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Darkness Will Envelop Me: A Meditation on Hanukkah

Devora Steinmetz

> Rav said: Kalends was established by the first human being (*Adam ha-Rishon*).
> When he saw that the night was getting longer,
> he said:
> "Woe to me lest the one about whom it is written
> 'He shall wound (*yeshufekha*) your head and you shall wound (*teshufenu*) his heel' (Genesis 3:15)
> will come to bite me."
> "And I said: 'Surely (in) darkness (he) will envelop me (*yeshufeni*)'" (Psalms 139:11).
> When he saw that the day was getting longer,
> he said: "*Kalendes*!"—*kalon deo* (or--*calo diem*). (*y. Avoda Zarah* 1:1/39c)

This brief story tells of Adam's terror when, shortly after coming into being, he notices that the days are changing. Adam, according to this tradition, was created in the fall. He begins to see that each day brings a longer and longer night. Never having experienced the changing of the seasons before and having no source of knowledge other than his own experience, Adam thinks that this pattern will continue and that the nights will keep getting longer and longer, the daytime shorter and shorter. He is terrified.

What is it that makes Adam feel so vulnerable? The passage gives us an insight into Adam's terror by calling our attention to a word that appears in two verses, one from the story of Adam in Genesis and the other from Psalm 139. It should be noted that this particular psalm is commonly understood in rabbinic tradition as reflecting upon the experience of the first human being. In the verse that is quoted here, the speaker talks about his own experience; he talks about something that he had previously thought: "And I said: 'Surely darkness will envelop me . . . .'" The word that I have translated as "envelop" is *yeshufeni*, the same verb that describes the state of enmity that God tells Adam, in the aftermath of Adam's sin, will exist between Adam and the snake: "He shall wound (*yeshufekha*) your head and you shall wound (*teshufenu*) his heel." The passage takes the words of the psalm, understood as Adam's own words, and reinterprets them in relation to the Genesis verse. While the plain meaning of the verse is something like "Surely darkness will envelop me," darkness serving as the subject of the verb *yeshufeni*, the Talmudic story reads "Surely in darkness *he* will wound me," with "he" referring to the snake.

Adam's world is no longer a safe place. In the aftermath of his sin, Adam feels vulnerable. God has told Adam that he will be in unmitigating conflict with the snake, and Adam fears that the darkness will give the snake opportunity to attack him. As the nights get increasingly longer, a greater part of each day leaves Adam vulnerable to that which he most fears.

Returning to the Psalms verse which, in our passage, articulates Adam's fear, I think that the plain meaning and the midrashic understanding are not so far apart. The midrashic reading gives voice to a very particular fear, fear of the snake, but we might understand this more

broadly as a very primal fear, not so different from anyone's fear of the dark. Darkness envelops us, and we feel vulnerable to whatever it is that most terrifies us: ghosts, monsters, our own thoughts, our nightmares, our inadequacies, our mortality, our guilt. Adam's fear of the snake, similarly, can be understood as the terror that grips him in the aftermath of his sin. He has failed, he has been cast out of Eden, he has been pronounced mortal—and the world is getting darker and darker.

Rabbinic tradition's understanding of Psalm 139 as a description of Adam's experience can be seen as a narrowing of the subject of the psalm. But, alternatively, it can be seen as a broadening of the experiences that the psalm describes. *Adam ha-Rishon* is both Adam, the first human individual about whom the Torah tells a story, and all humankind. Reading the psalm as a window into Adam's experiences is an invitation to each of us to imagine ourselves in the words of the psalm. Each of us experiences times in which we are plunged into darkness, times in which the world is getting darker and darker around us. Each of us knows the terror of those moments in which we do not know whether the darkness will ever give way to the light.

And I said: "Surely darkness will envelop me, *and* the light shall be night about me."
The second part of the verse that begins by describing the experience of being enveloped by darkness can be read in two different ways, each of which is attested in contemporary biblical translations. The first reading takes the second part of the verse as reiterating the first part or taking it a step further. The speaker is saying that he is shrouded in darkness even in times of light. Reading the verse as spoken by Adam, the verse tells of the days leading to the winter solstice. Not only is Adam vulnerable in darkness, but even *light*—that is, even what until now has been daytime—is becoming *night*. And, as far as Adam knows, this process will continue until there is only nighttime and no more light, until he will be totally enveloped by darkness.

Alternatively, the second part of the verse can be read in the opposite way:

And I said: "Surely darkness will envelop me," *but* the night has become light for me.

In this reading, only the first part of the verse constitutes the words that the speaker recalls saying or thinking earlier. Adam, in our story, *thought* that he would be enveloped by darkness. But the days pass and the solstice comes and gradually the daylight hours begin to increase. Adam thought that darkness would take over, but currently realizes that what had been *nighttime* is now becoming *light*.

The second part of this verse, then, can be read to express both of Adam's experiences: his experience of day turning into night and his experience of night turning into day. It describes the terrifying experience of feeling vulnerable to what he imagines will be the ever-increasing darkness and also the feeling of celebration as darkness begins to give way to light. Rereading the verse with *both* of these possibilities in mind—taking the ambiguity of the verse not as something to be resolved but as expressing the verse's full meaning—allows us simultaneously to experience the deep terror of the darkness and the relief and joy of anticipation of light's return. Both of these, the story tells us, were foundational experiences of the first human being, and both of these are experiences of every human being.

This story is offered in the Yerushalmi as an explanation of the origin of the pagan holiday of Kalends. Rav explains that Kalends originated with Adam. When Adam saw the day getting longer, he exclaimed "*Kalendes*!" Adam's exclamation is interpreted in two different ways by the commentators (see the *Penei Moshe* commentary). Either he is saying *kalon deo*—Greek for "God is good!"—blessing God for bringing light out of the darkness, or he is saying *calo diem*—Latin for "I proclaim the day!"—celebrating the lengthening of the day after the solstice.

The Bavli offers a similar story in explanation of the origin of Kalends:

> Rabbi Hanan bar Raba said:
> Kalends—the eight days following the solstice.
> Saturnalia—the eight days preceding the solstice.
> And your mnemonic: "You have beset me behind and before etc." (Psalms 139:5).
> Our Rabbis taught:
> When the first human being [*Adam ha-Rishon*] saw the day getting shorter and shorter
> he said:
> "Woe to me, perhaps because I have sinned, the world is dark about me
> and is returning to chaos and confusion,
> and this is the death that has been sentenced upon me from the Heavens."
> He sat for eight days in fasting.
> When he saw the winter solstice and saw the day getting longer and longer,
> he said:
> "This is the way of the world."
> He went and made eight festive days.
> Another year he made these and these into festive days.
> He established them for the sake of Heaven,
> but they established them for the sake of idolatry. (*b. Avoda Zara* 8a)

Both the Bavli and Yerushalmi stories appear in relation to a mishnah that lists pagan festivals:

> These are the festivals of the idolaters: Kalends and Saturnalia. . . . (*m. Avoda Zara* 1:1)

While the Yerushalmi story offers an explanation only of the first holiday mentioned, Kalends, the Bavli offers an explanation of the first two holidays, Kalends and Saturnalia. Rabbi Hanan bar Rabbah says that the first of these occurs eight days after the solstice, and the other occurs eight days before the solstice. This means that the holidays are listed in reverse order in the mishnah, a fact that suggests the need for the mnemonic that follows, "behind and before You have beset me."

In the verse that is quoted as the aid to memory, the word "behind" (*ahor*) precedes the word "before" (*qedem*). "Behind" in rabbinic texts refers to what is in the future. For example, in the famous story of Moses visiting the *beit midrash* of Rabbi Akiva, God says to Moses "turn behind you" (*hazor le-ahorekha*), inviting him to look into the future (*b. Menahot* 29b). Conversely, what is in the past is that which is before or in front of a person. This

directionality is counterintuitive to us, who see the past as that which is behind us, and who imagine ourselves as oriented toward the future, which lies before or ahead of us. But in rabbinic imagination, one faces what has already happened; this is what can be known and this is how we orient ourselves. The future is what we cannot see; it is in the back of us. And so the mnemonic is saying that what is behind—that is, what is in the future, what will come later—precedes what is before—that is, what is in the past, what comes earlier. Thus, with this verse in mind, we can remember that the mishnah lists the later holiday, Kalends, before the earlier holiday, Saturnalia.

But why this oblique mnemonic? Why would it be likely that one would remember this verse and its implication for the order of the holidays listed in the mishnah? The use of this mnemonic only makes sense if we recognize that the verse is from Psalm 139, the psalm that is understood as telling about Adam's experiences and that is quoted explicitly in the Yerushalmi version of the story of Adam and the increasing darkness. The Bavli story does not explicitly quote the psalm, but the appearance of a verse from Psalm 139 at this point sets a backdrop for the story that follows, bringing the psalm and its associated experiences into our consciousness as we set about reading the story.

This particular verse—offered here as a reminder of the holidays that Adam established—is interpreted elsewhere in the Bavli as articulating Adam's experience of diminution after his sin. Adam, according to Rabbi Elazar, was gigantic at creation; he reached from the earth to the heavens. After he sinned, God placed His hand on him and diminished him (*b. Hagigah* 12a). Rav Yehudah transmits there a similar tradition in the name of Rav: At creation, Adam stretched from one end of the earth to the other; when he sinned, he was diminished under God's hand. Both derive the idea of Adam's diminution from this verse (Psalms 139:5):

> You have beset me behind and before, and you placed your hand upon me.

The word translated here as "beset me"—*tzartani*, construing the word as connoting narrowness—has also been understood as "formed," recalling the creation of the human being: "The Lord God formed (*va-yitzer*) the human being from the dust of the ground" (Genesis 2:7). Rashi to *Hagigah* 12a explains the talmudic interpretation of the verse as telling of Adam's diminution as based on this latter understanding of the word *tzartani*: "You have formed me behind and before" refers to two separate acts of creation, an earlier one in which Adam is gigantic, and a later one in which he is small—or, in Rashi's words, creations in which Adam is high and then low. Alternatively, the Talmudic Sages might be interpreting the first part of the verse as referring to Adam's initial creation, the words "behind and before" suggesting that he stretched from one extreme point to the other (from earth to heaven or from one end of the earth to the other), and only the second half of the verse—"and you placed your hand upon me"— as referring to Adam's diminution after his sin.

Yet a third possibility is that the Sages are reading the word *tzartani* in both ways simultaneously, as conveying the meaning both of formation and of narrowing. The human being, according to this reading, is a creature whose essence is both of vast capacity and of extreme limitation. Adam both can reach from earth to heaven—or from one end of the earth to the other—and can be so very small. Such a reading fits with the reading I offered above of the verse about light and darkness. There, too, the verse can be construed in two ways, and I

suggested that the Talmudic story includes both of these readings and, indeed, invites us to imagine both meanings simultaneously.

This bivalence can be read as central to Psalm 139's meaning and purpose. The human being in this psalm is portrayed as worthy of God's notice and, at the same time, fragile and vulnerable in relation to God. The speaker talks about the impossibility of escaping from God's presence in verses that have been read both as suggesting an attempt to flee from God and as conveying the awesome assurance of finding God everywhere. The paradoxical nature of the psalm's portrayal of the human condition and especially of the human experience of being in God's presence is highlighted in Israel Najara's liturgical poem based on this psalm, *Ana Elekh*. The poem begins *ana elekh me-ruchekha, evrah mimmekha elekha*—"Where can I go from your spirit? I escape *from* you *to* you." This very duality might lie at the heart of the rabbinic attribution of the psalm to Adam, the human being formed (*va-yitzer*—Genesis 3:7) from the dust of the earth but ensouled with God's spirit, the person who lives in a place in which God walks and who tries to hide from the presence of God, only to find that the very place in which he hides (amidst the trees of the garden!) reveals to God his thoughts and actions. (See Genesis 3:8; compare 2:9 and 3:3)

It is this duality that is captured by the talmudic understanding of the verse, a verse which is introduced just before the story about Adam in the Bavli. Adam filled the entire earth, but Adam sinned and was diminished. It is worth noting that the word used for "sin" in the passage about Adam's diminution is *sarah*, the same word that is used in the story about Adam establishing the festivals for which the Psalms verse is cited as a mnemonic: "perhaps because I have sinned (*sarahti*) . . . ." And so citing this verse brings to mind the complex experience of the human being described in the psalm and, in particular, the notion of Adam sinning and what happens to Adam as a consequence of his sin.

The Bavli story is very similar to the Yerushalmi story, but there are a few notable differences. In the Yerushalmi story, Adam is worried that the snake will come and attack him in the darkness. In the Bavli, it is darkness itself that terrifies Adam. "The world is dark about me" —*ba-adi*— recalls the Psalms verse about light and darkness: "And I said: 'Surely darkness will envelop me, and the light shall be night about me—*ba-adeini*.'" Adam is saying that the world is dark *about himself*—meaning both that it is dark *for* him and also that the world is dark *because* of him. Adam imagines that, because he has sinned, darkness has come to the world. And he believes that this darkness, overtaking the world more and more each day, signals that the world is returning to primordial chaos. The first act of creation in Genesis is the creation of light (Genesis 1:3). Before that, "the earth was unformed and void—*tohu va-vohu*—and darkness was upon the face of the deep" (Genesis 1:2). If the earth is returning to darkness, then it is returning to *tohu va-vohu*—the very words that Adam uses in our story. Adam has caused the dissolution of creation, the return of the world to its precreation state of darkness and chaos. This, he believes, is the death that he had been warned about should he fail to obey God's word (Genesis 2:17).

In the waning days of winter, the newly created Adam imagines the world as an extension of himself; the death to which he had been condemned is the extinction of the world. His own offense—*sarahti* evokes decay or rot—returns the world to chaos and confusion. But at the solstice, there is a shift in Adam's consciousness. When Adam sees the days getting longer and longer, he says "This is the way of the world." It is not clear what causes this change in

the way Adam sees the world. Why does he not believe, instead, that God has responded to his fasting, that God has forgiven him and halted the process set in motion by Adam's sin? Perhaps Adam's new understanding comes about because Adam sees the daylight increasing gradually; if God had forgiven him and halted the world's return to darkness, the lengthening nights would simply be expected to stop lengthening, or perhaps to return to their pre-sin duration. Instead, Adam notices a gradual shift in the length of daytime, and that does not seem to him to be a response to his fasting. Rather, he concludes, this—both the lengthening of daytime that he experiences now and the lengthening of nighttime that he had experienced earlier—is the way of the world.

Adam now is alienated from the world. He understands the world to be separate from himself; it is not affected by his actions or his state of being. The increasing light is not a function of his fasting, and the decreasing light was not a function of his sin. Thus, he not only celebrates the time of increasing light, but he subsequently turns the earlier days into festive days as well. The world will continue as it is, with longer and longer nights giving way to longer and longer days. This realization, the story tells us, is the origin of the two eight-day festivals of Kalends and Saturnalia.

Eight-day festivals? Rav Hanan bar Rava had dated Kalends to eight days after the solstice and Saturnalia to eight days before. Saturnalia was, in fact, a Roman festival held on December 17th, eight days before the winter solstice, which, on the Julian calendar, fell on December 25th. And Kalends was a first-of-the-month festival. The Kalends of January falls eight days after the December 25th solstice. But Rav Hanan bar Rava's statement does not suggest that these are eight-day holidays. That is a subtle change introduced in the story about Adam's establishment of these festivals, and it does not correspond to the actual Roman holidays. Kalends was a one-day festival, and Saturnalia varied in duration from one to seven days during different periods. Neither was an eight-day long festival. According to this story, though, Saturnalia began on December 17th and continued, for eight days, through the 24th, and Kalends began on December 25th and continued, for eight days, through January 1st.

So why does this story tell of Adam's celebration of eight-day holidays? I believe that this story was shaped in the Bavli in relation to the practice of lighting Hanukkah candles and to the Hanukkah story. [I am indebted to my colleague Rabbi Shimon Deutsch for first introducing me to the possibility that the Bavli story and the Bavli's discussion of Hanukkah are related to each other.] Here is the Bavli's discussion of how to light the Hanukkah candles, followed by the story of Hanukkah's origins:

> Our Rabbis taught:
> The *mitzvah* of Hanukkah is a candle for each person and his household;
> and those who beautify—a candle for each and every one;
> and those who most beautify—
> Beit Shammai say:
> The first day he lights eight; from then on he decreases and decreases
> and Beit Hillel say:
> The first night he lights one; from then on he increases and increases . . . .
> What is Hanukkah?
> As our Rabbis taught: On the 25th of Kislev are the eight days of Hanukkah,
> [wherein one should not eulogize nor fast.]

> For when the Greeks entered the temple,
> they defiled all of of the oil in the Temple.
> And when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed and defeated them,
> they searched and found only one cruse of oil that lay with the seal of the High Priest,
> and there was only enough in it to light for one day.
> A miracle occurred with it, and they lit from it for eight days.
> Another year they established them
> and made them into festive days with praise and thanksgiving. (*b. Shabbat* 21b)

There are several similarities between this description of the origins of Hanukkah and the Bavli's story about Adam and the winter solstice. Hanukkah, of course, is an eight-day holiday, like Kalends and Saturnalia according to the Bavli's story about the origin of these festivals. It falls on the 25th of the month of Kislev, a date similar to the pivot point of the two festivals that Adam is said to have established, one eight days before and the other eight days after the December 25th solstice.

After each of the stories describes the way the holidays originated, the stories conclude by saying that, at a later time—*le-shanah aheret*—there was a change. Adam originally fasted during the first eight days and celebrated the second eight days as festive days—*yamim tovim*. But "another year" he established both sets of eight days as festivals. Similarly, the original eight days of Hanukkah were the days in which the miracle of the oil unfolded. But "another year" they established these as festive days, on which fasting is forbidden. Both stories use the word *kava*, "established," in describing how the holidays reached their final form. Adam "established" the holidays for the sake of Heaven, but others "established" them for the sake of idolatry. Hanukkah was "established" and made into festive days with praise and thanksgiving.

Finally, both passages talk about decreasing light and increasing light. In the Adam story, the day is *mitma'et ve-holekh*—it gets shorter and shorter—and then it is *ma'arikh ve-holekh*—it gets longer and longer. In the Hanukkah passage, Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel dispute how the candles ought to be lit. According to Beit Shammai, on the first day one lights eight candles and, from then on, *pohet ve-holekh*—he decreases and decreases; that is, one lights fewer and fewer candles each day. According to Beit Hillel, on the first day one lights one candle and, from then on, *mosif ve-holekh*—he increases and increases; that is, one lights more and more candles each day.

These similarities, both in content and in formulation, suggest that the two passages are shaped in relation to each other. Note that the Yerushalmi version of the Adam story contains not a single one of the elements listed above that are shared between the Bavli version of that story and the passage about Hanukkah. The story about Adam in the Bavli seems to be deliberately shaped to echo elements of the Hanukkah passage, and it is possible that the Hanukkah passage itself was partially shaped in relation to the Adam passage. Thus, the Bavli is inviting us to hear the story of Adam when we read the Hanukkah story and to keep the Hanukkah story in mind when we read the story of Adam. This interplay between texts enables each reader to find something different in the dynamic space that is created between them. I will offer some of my own thoughts as to what might be suggested by that interplay.

First, the Adam story broadens the significance of the Hanukkah story. While Hanukkah marks a particular event in Jewish history, the Adam story invites us to understand Hanukkah as celebrating a universal human experience as well. Adam—the first human being and every human being—experiences the terror of being engulfed by the darkness. And Adam experiences the return of the light after a period of darkness that threatens never to end. Hanukkah, understood in relation to the story of Adam, becomes a holiday in which victory over tyrants, rededication of the Temple, and lighting the tiny remnant of oil signify an event of ongoing significance in each individual life and in the universal experience of humankind.

Second, the Adam story helps us notice that Hanukkah is a holiday about both increasing light and decreasing light. Beit Shammai's and Beit Hillel's positions are alternatives *in practice*, but the two ways of lighting the candles coexist in our text—within the talmudic passage, we are offered both an image of diminishing light and an image of increasing light. In fact, Hanukkah falls at the very darkest time of the year. With respect to the solar calendar, Hanukkah falls not far from the winter solstice, when the nights are longest. With respect to the lunar calendar, Hanukkah begins shortly before the new moon, at a time when the last sliver of the waning moon is about to disappear. An eight-day holiday that begins on the 25th of a lunar month takes us through a period of disappearing light into a time of greatest darkness and then into a time in which the light begins to reappear, with the emergence of the waxing moon. [I am indebted to Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun for the observation that Hanukkah falls on the very darkest days of the year, taking the lunar cycle into account. See his analysis in a *Megadim* article, where he discusses this point and offers an interpretation of Beit Shammai's and Beit Hillel's opinions about how to light the Hanukkah candles in relation to the eight days of decreasing light and the eight days of increasing light described in the Bavli story.] Hanukkah, then, mirrors Adam's experience of diminishing and growing light, but does so specifically on the Jewish lunar-solar calendar. And Beit Shammai's and Beit Hillel's positions about how to light the Hanukkah candles—formulated, as we saw, in language that echos the Adam story—mirrors Adam's experience as well. Instead of eight days of decreasing light followed by eight days of increasing light, which generate two consecutive festivals, as in the Adam story, Hanukkah is a single festival of eight days in which—within our textual tradition—the light of the candles simultaneously both decreases and increases. It is as if the Hanukkah passage folds the two parts of Adam's experience over onto one another, asking us to experience the decreasing light and the increasing light at one and the same time. This complicates the experience of darkness, suggesting, perhaps, that not only will darkness inevitably give way to the light—as in the Adam story—but that darkness and light are interwoven in some way. Perhaps we are invited to imagine ways in which the experience of darkness itself might—at least from the perspective of *another year*—be a source of light.

Finally, the Adam story traces Adam's maturation from having a consciousness of the world as an extension of himself to having a consciousness that is alienated from the world. At the story's end, Adam believes that "this is the way of the world" and that his behavior and his state of being have no impact on the way the world functions. The story of Hanukkah asks us to reevaluate this vision of our place in the world. Like Adam, we live in a world that has an existence independent of ourselves. But Hanukkah asks us to light a candle, to add light to the world, not only, like Adam, to celebrate with praise and

thanksgiving. The passage about Hanukkah, read in relation to the story about Adam, invites us to imagine how a human being who accepts the realization to which Adam comes can nevertheless believe in our ability to affect the world.

The dispute between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai has always puzzled me. Yes, as I have suggested above, the two positions side-by-side offer a generative experience of overlapping increasing and diminishing light. But, as *alternative* positions about how to light the candles, Beit Hillel's position, which is universally followed, seems eminently sensible, while Beit's Shammai's position seems almost unimaginable. Why would we think to have a candle-lighting practice that moves from eight candles down to one, a practice that has us celebrate Hanukkah by creating an experience of diminishing light?

Perhaps we can understand Beit Shammai's position in light of the notion that Hanukkah moves us from a position of alienation from the world to a belief in the possibility of having an impact on the world. Beit Hillel's position has us reflecting the light that is about to increase or modeling the increase that we anticipate we will soon experience. But Beit Shammai asks us to do something different. Beit Shammai asks us, in the very darkest time, when the last sliver of light is about to disappear, to bring a blast of light into the world. Our actions light up the world and, over time, as the world begins to brighten, it is necessary for us to put in less and less light. Beit Hillel, in other words, has us lighting the candles as a form of *pirsumei nisa*—publicizing the miracle—responding to the change from darkness to light by reflecting that change, increasing the light of the candles from night to night. In a sense, we are like Adam, responding to the change that we experience with praise and thanksgiving. For Beit Shammai, however, we do not respond to the change. Instead, Beit Shammai asks us to *create* that change, to enter into the experience of being plunged into darkness and to give out all of the light that we can muster.

The echoing of the story of Adam and the Hanukkah passage opens dimensions of the experience of Hanukkah that go beyond the classical story that the Bavli explicitly relates. Within this intertextual space, Hanukkah becomes a time that allows us to mark the experience of darkness, the terror and uncertainty that each person faces at times when light, literally or figuratively, seems to be slipping away. It becomes a holiday in which we search for tiny points of light, which promises us that small sources of light *can* be found and that, no matter how dark it is, light will return to the world again. The eight days of Hanukkah, and the candle-lighting practices that the Talmud describes, evoke an overlap of decreasing and increasing light, offering an experience of darkness and light that are interwoven with each other, as they so often are even in our most difficult and our most joyful life events. And the *mitzvah* of candle lighting holds out the promise and responsibility that, even though, as children of Adam, we are very small, each one of us does have the capacity to bring some light into a world that can be very dark.

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The Downside of Digital Democratization: A Response to Zev Eleff

Sarah Rudolph

What does it mean to "democratize" Jewish learning, and is such democratization a good thing?

I have struggled with this question a great deal, and was intrigued to see Zev Eleff's recent article, "Digital Discourse and the Democratization of Jewish Learning." Once I read it, though, it became apparent that he was only addressing the issues from one direction (those being provided access to Jewish texts), and I feel compelled to raise some questions from the other direction (those doing the providing) as well.

On one hand, I freely utilize and am eternally grateful for the vast array of material available at the click of a mouse. The bulk of my work as a freelance Jewish educator and writer is done in coffee shops, and while I used to enjoy setting up in a Starbucks with my pile of *Humashim* and *Gemara*s, I also enjoy the freedom to carry nothing but my laptop. I miss the feel of pulling books off of shelves and turning pages, I miss the conversations with total strangers who would see me with my odd books and ask random questions about Jews, and I even miss old-fashioned cutting and pasting when I make my handouts – but I get over it for the sake of accessibility, ease, and speed.

Beyond the benefits in my own life, I also thoroughly support making Jewish texts accessible to all. I want to see every Jew learning Jewish texts, more and more of them. I want to see more and more Jewish learners (for learners should we all be) able to imbibe those texts as painlessly as possible, and come up with the *hiddushim* Dr. Eleff talks about.

So democratization from the side of the learner, in the sense of texts being more readily available to all, sounds great to me.

But what about from the other direction? What happens when the teaching or providing of Jewish texts is also democratized? When we offer a platform from which anyone can share a text, without vetting for accuracy of the transmission? When anyone who thinks they know something has the freedom to publish their translation or explanation? What happens when these texts are published online and innocent bystanders, who just want a little bit of Jewish learning, come across something that is incomplete or even untrue?

I'm thrilled to allow "just anyone" access to texts – but I worry about the integrity of the texts they're accessing.

As an example – I have encountered several texts on a popular website that were mistranslated and/or had large swaths of personal bias mixed in with the translation. (At least one said the exact opposite of the Hebrew text!) If I were using that site and didn't happen to know Hebrew, or didn't think to check the original Hebrew text, I would have thought that was actually what the text said.

Certainly every translation is inherently interpretation, and of course errors have always been rampant in printed texts as well. Certainly, too, readers should be responsible about what they read - especially on the internet, especially in the age of Wikipedia, and especially in the more recent era of “fake news.” As readers and learners, we all have a responsibility to do our due diligence, to read critically and to remember that not everything we read is true.

But the responsibility cannot lie with the reader alone. It takes education and awareness to even realize where potential pitfalls lie or how to avoid them, and providing material on the internet means it will be accessed by untold numbers without that background - much greater numbers than would wander into a bookstore and pick up a book. That accessibility is good, in theory. But the more widely a text is spread, the more diverse the population that might access it – the more responsible we have to be with what is transmitted and how.

If the purveyors of Jewish texts in today’s world want to provide texts and translations online, I commend them. I am grateful. And I want to see those texts riddled with disclaimers. I want to see a reminder **on every page** of translation that translation is inherently interpretation and can never be viewed as **the** conclusive meaning of a text, an attribution right there on the page (that doesn’t require another click) to the source of the translation, and an acknowledgement of the potential for errors. This is especially necessary for websites open to community submissions.

Of course, printed books might have the same pitfalls. I came across a particularly glaring mistake years ago, in a printed translation of *Ein Yaakov*, that I still use as an example to show my students the dangers inherent in relying on translations. (And of course, much of what is available online started in print.) I’m a fan of disclaimers; I wouldn’t mind seeing them in books as well. But books are different from web pages. One is unlikely to happen upon an obscure and imperfect printed translation of *Ein Yaakov* because of some vaguely curious Googling; the odds are much greater that more people with less background will happen upon information online than in print.

And really, it’s not only a matter of background; even more seasoned learners won’t always catch an error. And it’s not only a matter of technical accuracy in translations, but of appreciating complexity - which includes, but is not limited to, recognizing the potential for multiple correct translations that might lead to multiple viable interpretations of a text.

With so much available on a silver platter, it’s easy for internet users of all stripes to fall prey to “the perils of shallow reading and lazy shortcutting,” as Dr. Eleff points out; it’s easy to forget that true knowledge requires time and “painstaking *bekiut*.”

If the texts that make up our treasured heritage are to be served on that silver platter, we need to make sure that perceived “knowledge parity” (to borrow Dr. Eleff’s phrasing) is real, that the information offered to all alike is solid. There is no knowledge, and no knowledge parity, when readers simply *think* they know something, not realizing the information is actually erroneous or misleading.

New *hiddushim* are great, and can indeed come from Torah scholars and laypeople alike - but only if those *hiddushim* are rooted in an awareness of what is and is not, or may or may not

be, an accurate piece of Torah. If teachers are going to "surrender their monopoly on facts," they need to make sure their students know how to ascertain what is and is not fact.

It is only when the dwarf sees the giant for what he is that he can climb on that giant's shoulders and reach for the sky.

Sarah Rudolph is a freelance Jewish educator, writer, and editor. She has been sharing her passion for Jewish texts of all kinds for over 15 years, with students of all ages. Sarah's essays have been published in a variety of internet and print media, including Times of Israel, Kveller, Jewish Action, OU Life, The Lehrhaus, TorahMusings, and more. Sarah lives in Cleveland with her husband and four children, but is privileged to learn online with students all over the world, through www.TorahTutors.org and www.WebYeshiva.org.