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BronfmanTorah: commentary on the Torah that draws on the lives, skills, and insights of our community

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Writing Torah for Ourselves

Ilana Kurshan ('95) | BronfmanTorah | Shemini

We are pleased to bring you a dvar torah by Ilana Kurshan ('95), whose new memoir, *If All the Seas Were Ink*, has been sent to hundreds of Bronfmanim thanks to the generosity of an anonymous donor.

Upcoming Book Salons

New York City: April 15

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Ilana Kurshan ('95) is the author of [If All the Seas Were Ink](#), published by St. Martin's Press in 2017.

We are now in the period of the Jewish calendar known as the Omer, counting seven weeks from the liberation on Passover to the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai on Shavuot. The Omer serves not just to connect redemption and revelation, but also to dramatize our anticipation of receiving Torah.

The Israelites in the Bible, too, counted the days until Moses would return down the mountain with the Ten Commandments inscribed on two tablets of stone. The Talmud in tractate Shabbat (89b) comments on the Biblical verse describing the people's response to Moses' ascent to the heavens to receive Torah from God: "When the people saw that Moses tarried in coming down from the mountain..." (Exodus 32:1). The Bible uses an unusual word for "tarried," *boshesh*, which serves as the occasion for Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's creative misreading: "Do not read *boshesh* (tarried), but rather *ba shesh* (six is coming)." Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi explains that when Moses went up the mountain, he informed the Israelites that he would be back in forty days, at the beginning of the sixth hour of the day. But then Satan came and confused the Israelites' sense of time, so that they expected him a day early. Rashi explains that whereas Moses had started counting from his first day in heaven, the people counted from the day he departed, and therefore they expected him one day earlier. And so convinced that Moses had abandoned them or had died upon seeing God—the midrash relates that Satan showed them a vision of Moses' bier—they despaired of his return and built the golden calf, which was essentially a product of their miscalculation. Had they known how to count the days until revelation, they would not have sinned so egregiously.

Moses Breaking the Tablets of the Law (1659), by Rembrandt.

The rest of the story is well-known: Moses comes down the mountain, witnesses the people dancing around the calf, and shatters the tablets in his rage. And so instead of receiving the first set of tablets which were inscribed with the finger of God, the people instead receive a second set that Moses carves out himself. The Talmud (Shabbat 87a) relates that Moses was distressed that he had shattered the first set of tablets, but God applauded him for doing so: "More power to you that you broke them." According to the midrash (Exodus Rabbah 46), the second set of tablets contained more than the first set, and so Moses was actually doing the people a service by creating the need for a replacement:

וְאָמַר לוֹ הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֵל תִּצְטַעַר בְּלוּחוֹת הַרְאשׁוֹנוֹת, שֶׁלֹּא הָיוּ אֶלָּא עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרוֹת לְבַד,

ובלוחות השניים אני נותן לך שיהא בהם הלכות מדרש ואגדות, הדא הוא דכתיב: וְגַדְלָהּ לְךָ תַּעֲלָמוֹת חֲכָמָה כִּי כִפְלָיִם לְתוֹשֵׁבָהּ, (איוב יא:ו)

God told him: Do not feel bad about the first tablets, for they contained only the Ten Commandments. However, the second tablets I will give you will have Halcaha, Midrash and Agadah. This is what is written: ([Job 11:6](#)): "I will tell you hidden wisdom for it shall be doubly comforting."

Whereas the first set contained only the written Torah, the second set contained the oral Torah as well, including laws, exegesis, and legends. The second set, the set carved by Moses, thus reflects creative human engagement with the Torah written by God.

The Netziv in his commentary on Deutereonmy (5:19) explains that even the versions of the written Torah that appeared on each set of tablets was different: the first set contained the version of the Ten Commandments that appears in Exodus, whereas the second set contained the version that appears in Deuteronomy. If so, it is not incidental that the second version of the tablets appears in Deuteronomy—Deuteronomy is Mishneh Torah, the second Torah. It is Moses' rewriting of the Torah, telling the story from his perspective, in the first person, and rewriting it with his own hand.

This rewriting of Torah is in fact a mitzvah. The Talmud teaches in tractate Sanhedrin (21b) that "even though one's ancestors have left him a scroll of the Torah, it is a mitzvah to write one's own." I have been trying, in my own way, to write Torah for myself. My book *If All the Seas Were Ink* is a record of my engagement with the texts of our tradition, writing about the Torah I study in the first person, against the backdrop of my life experiences.

In recent years much of my learning has taken the form of daf yomi, learning a

page of Talmud a day as part of an international program to complete the entire Babylonian Talmud in seven and a half years. Daf yomi, like the Omer, is a way of marking time in relation to Torah. There is a fixed schedule, and so everyone who participates learns the same page each day and completes each tractate on the same day. Daf yomi thus serves to connect me to a wider community of learners, reminding me that I am never really alone because there are tens of thousands of people out there who are literally on the same page. On days when I feel out of sorts, or unproductive, there is something very reassuring in knowing that even if I do nothing else that day, I will get through my page of Talmud and bring myself one page closer to completing the tractate I am learning.

Although the Omer is a way of counting down the days until revelation, it is notable that we do not in fact count down, but rather up: “Today is the first day of the Omer, today is the second day of the Omer,” etc. Unlike the Israelites at Mount Sinai, who grew increasingly desperate about Moses’ return, our counting takes the form of hopeful anticipation. The Omer, like daf yomi, serves as a reminder that every day is an opportunity to grow in wisdom. As we draw closer with each passing day to Shavuot, may we also deepen our own engagement with the texts of our tradition, carving out a place in our lives for the study of Jewish texts and discovering new and creative ways to write Torah anew for ourselves.

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