

Simhat Torah Intimations: The Bridegroom of Bereshit

Sara R. Horowitz

AN ODD FESTIVAL, SIMHAT TORAH DOES NOT RESEMBLE THE OTHER HOLIDAYS WHICH PEPPER THE JEWISH CALENDAR. EACH OF THE THREE PILGRIMAGE FESTIVALS, THE *SHALOSH REGALIM*, MARKS A HISTORICAL event—the exodus from Egyptian slavery, the desert wanderings, the revelation on Mount Sinai. Each also is linked with the seasonal agricultural cycle. But Simhat Torah has no such associations.

Outside of historical and seasonal frameworks, Simhat Torah remains outside the arrowed or spiralled progression of time which shapes Jewish memory. The holiday celebrates not what happened then, but what we do now: that is, the conclusion of the weekly Torah readings with the final verses of the final portion, *Ve-Zot Ha-Brakhah*, in Deuteronomy, and the beginning of the cycle of readings with *Bereshit*, Genesis. A cyclicity outside of nature, the cycle of the Torah forms an endless loop, whose beginning and ending mark the same spot. It is as though the Torah were not a scroll read linearly from beginning to end, but a Möbius strip, a geometrical form whose inside becomes its outside, so that there is no real beginning and ending, and all surfaces become simultaneously inner and outer.

Tagged on to the festival of Sukkot as a mark of God's love, Simhat Torah celebrates the marriage of Israel and Torah. In the exuberant celebration, we dance the evening into night, the night into morning, the morning into afternoon. Synagogue sobriety loosened, we laugh and drink as the Torah scroll becomes a bride paired with her *hatan*, her bridegroom—first termed *Hatan Torah*, the Bridegroom of Torah, then *Hatan Bereshit*, the Bridegroom of Genesis. We loft the Torah in the air as a bride on her wedding chair; in some synagogues, we raise funds as though for wedding gifts.

Thus, the festival enacts not an anniversary lovingly recollected, but the wedding itself. Unlike other holidays, on Simhat Torah we do not ritually remember an event long past. Instead, we become, each of us, the Torah's bridegroom rejoicing over our beloved bride, and each time for the first time. On this festival we are vouchsafed what we aspire for but cannot wholly attain in our lives: a love always familiar yet always new.

AS WE CONCLUDE THE TORAH AND BEGIN TO READ *BERESHIT*, WE RESEMBLE A bride and bridegroom, our history ahead of us, yet already in us at this moment. As we celebrate our marriage to Torah, the text recollects in us another new couple, our progenitors in Eden. For me, the confluence of this festival and this Torah reading holds out a necessary but impossible promise, incorporating the familiar newness of Simhat Torah into the effortless intimacy of the couple in Genesis.

The events described in the first three chapters of the Torah—the story of the creation of life and the expulsion from Eden—seem simple and straightforward. But I believe we read this section differently from the rest of Torah. Elsewhere, we can picture events described, no matter how extraordinary. Biblical characters often resemble us in their desires, aspirations, frustrations and failings. The world they inhabit is subject to the same conditions and limitations that govern ours; what strikes us as miraculous strikes them as such, too. Not so in the opening sections of Genesis. For while these first three chapters of Genesis describe the beginnings of our world, it is not yet our world depicted here, but a world still becoming.

The remainder of the Torah presents historical narrative and social fabric; Genesis 1-3 precedes history and society. It permits history to come into being. The remainder of the Torah exists in real time; this section I call “dream time,” a time like no other time, a time outside of time. The remainder of the Torah reflects historical memory; this section represents mythic memory, an unrememberable memory.

In using the words “mythic memory” and “dream time,” I am not arguing about whether the events described in Genesis 1-3 actually occurred. Rather, I am suggesting that whatever words we have at our disposal to describe what happened are of necessity inadequate to that task. Although we can recite the events of Genesis 1, 2, and 3, and may retell the story in our own words, we cannot really understand what happened at all.

Reams have been written by exegetes, philosophers, and others to try to establish just what lies embedded in the seemingly simple account. Did God create *ex nihilo*? Were there two Adams or just one? Was the first being androgynous? How does one translate a “day” of creation into human time?

Yet each reading of that portion of the Torah always throws us back against its inaccessibility, and our own inability to really know—to really understand—what occurred at our earliest beginnings. And precisely because it is our dream time, our mythic memory, our earliest imprint, we keep returning to the text, trying to unravel its enigmas.

LE-MAH HA-DAVAR DOMEH? WHAT IS THE MATTER LIKE? IT IS LIKE THE DAYS OF our earliest childhood, before language and before speech. The time in our lives when we move about in the world, when we love, bond, connect, suffer, delight, and form the internal basis for the ways in which later, as adults, we will come to feel emotion, come to know ourselves, become ourselves, enact ourselves in the world.

As adults, shaped and marked so strongly by our earliest childhood dramas, we cannot recount—we cannot remember—any of what we then experienced. Try as we may, the gates of memory to our early childhood—our pre-language childhood—remain closed to us. Apart from vague and hazy images, from emotional, rather than narrative, memories, we have no access to that world. Thus for each of us, our earliest days constitute our private dream time, our personal mythic memory—distinct from our personal historical memory, which takes narrative form. Everything we do, we do with that early time inside us. Not only during troubling moments, but also at happy times, we search for insights by trying to understand the relationship between the self we are now (which we can describe but never wholly know) and the self we were then (which we contain but cannot now actively remember).

Similarly, we may examine the relationship between the world depicted in the first three chapters of Genesis—our dream time, inaccessible to us—and the world that comes after—our memory, our reality, which we see but cannot fully know.

How might we view that relationship? Recently I asked my Biblical Judaism class to retell in their own words the events of Genesis 3. To my astonishment, we found ourselves using words like “curse” and “punishment” to

describe God's pronouncements to the first man and woman at the close of that chapter. Yet those very pronouncements—the labors of childbirth and of sustenance—also represent what we hope for most dearly: the blessings of fruitfulness, of fullness, of creativity, of some trace of immortality. The travails of birth and work describe the world as we know it today. To see God as having cursed the first beings is to see our world as accursed, as one of unrelenting punishment.

So I choose to interpret the first three chapters of *Bereshit* differently. For me, the reading of the first section of Genesis reflects a collective hearkening back to a time of easy and pervasive intimacy which characterized the relationship between God and the first two humans, and those two humans to each other, to other living creatures, to the vegetative and the inanimate world around them.

To us, this represents a lost intimacy, an unattainable unity already terminated by the time each of us comes into being. Like the imprinting of loving in early childhood, it embeds in us a yearning for an impossible closeness, an impossible harmony. Of this Edenic harmony, all of our intimate relationships—all the various people we love in different ways—are imperfect but important approximations.

We are those who come after Eden, just as we are those who come after infancy, after prelingual childhood. In a sense, we move into our adult being already bereft. We want what we had then—which we can only dimly recall, only vaguely sense. But the way back is barred—by an angel with a flaming sword, by the unidirectional progression of time. We cannot go back—and in some sense, we don't really want to. Thus we can never fully recover what we miss.

As we celebrate the marriage of Simhat Torah, we find ourselves poised between the dream memory of Edenic harmony, which is always past, and the extended promise of Messianic harmony, the Eden of the future, which is always ahead. Our position shapes our desires; it also outlines our feeling of deprivation. As humans, existing in the now of historical time, we require comfort for the travails inherent in the very conditions of our existence. Each of us needs to be comforted for the Eden we can no longer have and the Messianic delights we cannot yet have. And so we comfort one another. Like Adam and Eve after the expulsion, this beginning nestles at the heart of our most precious human relations.

Sara R. Horowitz is co-editor of *Kerem* and director of the Jewish Studies Program at the University of Delaware where she teaches literature and film. This essay is based on a *dvar Torah* delivered at the Center City Havurah in Philadelphia on Shabbat *Bereshit*.