

DEBAR TORAH by RABBI ROHDE

Why the Torah Had to Be Given by God

The text of Torah, as well even in the subsequent development of Rabbinic Judaism, leaves quite a bit of ambiguity as to why it was given and, consequently, why it should be observed. One could simply say that no such explanation is needed because it is simply God's orders which must be carried out and obeyed, whether we like it or not. And yet our text implies that there are reasons for the giving of the Torah and that observing it makes sense. The Jethro story seems to imply one rationalization for why the laws of the Torah were given: God had to give Moses a standard set of laws so that the judges which Moses was to appoint would all be in accordance with what Moses would have decided in each case through his prophetic consultations with God. Yet this does not seem to be a full explanation. It does not explain the giving of the Decalogue with such fanfare, for one thing. And the whole "covenanting" story seems to offer its own rationale for the giving of the Torah: God agrees to be specially loyal and bound to Israel in exchange for all of Israel agreeing to be bound to God's Laws and observe them. This covenant is with the entire people, not specifically with judges, and seems to have no real connection to the first rationale that judges needed a law code. Another justification which seems to be hinted at in the Torah's laws is to prevent a return to conditions of slavery, either in the new Promised Land or by returning to slavery in Egypt. All of the stories, including the one which explains that the civil law was separated from the Decalogue because the People were too much in fear of being addressed by God Himself, seem to be incomplete explanations and justifications for the compilation of the Torah's laws. I was reminded of this recently when I was questioned about my observance by an uneducated, non-Observant acquaintance. He immediately asked whether Judaism believed in the immortality of the soul! I gave him a complex answer, realizing that he was really trying to ask me why I was observant. And belief in the immortality of the soul would only be a very minor part of how I would explain why I try to follow the Torah's laws. The next morning, I had a discussion with Baruch-Lev about Judaism's almost deliberate ambiguity about many of these ultimate issues.

I don't go along with an approach which simply says that the Torah wants everyone to find his own reasons for observance. I'd rather say that there are dialectical and dogmatic parameters within which the learned individual may interpret answers. My interpretation as to the reason the Laws of the Torah have to be given by God is that we believe that laws and justice must be patterned upon high ideals and classic traditions. The best society's laws must reflect high ideals of devotion to God, people, and country. We are to aim for the best kind of society, and therefore it should come close to what Moses would have envisioned through Divine Prophecy. The best society should strive to keep its people as free as possible. The best society should follow ideal patterns of justice, and be aware that in taking upon oneself to judge his fellows, one is arrogating to himself authority which should properly only belong to God and his prophets, because a judge is, in fact, "playing God" (indeed, the very term "Elohim" for God means "judge"). I was asked this week my opinion about the morality of the use of nitrogen in capital punishment. I replied that our Torah and Talmud are very specific about allowing only four or five classic categories of capital punishment: stoning, burning, sword, hanging, as well as the "cutting off" of a member from the community. Further, the Torah goes into hair-splitting detail about how each should be carried out and exactly the cases when each is appropriate. Therefore I went on to argue that any modern "mechanizations" of capital punishment would not satisfy the Torah's ideal standards, no matter how "humane" they may be in reducing the victim's pain. The Torah wanted the death of the offender to be carried out by human hands in these old-fashioned ways, in order that it should not be too easy to take a human life. Even Jewish laws of animal slaughter require that it be carried out manually with a human hand holding the knife. How much the more so the taking of a human life! Taking a life should give us pause, and we should know that we are arrogating to ourselves the authority of the Giver of that life. We must meet the victim face-to-face. Of course, that is the ideal in a normally-peaceful society of brothers, and it is an ideal which may not be realizable and may have many exceptions. But the uniqueness of Judaism for me is its insistence upon being based upon classic and ideal forms of Law and Lore in the Mind of God which we conceive of Moses the Prophet of having had access to and revealing to us in the Torah.



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL
The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

Shabbat Yithro

February 2-3, 2024 | 24 Shebat, 5784

SCHEDULE

Kaplan: p. 344 | Haftarah: p. 1118

Hertz: p. 288 | Haftarah: p. 302

Candle Lighting | 4:57 pm

Evening Services | 5:00 pm

Friday Night Lights | Following Service s| Main Sanctuary | *Session sponsor: Faith Fogelman, in memory of her mother, Miriam Watkin*

Community Dinner with Liel Leibovitz | *for registered guests* | following services | Levy Auditorium

Zemirot | 8:15 am | Main Sanctuary

Shahrit with Reading of Ten Commandments | 9:00 am | Main Sanctuary

Year of Hope Lecture | At Morning Services | Rabbi Soloveichik

Tot Shabbat | 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room

Youth Groups | 10:00 am | Elias Room

Jr. Congregation | 10:30 am | Little Synagogue

Kiddush | following services | *Kiddush in honor of our dedicated facilities team: John, Isaid, Miguel, and Olivo, and our Tot Shabbat leader, Liz. Special thanks to Elie Sasson for his initiative and for securing the sponsors | Wine sponsor: The Jacobowitz family, in memory of Michla b. Eliyah*

Shabbat Afternoon Class | 4:10 pm | Rabbi Soloveichik | Main Sanctuary | *Session Sponsor: Ellen Zimmerman & Edward Miller, in honor of Susan & Avery Neumark, and in memory of Charlotte & Joel Zimmerman and Symma & Leon Miller*

Teen Class | 4:10 pm | Baruch-Lev Kelman | Elias Room

Evening Services | 4:55 pm

Habdala | 5:45 pm

Rosh Hodesh Adar I begins on Thursday night.

Weekday Service Times

Sunday Morning: 8:05 am | Monday-Friday Mornings: 7:05 am

Sunday-Thursday Evenings (Arbit Only): 6:30 pm

COMING UP

Bring them Home Now

“Marching and Running for Their Lives”

Sundays, 11:00 am | Central Park West & 90th Street

(Organized by Hostages and Missing Families Forum, New York)

All are invited to support this global initiative to bring home our hostages: Every Sunday, meet at CPW and 90th, and then run or walk the bridle path. Participants are encouraged to bring Israeli flags and wear *BringThemHome* T-shirts.

Volunteer for a Shearith Israel CSS (Community Security Service) Team

Entry Point training on Zoom | Virtual one-hour training session

THIS Tuesday evening, February 6 | 8:30 pm

Refer to our emails for the link and signup details.

Grandparents, parents, and kids are invited to bond at

Parent-Child Learning

Next Session with Dr. Pasha Kletenik, Head of School, MDS

NEXT Motzei Shabbat, February 10 | 6:30 pm

Make sure to register at shearithisrael.org/pcl-5784.

READERS WELCOME: Women's Megillah Reading

Megillah Reading on Purim morning, Sunday, March 24 | 8:30 am

Rehearsals: Sundays, Feb 25 & Mar 10 | 7 pm

Women and girls over the age of 12 are welcome to contact Mrs Lisa Rohde at lrohde-csi@yahoo.com to participate.

Shabbat Adar Dinner

From Singapore to Savile Row to Bespoke in Brooklyn:

A Hasidic London-Trained Tailor In Conversation With

Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Friday Evening, March 8 | Following Evening Services & Friday Night Lights

Register at shearithisrael.org/events/tiefenbrun.

Young Professionals Shabbat Dinner with the ZOA

featuring Shearith Israel member Dov Zigler

in conversation with ZOA member Akiva Covitz

Friday night, February 23 | Ages 21-35

Register at shearithisrael.org/events/yp-zoa.

2024 YEAR OF HOPE

Rabbi Soloveichik's *Year of Hope* Lecture Series

“Judaica and Us: The Story of the Jewish People in Ten Objects”

Lecture #3: This Shabbat, February 3 | At Morning Services

Truman's Torah, the Army's Talmud, &
the American Jewish Future

Capital Campaign

Replacing our Sanctuary Carpet & Other Vital Repairs

Our Sanctuary is a prayer space of profound beauty, dignity, and serenity that has stood the test of time. While to the casual eye, the majesty of the space endures, there's an undeniable truth beneath our feet—our carpet is torn and tattered, bearing witness to the countless footsteps of generations within these walls.

Among other infrastructure repairs, it's time to replace the carpet, in both the men's and women's sections, so that our sacred space reflects the reverence it deserves.

We're off to a great start! Help us reach \$500,000 by March 31.

Donate at shearithisrael.org/giving/year-of-hope.

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mazal tob to **Henri Bengualid**, on the forthcoming marriage of his granddaughter Michele Bengualid to Alec Fishman. Michele is the daughter of Marc & Beth Bengualid.

Congratulations to **Anwar Suleiman** upon the opening of his play, Cafe Munich, directed by **Barbara Schofield Suleiman**. Tickets are available on Eventbrite for performances on February 10, 11, and 18.

In the Press

Most of us are familiar with Washington's letter to the Jews of Newport. But that letter was preceded by his first letter to the Jewish community, his letter to Savannah.

It is that letter which reminds us how the Founders revered the Jewish story and sought succor from the Jewish faith. Read Rabbi Soloveichik's article for Commentary Magazine on our press page: shearithisrael.org/resources/press.