

## Torah as Home

### **Introduction**

At the other entrance to GJC – not the entrance we’re using today, but the entrance for the school and the office – the Hebrew letter *bet* is tiled into the floor. You may have stepped over it many times without noticing. *Bet* is the second letter of the *Alef-bet*, but the first letter of the Torah: it’s the first letter of the first word, *B’reishit*. The name of this letter means house – *bayit* – in Hebrew, and also in the related languages Arabic, Akkadian and Phoenician. Elie Wiesel of blessed memory taught:

But why [does the Torah begin with] a bet? ... Because, I believe, bet means a house. And thus, we are told, the Book of books is a shelter, a dwelling place, a refuge, a place in which [people] laugh and weep, read and write, work and sleep, a place in which people love one another before they start quarreling, or the other way around. In other words, it is a home.<sup>1</sup>

Today, in our celebration of Rosh HaShanah, our commemoration of creation, *B’reishit*, I am going to talk about Torah as *bayit*, Torah as home, and explore ways that we might find a home in Torah.

Home, of course, means different things to different people. What I mean is the kind of home Wiesel talks about: home as a place to dwell, a refuge, a place we may be challenged and a place in which we connect with other people. And when I say Torah as home, what does Torah mean? For me, Torah is both the words of our Torah scroll and the centuries of interpretation up to today. Here, Torah means the stories, mitzvot, ethics, holidays, prayers, and customs that together create a framework for Jewish life, giving us opportunities to connect with others and with the possibility of transcendence.

As you may know, I spent the summer away from home, studying in Israel, without my family. Even before I left, I began thinking about what home means to me, and about how I would define home for the time I was away. I expected to encounter much that was unfamiliar, and hoped to learn from those new experiences. I also prayed that I could maintain some familiar space, as Wiesel describes, “a shelter, a dwelling place, a refuge” through my connection with Torah.

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<sup>1</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Longing for Home, Today*, talk at 92nd Street Y, November 15, 1994. The recording of the talk is here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFVw6YshIAI>

As I learned, whether I could find familiar space through Torah was not exactly the question. From the street signs to the topography, the trees and the calendar and the siddurim (so many different siddurim, all with prayers reassuringly familiar to me): it was not hard to find Torah in Israel. Instead, I became curious about how to make Torah feel like home.

I'm going to share some ideas about what we can do to find or to create a space that feels like home in Torah. Remember, Wiesel begins by saying that *bet* means house, and he lists things we do in a house: laugh, weep, read, write, work, sleep, quarrel, love. He concludes, "In other words, it's a home." Making a house into a home requires us to do something. We don't feel at home the first time we step into a new apartment or new house, the first time we come to a new synagogue, or the first day of a new job. It takes time and engagement to make a place a home. And so with Torah too. If we want to feel like Torah is home, we probably need to do something.

### **1. Drawn toward home: Tradition, good deeds, and *drash***

The first Torah portion I read after returning from Israel in August was parashat *Shoftim*, which is about government. It includes the law for when a man of military age is not obligated to stay and fight in battle, *i.e.* when he can go home. There are three categories: a person who recently built a new house but who has not yet dedicated it, a person who planted a vineyard but who has not yet harvested it, and a person who is engaged but not yet married. Men in each of those categories are told not to go forth into battle, but instead to return home, lest they die without a chance to finish those activities. Deut. 20:5-7.

This passage teaches that sometimes we are ready to go to battle: we're able to engage fully in our activities in the outside world. But when something in our home lives remains incomplete, or when we feel fragmented, we can't fully focus on outside activities. In those circumstances, we are drawn toward home, and the Torah instructs people to return home rather than fight in a war.

In the Talmud, this same passage from Deuteronomy is a source of the rabbinic teaching that Torah is home. The ancient rabbis interpret the three categories – remember, the three categories are house, vineyard, and marriage. For the ancient rabbis, these three are all about Torah study. In their reading, the person being drawn toward home is being drawn toward Torah.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 44a.

If Torah is home, the rabbis say, it has three parts corresponding to the three categories. The first part, house, is Bible, Mishnah and Gemara: the written Torah and the oral Torah, the words in our Torah scroll and the Talmud. The second part, vineyard, is *ma'asim tovim* (good deeds), and the third part, marriage, is *drash*, interpretation. What they are saying is that if we are going to find a home in Torah, first we need to be centered in our sacred texts; next, we need to use that learning to act with loving intention toward others, *ma'asim tovim*; and finally we need *drash*, interpretation, so Torah is meaningful in our lives today. Once we're grounded in the tradition, acting lovingly toward other people, and connecting the tradition to our lives today, then we are at home.

## 2. Making Torah Home: *Ma'asim tovim* (good deeds)

I want to share with you a midrash, a rabbinic story, about making homes through *ma'asim tovim*, good deeds. In the first chapter of the book of Exodus, we learn the story of the Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Puah, who defy Pharaoh's order to kill newborn boys. The Torah tells us, "They let the boys live." Ex. 1:17. In *Dirshuni*, the collection of contemporary Israeli women's midrash, there is a midrash on this verse by Rivka Lubitch. She writes:<sup>3</sup>

*What is "וַתַּחְיֶינָה אֶת־הַיְלָדִים" "and they let the boys live"? They gave them life through Torah, for "life" means nothing other than "Torah".*

*...Shifrah and Puah would pass from house to house, from woman to woman, and they would gather there all the children of Israel at the foot of the bed of the one giving birth. First they would help the woman give birth, and after they would enliven the children with Torah.*

*Therefore it is said in the Torah, "Because the midwives had awe for God, God established houses for them" (Exodus 1:21) – these are houses of study (batei midrashot). For every house that a woman gave birth in became for them a beit midrash, a house of study, until Israel was full of houses of study in abundance.*

In this midrash, the midwives do *ma'asim tovim*, good deeds, by welcoming and protecting the newborn babies in defiance of Pharaoh's decree. Their actions transform the

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<sup>3</sup> This midrash is in the Hebrew edition of *Dirshuni I*, א, דרשוני כרך א, ed. Nehama Weingarten-Mintz and Tamar Biala (Tel Aviv, 2009), a volume of contemporary midrash by Israeli women, but unfortunately it is not in the companion English edition, *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash*, ed. Tamar Biala (Chicago, 2022).

birth room into a literal *beit midrash*, a house of study, bringing Torah to a child from the moment of birth. As the midrash says, “They gave them life through Torah.”

From this, we can learn that taking action consistent with our values is one way of creating a home. It was the midwives’ sacred resistance – letting the babies live – that God rewarded with the *batei midrashot*, the houses of study. Sometimes a space doesn’t “feel like home” because something about it is inconsistent with our values, and that’s uncomfortable. If we take action, expressing our values, we may feel more at home: more at home with ourselves, since we can be authentic, and more at home in the space, since it now includes us.

As a framework for holding the stories of our people, Torah invites us into taking righteous action. In fact, it commands it! Like the midwives, when we combine action and awe, justice and the sacred, we have the potential to shape that framework into a home that can be nourishing and life-giving.

### **3. Making Torah Home: *Drash* (interpretation)**

The ancient rabbis also insisted that making Torah home requires *drash*, interpretation. If we study our traditional texts without interpretation, we may find them irrelevant, or we may feel alienated. Yesterday and today, we heard the stories we read every year on Rosh HaShanah: Sarah, our ancestor, tells Abraham to banish her servant Hagar and Hagar’s son Ishmael, because Sarah is worried for her son Isaac’s status: she wants him to be the favored son. Listening to her, Abraham banishes them to wander in the desert. And in today’s Torah reading, Abraham hears a Divine call to bring his remaining son, Isaac, to a mountaintop and bind him on the sacrificial altar. He follows every instruction. As far as we know from the Torah, he does not even tell Sarah he is taking their child.<sup>4</sup>

These stories present us with challenges. Questions. Maybe even anger and horror. As Wiesel says, those stories lead us to “laugh and weep, read and write. . . love one another before we start quarreling, or maybe the other way around.” Weeping, quarreling, laughing, reading, writing – these are things we do at home. Home is not always easy, and it is not always free of conflict. We acknowledge different perspectives and grieve what is lost. The same is true for Torah as home. Only through grappling with these stories, through interpretation from Rabbi Zeff and from generations of scholars, rabbis and ordinary people, and by expressing our own

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<sup>4</sup> There is a midrashic tradition that Isaac returns to his mother after the Akedah and tells her that his father nearly sacrificed him. The news causes Sarah to cry out six times, corresponding to the six blasts of the shofar, and then she dies. See Vayikra Rabbah 20:2.

ideas – only with *drash* can we find ourselves at home in these stories. With interpretation, these stories can teach us about human relationships, about the fragility of partnering and parenting, about keeping hope even in dire circumstances, about loneliness, pain, devotion, power, fear, and love. With *drash*, with interpretation, we can begin to connect our lives with the lives of our ancestors across time and space.

#### 4. Creating Homes for Torah

In that passage from the Talmud we discussed, the rabbis' arguments go through several steps in order to get to the conclusion I shared with you, about Torah study and *ma'asim tovim* and *drash*. Along the way, the rabbis discuss the concept of "house," *בית*, and the concept of "woman," *אישה*.

It is a theme in rabbinic texts that when Torah says *bayit*, house, the word is referring to women,<sup>5</sup> or to women and children, or to families.<sup>6</sup> This is challenging: on its face, this concept diminishes women's autonomy to choose roles in and out of the home. But today I want to consider that concept together with the other ways we know the ancient rabbis thought about *bayit*. There is the *beit midrash*, the house of study; the *beit kneset*, the synagogue; and also the *beit hamikdash*, the Temple. And of course, Torah is associated with home. In the rabbinic mindset, spaces that were so important, the most honored and sacred spaces, were called *bayit*. In that framework, the word *bayit* is a mark of high status. This can make the rabbinic association between *bayit* and "woman" into an opportunity to identify women, along with others who were invisible in public spaces of rabbinic authority, as inheritors of Torah. It transforms women's connection with *bayit* from a connection with domestic labor to a connection with Torah.

I have a story about this. In June, during the second week I was in Israel, I had the opportunity to go to Jerusalem to pray at the Kotel with Women of the Wall. It was Rosh Hodesh Tammuz. Women of the Wall organizes women's prayer services at the Western Wall once a month, for Rosh Hodesh. Because the religious authorities who control the Wall don't recognize that women can constitute a minyan or hold a Torah service, this act of praying as a group of women, on the women's side, is quite controversial.

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, Rashi on *בית יעקב*, Ex. 19:3.

<sup>6</sup> For an extended discussion on the word *bayit* in rabbinic texts, including the concept that wife and Torah are linked through the word *bayit*, see Dina Stein, "Collapsing Structures: Discourse and the Destruction of the Temple in the Babylonian Talmud," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 98 No. 1 (Winter 2009), 1-28.

It was about six-thirty in the morning, the air still cool, when I set foot in Jerusalem for the first time in my life. I was full of anticipation to be *there in that place*, and also overwhelmed by the organized harassment of our group. The men and boys opposing our prayer stood at the entrance blasting deafening whistles and using megaphones. When I was going through security, my ears ringing, I put my backpack through the scanner and walked through the metal detector. Next, the security guard, a woman, asked me to lift my shirt, although I had already passed through the metal detector without a problem. She checked under my shirt in front and in back before letting me enter. My Israeli friends told me she was looking for Torah scrolls. (Small ones!)

I'm relieved to tell you that the following month, a Jerusalem court ruled in a lawsuit that security at the Kotel is no longer permitted to conduct body searches for Torah scrolls, although the prohibition on women bringing in a Torah scroll remains in place.<sup>7</sup> The restrictions on women's full expression of prayer and Torah study are deeply disturbing. But I have to admit I was also fascinated with the concept that a person might have carried a Torah scroll under her shirt, and that carrying Torah in that way could be so significant as to require the intervention of an entire security apparatus. How powerful we are as women and others who are unanticipated or invisible in our inheritance of Torah! I love the idea of moving around the world, intentionally taking up more space, growing a library of Torah like I carried my children before they were born.

After that experience, I thought a lot about this. All of us have the potential to carry Torah like a pregnancy. In this context, we can be the home for Torah, carrying it until we're ready to release it into the world, knowing it has the potential to grow. There are other contexts in which we metaphorically conceal Torah under our clothes. There may be times when one is not ready or doesn't feel invited to share words of Torah, words to frame one's experience in the context of Jewish tradition. Sometimes we might feel like we can't possibly know enough to share our perspective. Sometimes we may be the only Jewishly-affiliated person in a space, and hesitate to speak up. Sometimes we are not ready yet; we need more time to nurture and grow the Torah inside us before it is ready to emerge.

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<sup>7</sup> In July 2023, a Jerusalem magistrate court ruled that security guards at the Kotel may only conduct searches for security reasons, not in search of Torah scrolls. Lawyer Ori Narov explains, "The ruling makes unequivocally clear that the security guards are prohibited from conducting a search in order to locate Torah scrolls in the possessions, *or on the bodies*, of anyone at the Western Wall, including the Women of the Wall." (emphasis mine). See <https://www.nif.org/stories/religious-freedom/ensuring-equality-for-women-at-the-western-wall/>.

As the ancients teach us, to find a home in Torah we need sacred texts and righteous action and *drash*, interpretation. As those who carry Jewish tradition, we also have the power to become a home for Torah. The Torah we need to feel at home might not yet be in the world, and we may need to envision it, create space for it, and nurture it.

### **Conclusion: Remembering and reclaiming our home**

In the coming year, may we remember that we have the capacity to make a home, a dwelling place, in Torah. May we turn our attention homeward, knowing that taking the time to tend to our sacred home can allow us also to pursue our other tasks in the world. May we put Torah into action by pursuing *ma'asim tovim*, good deeds. May we carry and grow the wisdom of Torah: exploring, interpreting, and learning, with trust that the living Torah we nurture will emerge and flourish.

One more story before I conclude: bell hooks was a Black feminist writer and public intellectual who grew up in rural Kentucky. She spent years of her career in universities on the East and West coasts. Eventually, she decided to move home, despite reservations she had about living in Kentucky. At home, she befriended older people in her town. She wrote: “[Elders] revealed to me that the treasures I was seeking were already mine. All the longing to belong, all the searching I did from city to city, looking for that community of like-minded souls, was waiting for me, waiting for me to remember and reclaim.”<sup>8</sup>

Like hooks, when we are searching for home, in our moments of longing to belong, may we reclaim Torah, the home that is already ours. The ancient rabbis teach that each of us learned the entire Torah before birth, but at the moment of birth, an angel touched our lips, and we forgot it.<sup>9</sup>

As we live our lives, maybe someday we will remember the Torah we learned in the womb, the Torah we forgot at our birth. Maybe, by opening ourselves to the possibility that the treasures we seek are already ours, we will remember it letter by letter, word by word. And maybe the first letter we will remember will be *bet*, and we will be home.

Shanah Tovah!

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<sup>8</sup> bell hooks, *belonging: a culture of place* (Routledge 2009), 24.

<sup>9</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 30b.