Hunter S. Thompson and the Tragedy of Modern Torah

David Zvi Kalman | The Bronfman Fellowships | Sukkot

David Zvi Kalman ('04, Venture Fund grantee and Alumni Board member) is a PhD student at the University of Pennsylvania, where he studies the impact of technology on religious law. He is a Hadar Campus Scholar and the director of Open Quorum, which produces (among other things) SermonSlam and Responsa Radio. David Zvi's new bentsher, Seder Oneg Shabbos, is now available for pre-order at www.shabb.es. Email him at dzkalman@gmail.com.

The Torah's last commandment is to write your own Torah—at least, that's what the Talmud says it means. The Torah itself just tells Moshe that he should write down a poem, but we read "poem" to mean "Torah" and "Moshe" to mean "everyone." In the world of Talmudic reinterpretations, this rereading (or rewriting) is about par for the course.

Simchat Torah is almost here, and I want to talk for a minute about what it's like to write someone else's book. Not ghostwriting—I'm talking about writing out a book that you didn't write, for personal purposes. The idea has a pedigree. Hunter S. Thompson did it; he wrote out all of *The Great Gatsby* just to see what it felt like to be F. Scott Fitzgerald, and he wrote out all of *A Farewell to Arms* because he wanted to feel like Hemingway. Mindy Kaling (of "The Mindy Project," "The Office") used to transcribe Saturday Night Live sketches as a kid.

These are not the rewritings of Jorge Luis Borges' "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*;" these people have access to the original texts, yet have no pretensions to originality. It's simpler than that—to write another's words is an attempt to enter their mind, to feel the flow of their prose. If authorship is a performance, rewriting is an attempt to bake another's work into ones own muscles, through conscious and careful mimicry.

Soul mate, compassionate parent, draw Your servant toward what You desire. Your servant will run after You like a deer and fall to the ground when faced with Your beauty. **For Your love is sweeter than a honeycomb or any flavor at all.** ¶ Beautiful, lovely, light of the world, my soul is sick for Your love. GOD, please, heal her, show her the pleasure of Your glow. Then she will gain strength and be healed, and she will be Your servant forever. ¶ ANCIENT ONE, arouse Your compassion; please have pity on Your beloved child. How long have I yearned to see the beauty of Your power. **Please, my GOD, my heart's desire, hurry and hide Yourself no more.** ¶ Please reveal Yourself and cover me, beloved, with the shelter of Your peace. Light up the earth with Your glory, and we will delight and rejoice in You. Quick, LOVE, for the time is coming, **be sweet with me like it was in the beginning.**

By all accounts, the exercise works—but *why* it works is a mystery to me. Fitzgerald wrote The Great Gatsby in spurts over three years; Thompson was presumably more efficient. A sentence that took an hour to construct takes only a few seconds to retype. Rewriting resembles reading more than it does actual authorship. The rewriter finds herself not in the mind of the actual author, but in the mind of an idealized author—an author who is not tortured, an author for whom ink flows like water, not like blood. And even so—it works. Rewriting leads to writing.

What is it like to rewrite God's book? If Fitzgerald is out of reach, the Holy One must be, as well. Yet the tradition of rewritten Bible has never faded; by the time Tanakh was complete, it had already begun to rewrite itself. Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha contains rewritten Bible; the Dead Sea Scrolls contain it, too. As Eran Shalev notes in *American Zion*, rewritten Bible was a common literary form in early America—and just as that genre was fading, the Book of Mormon came to light.

Rewriting the Torah has a special kind of power—what is being accessed is not just style, but the Object of Holiness, the Mouth of Might. Rewritten Torah is an attempt to generate reverence, that most elusive of qualities, a substance resistant to the very assertion of human authorship. What chutzpah it takes to write something which will be lifted up in the air so that we can shout, "*This is the Torah that Moshe placed before Israel*." Yet we are not simply allowed to do this; we are *obligated*, every one of us. We are obligated to bake into our fingertips the pen-strokes of God himself, the text that God calls "poem." Every one of us; we are obligated.

But rewriting contains the ultimate danger, too—that a reverential relationship with the Almighty, one based in part on mystery and enigmas, will itself by sacrificed. If I rewrite the Torah, maybe I'll know too much. If I rewrite the Torah, maybe I will meet God too intimately, perhaps he'll turn around and I'll see his face and my soul will perish, leaving behind only a jaded body.

This has all been on my mind recently. I've just completed a new bentsher; in doing so, my task was to design a home for text which is emphatically not my own (The ISBN lists one of my co-authors as "May their Memory be for a Blessing, Our Rabbis"—yes, you can do that). The end product is satisfying, but in the process, in rewriting words first uttered by God and by rabbis, I do feel I have lost something. In seeking to give my edition reverence, I've learned too much about reverence itself; even if I have succeeded in conveying it in the book, I've lost some of my own store of it.

I leave you, at Simchat Torah, with this paradox. What am I to do? How does one rewrite and stay a simple reader?