

Hayyei Sarah

This week's *parashah* is Hayyei Sarah, "The Life of Sarah". The *parashah* begins with the declaration that Sarah's lifetime was one hundred and twenty and seven years, stretching out her age as separate words to simulate the length of her life¹. We are told that Abraham, the *aivel*, the mourning widower, has approached Hittite merchants to purchase a burial *kever*, the cave of Machpelah, owned by Ephron, son of Zohar. Ephron was skilled at bargaining, and the *parashah* describes the negotiation that was customary for the time. Abraham paid full price not only for the cave but for the adjoining land. He buried the bride of his youth, Sarah, in the cave at Machpelah, and the remainder of the *parashah* relates how Abraham found a suitable wife for his son, Isaac. Abraham's servant found Rebekah, a nice Jewish girl, and brought her home to meet the family. Eventually, Abraham was gathered to his kin at the age of 175 years, "dying at a good ripe age, old and contented." He was buried at the cave of Machpelah, united in death with his beloved wife.

I was confused about the literal translation of the Hebrew word *hayyei* because it means "lives". Then I realized that *hayyei* was simply the *smichut*, or supportive plural form of *hayyim*, so it means "lives of". But then why is the word *hayyim* in the plural form to begin with? Don't we have only one life to live? If so, why the plural form? If not, where are the many clones of me having good times somewhere?

I went to my teacher, Resh Nebbish, who was learned in these matters. I don't remember where we met, but I know that we go back a long time. What was obviously *p'shat*, superficial interpretation to me, became *drash*, deep exegesis of Torah, to him. I found him at his favorite coffee shop raising a cup of Seattle's best brew to his lips. He saw me out of the corner of his eye just as he began to sip, and put the cup down quickly.

"Resh Nebbish", I said. "It's been a while since I last saw you. I have come to seek wisdom at the feet of the wise."

"Better you should bring some ice for my coffee, my dear, so your teacher doesn't burn his tongue."

I went to the barista to ask for some ice to cool my teacher's coffee and returned. Resh Nebbish put the ice into his coffee and I put my question to him. "Resh Nebbish, why is the Hebrew word for "life" in the plural form?"

He deigned to look at me as if I were the *tam* at the Passover seder, the simple son. "Superposition" he said, and went back to drinking his cooling coffee. I chilled for a while waiting for him to say more, but he was fully occupied with his pastry and I realized that I had been dismissed.

As I went my way, I pondered what he had said. I knew that superposition is a fundamental principle in mathematics, science, and engineering, but I had no idea why he linked it to the Hebrew word for life. Superposition refers to the overlaying of multiple phenomena, each one being superimposed on all of the others. Then, in a flash of insight, I understood where he was cleverly leading me. I am a different person when I am with different people. I react differently to each

¹ The number 127 may be stated as "One less than two raised to the 7th power", or 1111111 in binary notation, so we have evidence that God was familiar with binary arithmetic.

one, yet I am myself. All of my different selves are manifestations of my personality, which is evoked differently when I am with other people. I have many layers, all of them manifest or latent, and coexisting. Another interpretation might be that each individual's existence is overlaid upon the life of everyone else around that person. This is reflected in the Talmudic saying that "whoever destroys a single life is as if he had destroyed an entire universe, and whoever sustains a single life is as if he had sustained an entire universe."² John Donne expressed the same understanding of superposition when he wrote "Therefore, send not to know / For whom the bell tolls, / It tolls for thee."³

Symbols also manifest the principle of superposition: a symbol is a word or visual image that has been overlaid with more than one meaning, and one who hears the symbol or reads it or sees it awakens to the several meanings contained in the physical phenomenon of sound or sight. It is truly amazing to the informed mind that so much compression can be contained in a puff of air or a two-dimensional picture. Words and images serve to delimit reality, to carve out a specific set of meanings projected upon the mind when the physical stimulus is received by the ear or the eye.

One symbol of frequent mention and attention is the word "God".

There is a story, written by the noted science fiction writer, Arthur C. Clarke, called "The Nine Billion Names of God." Monks in an Asian monastery have been recording all of the known names of God by hand, and they have decided that they needed a computer to help them finish their task. They have computed the number of names of God and estimated that, without assistance, the task will take 15,000 years to finish. They wanted to use the computer to abbreviate their efforts. Once all of the names have been recorded, God's purpose for the universe will have been accomplished, and the universe will come to an end. The computer was installed by a couple of IT people from the West, it was booted up, the program to finish the cataloging of the nine billion names was started, and three months later, the job was done. When the last name was recorded, the stars began to wink out.

Why did all the stars begin to disappear? Because, we are told, the task for which the universe had been created, that is, to catalogue all of God's names, had been completed. How are we to understand this metaphor? Perhaps it is an indication of how important mystery is to us. Once all of God's names are known, the Ein Sof is no longer infinite. There is no longer anything that is not known, nothing beyond human comprehension, and hence, nothing divine in life. So God began to return his creation to the original state of *tohu va'vohu*—without form and void, and unfit for human habitation.

We consider the Divine Name to be sacred, and to deface it is *hillul hashem*, desecration of the name of God. To avoid this possibility, we often write the word "God" as "G – d" so as to circumscribe the chance of accidentally damaging what we have written and thereby committing a sin.

In earlier times, the Divine Name was written manually on parchment or printed on paper. Paper is easily bent, folded, spindled, and mutilated. Worn-out siddurim and Torah scrolls and any other document containing the Divine name are stored in a *genizah* to preserve their contents from accidental damage.

² Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

³ Donne, John, "Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions", Meditation XVII.

Today, we still have parchment and paper, and additionally more modern media such as flat-screen displays and flash memory sticks. If we type the Divine Name in any of its forms onto a computer display screen and backspace over it, have we committed the sin of *hillul hashem*? If we save a document containing the term “HaKadosh Barukh Hu” onto a hard disk drive that we know will deteriorate over time because the magnetic fields representing *HaShem*’s name will weaken and collapse, are we obliged to remove the drive at some future date and store it in a *genizah*?

In the case of the computer display screen, whatever is typed or displayed is being overwritten and rewritten many times per second due to the nature of the electronics in the display, so there is no concept of permanence attributable to the medium. In the case of the hard disk drive, we expect that the contents of a file that we create and save will be available for us the next time that we open it, so one would think that the hard disk drive and flash memory sticks ought to be put into a *genizah* when they begin to fail.

Actually, there is a precedent in the Torah for creating a deliberately temporary recording of God’s name. In *parashat Naso* (Vayikrah 4:21-7:89), a woman accused of adultery by her husband had to suffer an ordeal to demonstrate her innocence and fidelity. God’s name was written onto a parchment. The parchment was placed in water so that the ink would dissolve and Divine essence would be infused into the liquid. Also, dirt from the floor of the Tabernacle was added to the holy water. The accused wife had to drink the water, and if she were guilty there would be immediate bodily disfigurement as a sign of guilt. If she were innocent, she would become fecund and pregnant soon after. While this ritual appears to us to be misogynistic and degrading to the accused wife, it served the higher purpose of restoring *sholom bayit*, peace to a household and community. There are much deeper symbolisms to be investigated but not in the limited time that we have here. So, returning to the issue of recording the Holy Name on a perishable medium, it would seem that, in light of the *Sotah* ritual, it is not necessary to store old hard drives or laser-written CD’s or memory sticks in a *genizah*.⁴ Recording one of the many versions of the Divine Name on a perishable medium is like writing it on a whiteboard, knowing that it will at some point in time be erased. There is no expectation of permanence in the transcriptive act.

Another issue entirely is the question of whether any version of God’s name is holy at all. If we write the Tetragrammaton (yud hei vav hei) in English as “Yahweh” or “Jehovah” or any transliteration from the Hebrew, are we transcribing the Ineffable Name or not? No, we are not transcribing it because we do not know how it was pronounced. We can extend this concept to any version of God’s name without sinning because merely writing the letters “G o d” does not make the word holy nor does it imbue the medium upon which the letters “G o d” are written with sanctity. We must show respect to the object, but it is not worthy of our veneration.⁵

We have come a great distance from the story of Abraham returning his beloved wife to the *adamah*, the earth from which we all came and to which we, too, return. We have considered how each of us is a universe unto ourselves and as defined in relation to others. We speculated upon the purpose for which the *’olam*, the emptiness, was filled with God’s creations. We saw how layers of meaning can be superimposed on physical phenomena, and we discussed how to treat used and worn-out documents containing the Holy Name, so as to show proper respect to the Holy One, Blessed Be He. From a short narrative of a devoted husband to a discussion of

⁴ Rabbi Stuart Light brought the *Sotah* ritual to my awareness when I discussed this drash with him on 2008.11.01.

⁵ Ditto the above reference to Rabbi Light’s knowledge.

physical principles, intra- and inter-personal awareness, cosmology, ritual, and finally returning to our relationship with the Creator, we come to rest.

How wonderful it is to *drash*, to draw up wisdom from the *mei hayyim*, the living waters of the Torah!

Jung and easily Freudened, I rejoiced and James Joyce'd when I came to the reasonably profound conclusion that Torah is the spiritual DNA of the Jewish people.

Thank you for your attention.

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