

**Temple Israel**  
**Rabbi Katie Bauman**  
**April 9, 2010**  
**Turn It Again**

Taped to my desk in my office is a little cartoon from The New Yorker. My uncle clipped it for me and I instantly loved it. It depicts two men with long beards and robes, sitting in the desert in what appears to be ancient times. One of them is writing in a long scroll that is meant to be the Torah. The other one is saying the following to the scribe. “Quit worrying about corroborating your sources – it’s not as if anyone is going to take this literally.”

Of course, what’s funny about this cartoon is that even without corroborated sources, a great many people take the Bible literally. As we all know only too well, people have been so sure about the literal truth of the Bible that they’ve felt entitled and even compelled to kill on its behalf.

As Reform Jews, we reject the idea that everything in the Torah must be taken literally and is infallible. In fact, there are parts of the Torah that we find objectionable based on our Jewish values. In just a few weeks, we’ll read the Torah portion in which homosexual behavior is deemed an abomination, a verse that has been the basis for the exclusion and persecution of homosexuals for centuries.

Reform Judaism views the Torah as a document that contains divine inspiration expressed in flawed human terms, and as such, we are able to love the Torah and at the same time reject verses like this that come into direct conflict with values we know to be true – love of fellow human being, preservation of dignity, and the seeing the spark of divinity in one another.

In the face of this view of Torah, one that refuses to accept Torah’s infallibility, how do we still seek truth in it? One answer, I believe, is that if we can allow ourselves to hear the diverse voices within the Torah, we will actually hear our own voices and see our own faces reflected back at us.

We have begun the book of Leviticus in the last few weeks, a book of the Torah that contains law after law, most of which relate only to the ancient priests and their administration of sacrifices. It’s all blood and guts for weeks! What do we do with this book and its central presence in our holy scroll?

We can see it as one voice of many inside that scroll, a voice that is as present

– but not more so – than the others. And we can see it as a reflection of one part of our Jewish identity. The Torah presents us with several different views of what it means to be Jewish. And each view has become a part of our identity. What are some of these views?

**Genesis** offers us a vision of the Jewish people that is based on family and ethnicity. God makes a covenant with Abraham and his descendants, and the entire book is about the constant renewal of that covenant. The descendants of Abraham will be “Jews” because that’s what their ancestors were.

How many of us sitting here this Shabbat do so because it’s what our parents did? How many of us heard the echoes of relatives long since departed when we sat around our seder tables last week and felt the holiday more powerfully because of them? The legacy of Genesis rings true – Judaism is passed down from parent to child in a very significant way.

**Exodus** offers a different vision. Yes, the Israelites in Egypt are descendants of Abraham, but what really makes them a “people” is their collective experience of slavery and deliverance as well as receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. It’s the ethical and moral teachings as embodied in the 10 Commandments that makes them Jewish. Their Judaism is expressed in their value system. Holiness through law, and particularly ethical and moral law, is the substance of the covenant that God makes with Israel in Exodus, and we are heirs of that covenant as well.

For many in our community, Judaism is embodied in laws like:

You must not mistreat the stranger in your midst, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

You must let the needy among you eat of your fields, vineyards, and olive groves.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

He who insults his father or mother must be put to death.... Well, maybe not that one. (Just checking to be sure you were paying attention.)

But a history of suffering, redemption, revelation, and striving toward tikkun olam makes many of us who we are as Jews. The Book of Exodus is a reflection of that.

The world of **Leviticus**, the world we're reading about now, is a world of distinctions, setting certain places and times apart from others through behaviors that are extremely particularistic. The Judaism of Leviticus is a Judaism of ritual, and holiness is achieved by adherence to laws and customs that remind the Israelites who they are, what they believe, and what their historical experiences have been. This is a reflection of our Judaism as well.

The rituals of our tradition – lighting Shabbat candles to sanctify the day, making blessings over meals to express gratitude for sustenance, meticulously removing chametz from the house in anticipation of Passover, lighting a Yartzeit candle – elevate and emphasize the most important values of our Judaism for many. The spirit of Leviticus, of sanctifying time and space to increase holiness and illuminate a path to God, is present and prevalent within our community, and we are the richer for it.

In the Mishnah, Rabbi Ben Bag Bag says the following about the Torah: *Hafoch ba v'hafoch ba v'chulei ba*. "Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it." We take this to mean that all the answers to life's questions can be found in the Torah. But when we consider our Jewish identity, we might also interpret his words to mean that the Torah reflects the diversity of our Judaism. All of us are in it.

It's not simply the existence of Genesis, Exodus, or Leviticus that makes our Torah a tree of life and a storehouse of wisdom. Rather, it's the fact that Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus – family, history, law, and ritual – are ALL a part of our inherited tradition. These books, which have independent and divergent visions of what it means to be part of the Jewish people, have been sewn together and diligently passed down to us.

Our Torah teaches us that there are many ways to express who we are as Jews, that just as we read each book throughout the course of a year, we may live each book's lessons as we travel through our lives. Torah is the scroll of our lives, the story of each of us and of all of us. And whether the Torah is the Divine's gift to humanity or a divinely human effort, may we always see Torah as not just a book that teaches us about our people's history, but also as a sparkling mirror, as a splendid echo chamber, in which we can see and hear ourselves becoming and being at every turn.