

*Lamed* and *Vet*, the last and then first letter of the Torah. The *Lamed*, final letter of the final word of the Torah, *Yisrael* and *Bet* the first letter of the first word- *Bereishet*- in the beginning. Together they form the Hebrew word *Lev*, heart, symbolic source of our emotions, feelings, and of love.

Endings and Beginnings... Last and first... Lost and found. These themes are ever-present this year. To be sure, they are intimately connected to the story of our Ancient Sephardic Torah, which was lost and then found, and also all of all our stories.

Among those things we lost last year, trapped at home on endless zoom calls, was the visceral sense of community. The casual hellos and conversations. Once things began to reopen, the sense of relief and connection we experienced was like the air we needed- perhaps literally. How we longed for that sense of connection. My personal experience, arriving last summer in Great Neck knowing nobody, showed me how difficult it is to exist without community, without ways to make or connect with friends.

I am thus thrilled to have now met many of you in the brief window before Delta, and to see many of you here over the high holy days, though many more are watching from home. Still, this is in stark contrast to a year ago when, in my first High Holy Days here in Great Neck. For the first time in 50 years there was No One in this sanctuary. How lonely it was, just us here, praying to the cameras, with nobody in the seats, nobody in the room reading Torah.

I'm about to go on a tangent, but in ancient paleo-Hebrew, the letters, like those of other near Eastern languages, were originally pictographs. An *Alef*, for example, originally looked like the head of an ox- An *Elef* is a domesticated beast. This shape is still discernible in the script form of the letter when rotated 90 deg.

The *Yud* was a *Yad*- a hand, the *Mem*, like *Mayim*, waves of water, the *Bet* a *Bayit* or house, the *Shin* as in *Shinayim*- teeth, still visible in the block letter form we see today. *Lamed* was a cattle prod, perhaps apt for a stiff necked people... But *Lamed* is also a cognate of the Hebrew word, *Lomed*, a learner, which our tradition prizes.

Which leads me to a tale. **Pirkei Avot 6:9** (Mishnah) Rabbi Yose ben Kisma said: Once I was walking by the way when a man met me, and greeted me and I greeted him. He said to me, "Rabbi, where are you from?" I said to him, "I am from a great city of sages and scribes."

He said to me, "Rabbi, would you consider living with us in our place? I would give you a thousand thousand denarii of gold, and precious stones and pearls." I said to him: "My son, even if you were to give me all the silver and gold, precious stones and pearls that are in the world, I would not dwell anywhere except in a place of Torah; for when a man passes away there accompany him neither gold nor silver, nor precious stones nor pearls, but Torah and good deeds alone..., as it is said,

"When you walk it will lead you. When you lie down it will watch over you; and when you are awake it will talk with you" (Proverbs 6:22). "When you walk it will lead you" in this world. "When you lie down it will watch over you" in the grave; "And when you are awake it will talk with you" in the world to come, expanding on a well known Torah passage known as *V'Ahavta*.

Dr. Joshua Kulp teaches in his book *Mishnah Yomit* that, "Rabbi Yose ben Kisma will not leave his city full of sages, even to go to a place where they will give him all of the money in the world. The wealth of Torah accompanies not only in this world, but... onwards to the world to come. Note how opposite this idea is from the ancient practice of burying a person with some of his material possessions.... In Judaism what accompanies a person to the world to come are not his material possessions but his spiritual accomplishments: learning Torah and performing good deeds."

My Grandpa Joe, was fond of pithy sayings. He would remind me, in his late years, "Shrouds have no pockets, Adam. You can't take it with you." Material wealth can buy many nice things. Cars. houses. Beautiful clothing and even jewels to adorn ourselves. And there is no shame in this, its acquisition nor the possessions to surely follow. Paraphrasing Tevye the Milkman of Fiddler on the Roof fame, if money is a curse, may I be smitten by it.

And the Talmud quite agrees. "*Ein Kemach, ein Torah*" our sages taught- without sustenance there is no Torah. Without substance through which we can live physically, we cannot grow spiritually. Material wealth allows for the feeding of the poor, for communal infrastructure and sustains religious institutions like our own, and thus it has been since the days in the wilderness

when, as the Torah itself relates, people generously gave *Terumat haLev*, gifts of their hearts, to the portable Mishkan. Such fortunates are, it seems, only means to an end.

Many a Chassidic story revolves around fortunes lost, and later found. Silver and gold, we soon learn, cannot address matters of the soul and are easily lost or stolen. The treasure invariably found in these tales is typically metaphorical, a spiritual reward rather than a material one that can never be lost. And often, it is something that has been “there all along,” hiding in plain sight.

Our ancient Sephardic scroll, which we “found” was also here all along. The tale of its discovery has the quality of a meta-Chasidic tale. We are not Chasidim to be sure, though if material well-being is as easily lost as the true wealth of knowledge and spirituality, the lesson seems to be not the value of the actual object of such a Torah but rather the values it brings out in us.

If communal connections are something we’ve lost, we must prepare to find them once more. Yes, there’s zoom fatigue and we like wearing PJ’s, but if you have been keeping your camera off, are you not separating yourself from the community somehow?

These relationships, they are the real treasures, hiding in plain sight. As treasure hunters, we must shake off their dust, help them shed the PJ’s and put on royal garments. Likewise, with our Sephardic Torah- it too deserves a new garment for sure, but more broadly, how and why does one uncover the treasure of learning Torah?

To be clear, that treasure is also hidden in plain sight. It is behind these closed ark doors, or in dusty old books, but either can be opened. So what is the problem? If it is not hidden away somewhere in a filing cabinet waiting to be found as our Sephardic Torah was, perhaps it is hidden in Hebrew words we may not understand, or even when translated, contains enigmatic phrases and instructions that we cannot decipher ourselves.

How, Cantor, can I be a *Lamed*, a *Lomed*, with such obstacles? For that, and this is a bit of a self-interested plug, contact the Rabbis or I- the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. But these are not discreet, distinct ideas in our tradition- they are intricately linked. Returning to *Pirkei Avot*, we learn:

“Rabbi Nehorai said: Go as a voluntary exile to a place of Torah, and do not say that the Torah will follow you, for it is your companions who will make it your permanent possession. Do not rely upon your own understanding.” *Pirkei Avot 3 Verse 18*

Nehorai instructs us to leave the place where there is no Torah, to voluntarily depart from where there is only material wealth, to exile ourselves from that place of pure physical possession to seek out a place where one can pursue spiritual wealth and acquire it, we presume, through study.

But even then, the act of study, of *Limmud*, is not enough. Torah will not follow you, he says, of its own accord. Even studying it until the wee hours of the night will not make its knowledge yours. “Do not rely upon your own understanding.” Even if you were to master the language and decipher it unassisted, it would not suffice.

“For it is your companions who will make it your permanent possession.” That is, only by learning with and from others can you truly acquire this knowledge. Only through the social act of “Chevruta” studying with a friend can we achieve the goal.

Chapter 3 of *Pirkei Avot* opens with Ben Zoma’s famous question: “*Mi Chacham?*” Who is wise? The person who learns from all people. The prompt reminds us to be open minded, and in this instance I want to highlight that it includes, but is by no means limited to Rabbis and Cantors.

Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua used to say: “Let the honor of your student be as precious to you as your own...” *ibid verse 15* And so it is each week as I work with BM students. Together we pour over the text- not simply the pronunciation of this word or melody of that trope, but what does it mean?

By extension, in our community, weekly Torah study with a group of companions allows one not merely to acquire Torah knowledge from them, but their friendship and shared reflection and introspection that it brings. What is lost when we are separated is the visceral sense of community and friendship between us.

The Mishnah famously instructs us, “*Aseh lecha rav, knei l’cha chaver,*” “Make for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend” (*Pirkei Avot 1:6*). As we just heard, a clear interpretation of this teaching is that learning Torah requires one to have a teacher, and somehow in the journey of learning together one gains friendship with their teacher, peer or companion.

The Geonic era Tosefta text Avot d'Rabbi Natan (8:3) asks, "How does one acquire a friend? A person acquires a friend for themselves by eating and drinking with their friend, by studying Torah with their friend, by lodging with their friend, by sharing their private thoughts about Torah and other parts of life..."

We gain friends by sharing with them- food, shelter, adventures, but also by peeling back the emotional armor with which we protect our hearts and innermost thoughts and feelings about life and sharing. Study of Torah, the investigation and interpretations of its lessons and laws- this is not just the dry domain of long-dead Rabbis or contemporary clergy or religious Jews alone.

Engaging in discussion and debate over texts reveals our own thinking and feelings- it requires mutual trust. Learning Torah and living life are not separate domains- they are intertwined. Learning with companions deepens our relationships, sanctifying friendships into holy encounters.

One need not be a Rabbi, religious or a scholar to access this incredible act. It is available to everyone. Study of Torah is at the center of Jewish communal life- not just because it is the source of both Mitzvot and mythos, but because as we come together to seek revelation through our individual inquiry, we expose the innermost aspects of our souls to one another.

The name of the town from whence our ancient Sephardic Torah hails- that may well be lost to history, and that Torah is separated from its community of origin, but it is only lost if we fail to seek it out, and make it found. For before it came to us, it was not lost but central to the communal life, to that community's life. constantly being sought and found, bringing people together, for celebrations, s'machot, every week on Shabbat, throughout the year and through the decades and centuries.

So it may be for us as well. This Torah is special not because it is encrusted with jewels or gilded illumination of the text, or for its value as a rare object, but as a symbol. It is special because it still exists. It has rare characteristics and it is exceedingly old and beautiful. It is precious, however, because at one time it was an ordinary scroll that brought people like us together.

And so in an inverse of Rabbi Nehorai's teaching, somehow this Torah was exiled to us, here in Great Neck, so that we could find it, and in the process, discover something about ourselves. Whatever we may have lost in terms of our connection to community, to the Lev, heart of our lives, let us find it once more. Our responsibility is to "exile ourselves" to TBE, to the lessons of Torah. We must each of us come to learn from this Torah, learn about it so that we can say we found ourselves, we found one another, our community, our friends.

Following the High Holy Days, the *Torah Celebration Project* will continue, as it began this past spring, bringing to TBE monthly glimpses into the culture that gave rise to this ancient Sephardic scroll. Join us for a rich range of experiences, including Adult Education classes on the history of the Jewish communities of Morocco and Algeria, book club offerings and author discussions, music and food events, and a session with our friend, *Soferet* Linda Coppelson, to learn what makes this specific Torah scroll so unique and special.

I encourage you to attend these virtual and eventual in-person events, and more generally, I issue you a challenge- be the *Lomed*. Come learn with us, study a little Torah at TBE and make some friends in the process. Be in the *Lev*, the heart of our community by opening your own heart to learning some Torah. *Torah Lishma*, as we say, learning for its own sake.

The thing is, as Rabbi Nehorai said, you can't really do it on your own, by yourself. You have to do it with other people- one might call this friendship *lishma*- for its own sake. Rabbi Hillel famously taught- "Do not separate yourself from your community." Rather, come be a learner, a *Lomed*, a *lamed*, and you will find yourself at its beating heart, surrounded by friends.