Germany. The sixth student, however, was not studying to be a Rabbi. He was studying to be a librarian: a keeper of books. As Nazi Germany strove to suppress learning and encouraged an increase in the burning of books, it should not come as a surprise that a librarian was not granted a visa by the German government and wound up perishing in the Holocaust. Though his name has been lost to history and aging minds, I have shared his story with you today, bringing it back from death to your life.

If we take a moment to think about what a book is, we can pick apart a few unique details. Books are made of paper and are a collection of words and thoughts that at one point were in the author’s mind’s eye and are now written down for all of us to see. There is punctuation and a table of contents. Taken as individual pieces, a book is not very special. But as a whole, a book becomes something altogether different, it becomes unique: a book can become a story. A book can be a part of other stories.

Think about our own story, the story of the Jewish people. We are known as the People of the Book for a reason. We believe that it is our responsibility and calling to immerse ourselves in study and text, to turn our stories over and over again. If we have learned anything it is that this book, this Torah matters. It matters to you, it matters to me – it matters to each of us. Torah is our Book of Life, *Eitz Chayim Hi, Lemachazim Ba, v’tomcheyah meushar*; “*It is a tree of life to all who grasp it, and whoever holds on to it is happy.*”

Why is it so important to immerse ourselves in Torah? Everything we are and everything we do comes from Torah. In our liturgy we are taught that the study of Torah is greater than all other mitzvot. As we say in our prayers each day – *talmud torah k’neged kulam*, “the study of Torah is equivalent to all of the other mitzvot because it leads to them all.” For the Jewish people, the study of Torah never ends. Each year, as we read the sacred text again, it can be as if we are reading it for the first time. Each encounter with sacred text offers the possibility of new meanings.

When we study Torah we connect ourselves to our past. We connect to the rabbis and students who previously studied these texts. Yet, it is more than just a connection to history that makes Torah important. Within Torah we find the textual basis on how to live our lives. I became a Rabbi for a few reasons, but first and foremost was because I am a teacher of Torah. I believe that within Torah we can find answers to life’s great questions, we can find a way to worship, we can find business ethics and moral ethics, and yes, we can find ourselves. When I study Torah, I can feel myself be moved by the words and the stories. I love the rawness of Torah. It is honest in its portrayal of people. Hero or villain, good traits and bad are all laid bare for everyone to see.

Think about what the world would be like without Torah? The ethical code of the Western world comes straight from Torah. Morality and the sense of responsibility for one's fellow human comes from Torah. Christianity refers to the Golden Rule, "Treat others the way you want to be treated." It comes from our Torah! "*Ve'ahavta, lireacha camocha!*" Love your neighbor as yourself in Leviticus! It's right there for us to see – so plainly, so clearly.

You live a life of Torah. Your presence here today is an affirmation of the verses from Leviticus and Numbers which tell us to "have a holy convocation proclaimed with the shofar." When you choose not to steal, commit adultery, cheat, lie – it is from Torah! You need to see it, to realize that is within each of us.

Even the world's understanding of a day of rest comes from Torah. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches, "The Bible is more concerned with time than with space. It sees the world in the dimension of time. It pays more attention to generations, to events, than to countries, to things; it is more concerned with history than with geography. To understand the teaching of the Bible, one must accept its premise that time has a meaning for life which is at least equal to that of space; that time has a significance and sovereignty of its own. The meaning of Shabbat is to celebrate time rather than space." The peace of Shabbat, forcing ourselves to be present is commanded to us in Torah. Where would we be as a people without this commandment? Ahad Aham notes, "More than the Jewish people have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jewish people;" I would add, "More than the Jewish people have kept Torah, Torah has kept the Jewish People."

It says in Deuteronomy, "*lo bashamayim hi, it is not in heaven.*" Our Rabbi's teach that the "it" is the Torah. The phrase "not in Heaven" is understood to justify man's authority to interpret the Torah. The Talmud explains, "[The Torah] is not in Heaven" to mean that the meaning of the Torah itself is to be uncovered not by prophets, or even God's miracles or words, but by man's interpretation and decision-making. Torah does not exist all around us, it exists within us. It is within our hearts, it is who we are as Jews. We cannot separate ourselves from Torah, just like I cannot rip out my heart. We simply cannot live without it beating within us and through us. It truly is a source of life, eitz chayim hi.

A first-century CE teacher, Rabbi Ben Bag Bag, taught his students, *hafach ba v'hafach ba* "Turn the Torah, and turn it again, for everything you want to know is found within it." (Avot 5:25) The study of Torah can be both an intellectual adventure and a spiritual journey. The many meanings of Torah offer the potential to add greatly to one's life. And why do we turn it over again and again each year? The stories and teachings may not change, but we change. As we change so does our interpretation of Torah.

How amazing is it to note that the book given to me is a copy of Midrash? The history of Torah is one of interpretation. Every seemingly superfluous letter, unclear transition, and difficult phrase invites discussion, explanation, and elaboration. Midrashim offer a glimpse of

the ways that people of various times and places have grappled to understand the biblical text and to make it meaningful for their own lives.

After the Temple was destroyed we were a lost people. Within Torah are the rules and laws of a sacrificial cult with priests and fire. The center of our religion was the Temple! Take out a Torah and show me where it says that as a people we are about the book not the Temple – trust me it's not in there! It was the *midrashim*, the interpretations of our ancestors which brought us out of the ashes and saved us as a people! *Midrash* is our people wrestling to stay relevant in changing times. It is our history in story, our people seeking a new future. The stories written in Rabbi Lichtenberg's book took our people in new directions and new understandings of the tradition.

The ability to interpret is powerful. The Rabbis have been interpreting the text for thousands of years. Again, to use the example of the temple's destruction, where would we be without our sages' stories? A story is told of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai meeting with Vespasian before Jerusalem was destroyed. Rabbi Yohanan says to Vespasian: "Jerusalem may be lost, but give me Yavneh and its sages." Why did Yavneh matter? Why did and why does the study of midrash matter? Because Yavneh allowed later generations, after the destruction of the temple, to have a place to study, learn, and interpret. This is a powerful message and midrash – that new chapters in our history were written and continue to be every day, and if we seek to interpret, our midrash gives us the authority to do this.

Is this not what we as Reform Jews do every day? We are still writing new chapters and sequels. The story of Rabbi Lichtenberg continues to be written by me each day. Years after it was first published this book still has something to offer us; it still has something to teach us.

Yet today, we sit together not to wrestle with only the Torah, but to also wrestle with another book, the book of Life. The book of Life is described in the *unataneh tokef*. The language of our prayer imagines God as judge and king, sitting in the divine court on the divine throne of justice, reviewing our deeds. On a table before God lies a large book with many pages, as many pages as there are people in the world. Each of us has a page dedicated just to us. Written on that page, by our own hand, in our own writing, are all the things we have done during the past year. God considers those things, weighs the good against the bad, and then, as the prayers declare, decides "who shall live and who shall die."¹

The sages teach that one lesson of the High Holy Days is not that we have to be perfect, but that we are, and can continue to be, very good. It is enough that we continually strive to achieve our potential in whatever we do. God wants us to create a bestseller about the story of our own life regardless of our occupation or monetary worth. It is only when we fail to be the best we can be that we are held accountable. Martin Buber, in his monumental book *Tales of the Hasidim*, speaks about Rabbi Meshulam Zusya who reportedly said on his death bed, "In the

¹ Cardin, Rabbi N. 'Book Of Life'. *My Jewish Learning*. N.p., 2015. Web. 1 Oct. 2015.

world to come, they will not ask me, 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me, 'Why were you not Zusya?'"

At its core, the liturgy of the High Holy Days' is fairly straightforward: at some point, we are all going to die. We cannot control death, but the *unataneh tokef* teaches us how to give our lives meaning: *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedekah*. They won't cure a disease or bring someone back to life, but they may bring people to our sickbed or to our house of mourning who make us smile. They may restore to our lives a sense of connection, purpose, or peace. And where do we find the original source of *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedekah*? From Torah.

My professor Rabbi Margaret Wenig describes the scenery on the Big Island of Hawaii. If you have ever been there you know how majestic and awe-inspiring it is. There are two volcanoes on the island whose eruptions destroyed everything in their wake – forests, homes, roads – and left great swaths of lava hardened into a razor-sharp jagged surface. The barren landscape is frightening to see. What power! Yet on the west side of the island, the rainy side, vegetation pushes through the black swaths of death. And as the years pass, more green appears. Rain could not stop the flow of the deadly lava, but rain could ultimately turn the barren landscape into a foundation of life. Like rain, *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* can bring new life to an otherwise bleak landscape.

The same can be said of Torah. After crossing the Sea of Reeds with God's unforgettable help, the Israelites continued on into the wilderness of Shur. Three days into their journey without water, their mood turned ugly. The water at Marah was too bitter to drink. They groused and God instructed Moses to sweeten the water with a piece of wood, which he did successfully.

It is the Midrash that lifts the episode out of the ordinary. On the verse, "They traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water" the Rabbis teach: "Water actually stands for Torah, as it is says in Isaiah, 'All who are thirsty, come for water.' Having gone for three days without Torah, the prophets among them stepped forth and legislated that the Torah should be read on the second and fifth days of the week as well as on Shabbat so that they would not let three days pass without Torah"(BT Bava Kama 82a).

Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary notes, this "analogy drives home the point that Torah to Jews is as vital as water to humans. They are both indispensable sources of life. Without Torah, Jewish life would face extinction. Jews would perish like fish out of water.

This brings me back to Rabbi Leo Lichtenberg whose book is with us today. His story did not end in 1933. Today, 80 years later, I continue to write chapters in Rabbi Lichtenberg's life story.

This book matters to me, this story matters to me. As Jews we are commanded to study – to immerse ourselves in the text. An interaction recorded in the Talmud goes as follows: Rabbi Tarfon and some elders were reclining in an upper chamber in the house of Nitza in Lod

when this question came up: Which is greater, study or action? Rabbi Tarfon spoke up and said: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva spoke up and said: Study is greater. The others then spoke up and said: Study is greater because it leads to action.

Study leads to actions. In every book we have the possibility of finding the answers to our questions. From study, we learn what it is that we must do. We must hear the words of *unataneh tokef* as an opportunity to give our lives meaning. When we read Torah, when we study what it is saying, who will we be afterwards? Will we find ourselves turning towards God or will we continue to be lost on our current path of self-destruction? Will we be satisfied with where we are or will we seek to better ourselves and the world around us?

We do not come to synagogue on the High Holy Days to plead with God, “While you’ve got the Book of Life open, can I see how the story unfolds?” If we did, I can imagine that God might laugh and tell us that there is not really anything to look at.

The Book of Life is a story – it is your story, and my story. It has not yet been written. It is up to us, the main characters of this world, to write our own stories – to live our own stories.

Eitz Chayim Hi, Lemachazim Ba, v'tomcheyah meushar; “It is a tree of life to all who grasp it, and whoever holds on to it is happy.”