

**Erev Rosh Hashanah 5772**  
**Rabbi Steven Z. Leder**  
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My childhood rabbi was scary. He had slicked back hair and crooked, yellow teeth. And he never frightened me more than the morning of my Cousin Mark's bar mitzvah. Rabbi Sachs looked at me and said, "Stevie, I understand you are going to be holding the Torah on the bimah this morning. If you drop it, everyone has to fast for forty days. Don't drop that Torah Stevie." I was eight years old.

Dropping the Torah is no minor violation. The Torah is God's gift to humanity through the Jewish People. We rise in the presence of the Torah as a sign of respect. It takes nine long months to create a Torah, written entirely by hand written on parchment with a quill pen. When a Torah wears out it is buried like a person, in hallowed ground.

Imagine if one of the four people carrying a Torah when the service began tripped and that Torah crashed to the ground. Imagine the shock of seeing a Torah dropped right in front of you.

I worry, that in some ways, we have already dropped the Torah. Not in the physical sense, but in larger, more dangerous ways. Consider the facts that keep me up at night:

The first, some of you have heard me mention before. American Jews are having 1.3 children per couple. We are no longer replacing ourselves. Add to that the fact that 50% of American Jews intermarry...which is not in and of itself a problem. After all, we all know two Jews who never should have married each other. It's none of my business or anyone else's who falls in love with whom. The troubling part of the 50% intermarriage rate is that 75% of the intermarried do not raise Jewish children. Add 1.3 children per couple and 75% of 50% not raising Jewish children...and you have a dropped Torah.

Secondly, support for Israel is no longer a safe assumption among American Jews. It is bad enough that our enemies attack Israel from the right and the left...but now even many American Jews' love for Israel depends upon the politics du jour of its government or our own political whims. Over half the Jews in the world live in Israel. Israel cannot survive without the support of the American Jewish community and our government...and that support has rarely been weaker. If we

do not love and support Israel, warts and all, she is doomed and you have a dropped Torah.

Finally, what keeps me up at night is an old joke. A priest is complaining to his rabbi friend about a problem with mice in the church's choir loft. The rabbi mentioned that his shul once had the same problem. "Really," said the priest. "What did you do about it?"

"We bar mitzvahed them and we never saw them again," the rabbi answered.

We bar mitzvahed them and we never saw them again. Imagine if every Jew stopped his or her secular education in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. We would be the poorest and dumbest people on earth. What does it tell us that virtually every American Jew knows the name of Jesus' mother but not the name of Moses' mother? It's not just that our children stop learning at 13. We too, we empty nesters, we seniors, we Jewish grandparents, we too have dropped the Torah. Jewish illiteracy will kill us in a way our enemies never could.

My friend John Singleton, an African American writer and director asked me last year, "Rabbi Steve, why are you so worried, so obsessed with Jews disappearing? Jews have made it in America...in my business everyone wants to be a Jew. What are you so worried about?"

I answered John's question with a question. "John," I asked, "what if there was a pill that African Americans could take that would instantly make them white? How many would take that pill?"

"Most," was John's answer.

"Jews can take that assimilation pill in America," I told him. "Here we are accepted, admired, even loved. And that acceptance may well do to us what our enemies could not. Here we can shorten our noses and shorten our names. Here we can melt so completely into the melting pot that we disappear."

It's no secret that a lot of us have been working hard at raising money to build right here what will be the most remarkable urban center of Jewish life in America when we are finished. Let me tell you about one of those fund raising conversations.

After telling this potential donor, who could change the destiny of the Los Angeles Jewish community with the stroke of a pen, about our plans he looked at me and said, “Well, I am Jewish. But my religion is peace, love and understanding and my Temple is the world. The synagogue, the Torah, a Jewish school, is stuff that just doesn’t matter to me.”

This is what I told him and this is what I say to every Jew who cares about the world. I don’t know everything about you. But I do know this. Every good thing you believe in—peace, love and understanding, being an ethical business person, being a good son or daughter, father or mother, caring for the earth, not gossiping, treating other people the way you would like to be treated, reaching out to the hungry, the oppressed, the poor, the powerless, the frail—all of it and more, every noble idea in western culture, every decent thing you can think of comes directly from the Torah, you just don’t know it. And if we lose the Torah we will eventually, maybe not in one or two or three generations, but we will eventually lose those most noble of ideas, those most cherished values that make us all who we ought to be.

Maybe dropping the Torah and relying on American ideals to get us through would be alright, or at least tolerable, if we lived in the America of Jefferson and Lincoln, Emerson and Thoreau, Brandeis and Irving Berlin. But we live in an America whose politics are coarse and petty, and whose cultural exemplars are the likes of Kim Kardashian and Snoop Dog. Relying on secular America alone to perpetuate and nourish our values is like eating a picture of food.

Imagine a world without Torah...without “Love your neighbor as yourself, without thou shalt not murder, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not covet.” Imagine a world without, “Justice, justice you shall pursue.” Imagine a world without forgiveness, without the idea that there is a power, a Oneness from which all things come and to which all things return, a glory, and purpose and meaning to existence. That’s a world without Torah.

Whether we realize it or not, our very DNA--yours, mine and the philanthropist whose Temple is the world--our blood and bones would not exist without the martyrdom and devotion to the Torah of a thousand generations of Jews who came before us. We owe them our very flesh.

We all know about the Holocaust, but you may not know about David Weiss Halivni, the young Talmud prodigy deported to Auschwitz at 15. One day he saw a German guard unwrapping his midday snack. The sandwich was wrapped in

*bletl*...a page of torah. "Upon seeing this wrapper," writes Halivni, "I instinctively fell at the feet of the guard...the mere letters propelled me. With tears in my eyes, I implored him to give me this *bletl*, this page. He immediately put his hand to his revolver....Please I sobbed, give it to me. He gave me the *bletl* and I took it back to the camp. The *bletl* became a rallying point. We studied it whenever we could. Anyone caught with the *bletl* would be killed for carrying contraband. Moshe Finkelstein volunteered. I am sure he slept with it."

The last time Halivni saw Moshe Finkelstein, Finkelstein just tapped his hip...a sign that the *bletl* was safe.

Listen to this. This is a song sung by one of the youngest children of the Abuyadaya--a small band of a few hundred black African Jews in a tiny Ugandan village. A group from our Temple and I were with them for Passover seder two years ago.

Listen to this little girl sing, "Torah. I love Torah. I love Torah for the reason she is to me food. She is to me power. She is to me life. Torah, the Tree of Life...."

(Play music)

A little *bletle* in Auschwitz and a little girl in a tiny African village, Jews holding fast to the Torah. Never, never did they drop it.

What about us, in this rich and blessed place? Will we hold the Torah high for a thousand generations yet to come?

There is a discussion in the Talmud about what to do if a family has only enough money for either the father or the son to study Torah but not enough for both. We don't need to make such difficult choices. Down the hall from the sanctuary you can see two new classrooms housing our inaugural kindergarten class of Brawerman Elementary School East. Those are the two most hopeful classrooms in the history of our great congregation. Our children are holding the Torah high.

So can you. Don't look now, but before you leave tonight, take this card and fill it out. There are pencils right in front of you. This card is a way to hold the Torah high. It's a solicitation, but not for money. It is a solicitation for your heart and your mind. On it are different ways you can study the Torah at Temple and at home, with family and with friends. Fill it out, give it to an usher on your way out of the sanctuary and begin your study of the Torah. Be amazed at what Torah will do for your mind, your heart, your marriage, your family, your soul.

There is a legend about the moment God gave the Torah to the Jews standing at the foot of Mount Sinai. The legend claims that God picked up the mountain, turned it upside down, held it over the heads of our ancestors gathered below and said, "If you accept Torah it shall be good. If not, this shall be your burial." The Jews were given two choices by God, hold fast to the Torah, or die.

Maybe the legend is true. If we drop the Torah, in a sense we will die and along with us so many beautiful, noble and worthy things we and the world hold dear. So to you, my philanthropist friend who knows not from whence your religion of peace, love and understanding springs. To Moshe Finkelstein, a *bletl* in his pocket, to you little African child, and to us, among the most blessed and mightiest of congregations the world has ever known. Let us hold the Torah in our arms and our hearts. Let us vow today and forever, to hold it high.