

# English Leyning: Bringing New Meaning to the Torah Service

*Jack Kessler*

A FRIEND WHO IS AN ACTIVE OFFICER IN A LARGE New York synagogue attended a ritual committee discussion about the quality of services at the shul, and proposed that the Torah service be dropped. The shocked worthies wanted to know how he could suggest such a thing. He replied that Shabbat morning services in this shul were indeed engaging, emotionally and intellectually satisfying experiences. Everyone sings, discusses, participates...that is, until the Torah service. Then, he observed, the energy in the room drops dead. Yes, the columns of Hebrew are nicely chanted and melodically correct, but hadn't everyone present on the ritual committee seen for themselves how during the Torah Service the participation and engagement dropped to near zero, how people zoned out, drifted to the back to chat...and disengaged? Yes, the aliyot are called, and those chosen dutifully or cheerfully march to the front to recite the blessings, but as a whole, what might in earlier times have been a highlight of Shabbat morning was now deeply dull. All in all, it was not working. And if that was so, perhaps it should be dropped.

The committee certainly was not about to approve the idea, and thus my friend arrived at his purpose. He challenged them. If they were unwilling to drop the Torah service — as he had anticipated — were they not then obligated to discover and implement ways to make the Torah service come alive? If they had succeeded with the other components of the service, why couldn't the Torah service be re-visioned and renewed to match the quality of engagement and participation of the rest of the service?

I relate this episode to address a crucial issue for our communities: we need Torah to be alive for us as a living source of wisdom — brimming with meaning, relevant to the challenges of our lives, informing our choices, inspiring our spiritual journeys. Yes, of course Torah will always have a default iconic status, but for Torah to be alive, it must speak to us in compelling and inspiring ways.

My friend was hardly the first person in our contemporary scene to raise this challenge. Others, too, have been hot on the trail of making Torah-engagement a participatory experience. Amichai Lau-Lavie crafted ‘Storahtelling,’ which itself grew out of earlier experiments with bringing Torah text dramatically alive. Bibliodrama was championed by Peter Pitzele, his colleague Rivkah Walton, and others. The use of “theme-based aliyot” in which congregants self-selectedly come up to the Torah in response to the message of the reading, as explained in a brief *dvar Torah* that is shared before the aliyah, is yet another part of the widening effort to renew our engagement with Torah.

For myself, I was already an experienced *baal korei*/Torah reader when, about twenty years ago, I encountered my first experience with a way of chanting Torah that changed my experience of Torah reading forever. This became not only my personal “new normal,” but also the way I teach my cantorial students, the rabbinical student with whom I work, participants in the Davvenen’ Leadership Training Institute, and even my Bar and Bat Mitzvah kids.

Twenty years ago I first heard Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *z”l*, *leyn*/publicly read Torah in a flowing combination of Hebrew and English. His leyning in the traditional trop — the Torah melody — moved seamlessly from Hebrew into English translation and back into Hebrew without breaking the melody. Moreover, he used the English — which he was translating on the spot from the open scroll — to interpretively and dramatically teach the text. It was stunning. A tour-de-force! The text practically jumped off the page. I had never heard Torah so passionately alive, so powerful. I’d been leyning Torah my whole adult life, and I know the Hebrew reasonably well, but others around me, for whom the Hebrew would typically be a blur without meaning, were riveted too. They heard the ancient Hebrew, its inflections and rhythms, but interspersed with English in a way that brought them inside the experience. The public reading of Torah had come alive! The words leapt from the scroll into their hearts. We could hear the song of Torah become the carrier wave for the emotional power of the text. People who were hearing Torah read from the scroll, and understood it for the first time, wept.

For me, this was one of those aha! moments. I realized that even for the non-Hebrew-speaking Jewish world, Torah could be immediately alive and vital. I too began leyning this way, and have watched the reactions. Because not every synagogue is prepared for such a shift, I began with Megillat Esther on Purim, selectively and often humorously, translating passages directly from the scroll as I went along. I'd watch as the crowd, restlessly waiting for the one word they understood (Haman!), would suddenly wake up and pay attention.

Then gradually I began to bring my "direct-from-the-scroll" translations to the Torah service. I'd watch to see the ripple of surprise among those hearing Torah like this for the first time. The energy shifts in the room. There is an elevation of attentiveness. People smile, and lean forward in their seats to hear, as if to say: "Wait a minute, I *understand* this! It *means* something! Torah is speaking to *me!*"

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There are any number of ways to leyn in Hebrew/English. Because every translation has a midrashic element and is an interpretive rendering of the sense of the original Hebrew, the process opens up the opportunity to share the multiple layers of meaning in the Torah text. And of course, the translation of a given text will not necessarily always be the same, but may vary depending on the reader's understanding of the text at that time, and what s/he wishes to stress on that occasion.

The pattern I have developed is to always begin and end in Hebrew, no matter how much of a blend of Hebrew and English may fall within the section I am chanting. This puts the translation or interpretive reading squarely inside the frame of the original language, which has unique power. Inside that frame, there are diverse ways to leyn. One can alternate Hebrew and English sentence by sentence (less becomes too choppy) or in larger segments. One can translate all or only some of the Hebrew. Or the reverse: one can switch into leyning in English, and add in Hebrew phrases or whole segments as feels appropriate.

At this point, I wish to share a word about “trop.” Trop is a precise system for the public singing of Torah. It was developed for dramatic expression and to provide punctuation; as it is structurally linked to Hebrew grammar it is also a means of delivering the text with grammatical nuance. The current system we use was developed in the eighth century, and combines two earlier systems, a Babylonian and a Palestinian tradition. English is of course a very different language; singing English using trop means significantly disengaging the trop from its link to Hebrew. When singing English in trop, I suggest that you not try to apply the trop from the Hebrew overly rigidly, but rather take the Hebrew trop settings as a guideline, and freely create an English version that does the job in that language.

My successful experiences with Hebrew/English Torah leyning have led me into other texts. Based on my earlier work with Megillat Esther I went on to create and record an original abbreviated version of Megillat Esther entirely in English, set of course in Megillah trop. (Imagine hearing: “...Now this was the Ahasuerus whose empire extended from India to Ethiopia. In the third year of his reign he threw a huge party...” — you can hear the trop at work!) Next I developed English haftarah using my own English translation of the standard haftarah, also set in haftarah trop.

Then, going boldly where no hazzan had gone before, on a year in which July 4th fell on Shabbat, I set the Declaration of Independence to haftarah trop and offered it in my shul as an alternative haftarah. This text, drawn from the American revolutionary experience, came alive as a prophetic text in an extraordinary way. You can see it in full on the Shalom Center website (<https://theshalomcenter.org/node/1735>). Subsequently, using excerpts from several of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s speeches, I crafted a haftarah for the Shabbat of MLK weekend (see the appendix to this article.) The power of Dr. King’s faith, witness, and call to justice rolled into the room with a challenge to us to live the dream. While not officially part of the Jewish canon, from time to time alternative texts like these can be brought into our congregations in ways that honor our American and Jewish spiritual legacies.

I invite you to experiment and join me in this adventure! Torah, our prophetic literature, the other scrolls and texts that we chant at holidays and festivals, and the classic musical carrier-wave of the trop can come alive in ways that are both powerful and accessible.

## A Haftarah for Martin Luther King Shabbat

*These quotations from Dr. King's speeches were edited by Rabbi Marcia Prager and set to Haftarah Trop by Hazzan Jack Kessler.*

We are on the <sup>ˆ</sup>move now

The <sup>ˆ</sup>burning of our <sup>ˆ</sup>churches will not <sup>ˆ</sup>deter us

We are on the <sup>ˆ</sup>move now

The <sup>ˆ</sup>bombing of our <sup>ˆ</sup>homes will not <sup>ˆ</sup>dissuade us

We are on the <sup>ˆ</sup>move now

The <sup>ˆ</sup>beating and <sup>ˆ</sup>killing of our <sup>ˆ</sup>clergymen and <sup>ˆ</sup>young <sup>ˆ</sup>people

will <sup>ˆ</sup>not <sup>ˆ</sup>divert us ❖

We are on the <sup>ˆ</sup>move now. Like an <sup>ˆ</sup>idea whose <sup>ˆ</sup>time has <sup>ˆ</sup>come,  
not even the <sup>ˆ</sup>marching of <sup>ˆ</sup>mighty <sup>ˆ</sup>armies can <sup>ˆ</sup>halt us.

We are <sup>ˆ</sup>moving to the <sup>ˆ</sup>land of <sup>ˆ</sup>freedom ❖<sup>1</sup>

Now the <sup>ˆ</sup>fact that this <sup>ˆ</sup>new <sup>ˆ</sup>age is <sup>ˆ</sup>emerging

reveals <sup>ˆ</sup>something <sup>ˆ</sup>basic about the <sup>ˆ</sup>universe.

It <sup>ˆ</sup>tells us <sup>ˆ</sup>something about the <sup>ˆ</sup>core and <sup>ˆ</sup>heartbeat of the <sup>ˆ</sup>cosmos.

It reminds us that the universe is on the side of justice ✧

It says to those who struggle for justice:

“You do not struggle alone, but God struggles with you.”

This belief that God is on the side of truth and justice

comes down to us from the long tradition of our faith ✧<sup>2</sup>

I am convinced that the universe

is under the control of a loving purpose,

and that in the struggle for righteousness

man has cosmic companionship.

Behind the harsh appearances of the world there is a benign power ✧<sup>3</sup>

I refuse to accept the view

that mankind is so tragically bound

to the starless midnight of racism and war

that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood

can never become a reality ✧

I refuse to accept the cynical notion

that nation after nation  
 must spiral down a militaristic stairway  
 into the hell of thermonuclear destruction ✦  
 I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love  
 will have the final word in reality ✦  
 This is why right temporarily defeated  
 is stronger than evil triumphant ✦  
 I have the audacity to believe  
 that peoples everywhere  
 can have three meals a day for their bodies,  
 education and culture for their minds,  
 and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits ✦  
 I still believe that one day mankind  
 Will bow down before the altars of God  
 and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed,  
 and nonviolent redemptive goodwill  
 will proclaim the rule of the land ✦

I still believe that we shall overcome.⁴

We've got some difficult days ahead.

But it doesn't matter with me now.

Because I've been to the mountaintop.

And I don't mind.

Like anybody, I would like to have a long life.

Longevity has its place.

But I'm not concerned about that now.⁵

I just want to do God's will.

And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain.

And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land.

And I'm happy, tonight.

I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man.

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.⁵



## NOTES:

- 1 Speech before the Alabama State Capitol building in Montgomery, at the conclusion of the march from Selma to Montgomery, March 25, 1965; in James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 229.
- 2 Address to the First Annual Institute on Non-Violence and Social Change, Montgomery, Alabama, December 1956; in *A Testament of Hope*, 141.
- 3 “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” in *Strength to Love* (collection of sermons by Dr. King) (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1963), 153.
- 4 Address upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Oslo, Norway, December 10, 1964; in *A Testament of Hope*, 225-26.
- 5 Address at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, April 3, 1968 (Dr. King's last sermon); in *A Testament of Hope*, 286.



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