

Torat Malakhim (Torah from the City of Angels)

August 14, 2010 4 Elul 5770

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Torah Portion: *Shoftim* (“Judges”), [Deut. 16:18-21:9](#)
Haftarah Portion: [Isaiah 51:12-52:12](#)

“When he (the king) is seated on his royal throne, he shall have a copy of this Teaching written for him on a scroll by the levitical priests. Let it remain with him and let him read in it all his life, so that he may learn to revere the Eternal One his God, to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching as well as these laws.” (Deuteronomy 17:18-19)

This passage from the weekly *parashah* illustrates the pivotal role of Torah in Jewish life and thought. No one, not even a king, is above the rule of Torah law. The monarch, like all of his people, is bound to study and observe the teachings of our tradition.

To underscore this point, the king is enjoined to commission a Torah scroll. Long before Gideon Bibles appeared in hotel and motel rooms across America, the king of Israel had his own personal Torah at his bedside. He was to read and reread the words of this Teaching throughout his life in order to instill reverence for God and respect for sacred text.

Earlier this week the Board of Rabbis held its High Holy Days Seminar at Stephen S. Wise Temple. More than 160 colleagues attended the conference, the largest gathering of rabbis and rabbinical students in the Board’s history. Seminar participants spent the day intensively learning and sharing Torah with our gifted

guest scholar Rabbi Arthur Green, local master teachers, and a panel of prominent area rabbis.

There was a palpable buzz throughout the day as friends and colleagues discussed and debated themes for the New Year. What does the creation story teach us about our obligations to care for the environment, and what more can we do to be faithful stewards of our fragile planet? How do we let go of our individual and collective anger on Yom Kippur? What do our Jewish texts teach us about the challenges of forgiveness, the efficacy and relevance of prayer, and the proper balance of pride and modesty in our daily conduct? How can we nurture and sustain civil discourse in our society, especially when we discuss critical issues such as Israel's survival?

The rabbis' conference underscored the centrality of Torah in our lives—not just the lives and work of rabbis, but our entire community. The conclave exemplified a passion for *talmud Torah* (learning) and a commitment to *k'lal Yisrael* (pluralistic Jewish life). Seminar participants represented communities throughout southern California and the many flavors of Jewish life—Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Reform, Renewal, non-denominational, post-denominational, and Hassidic. The rabbis in attendance serve synagogues, Jewish schools, seminaries, universities, hospitals, prisons, and numerous other institutions and organizations. They were joined by students from four diverse rabbinical schools and their deans.

It is a joy to participate in the learning and fellowship that takes place at the High Holy Days Seminar. It is a special privilege to witness the “give and take” of conference sessions. If we hold to the adage “two Jews, three opinions,” we should add the corollary “three rabbis, five opinions” when colleagues gather to debate Torah.

While our multi-denominational learning is precious, the spirited yet respectful tone of the sessions is an even greater blessing. The lively discourse of the rabbis and rabbis in training epitomizes the norm of *mahloket l'shem shamayim*, disagreements that serve a sacred cause. We do well to spread this ideal throughout our communities and our world.

The Board of Rabbis conference coincided with Rosh Hodesh Elul, the beginning of the Jewish month of Elul. On the Shabbat before Rosh Hodesh, we welcome the new month in a traditional prayer that reads in part: *Haverim kol Yisrael*, “The entire Jewish people is one fellowship.”

This fellowship spans millennia and unites Jews throughout the generations and across the globe. The unshakable foundation of this fellowship is Torah, a precious legacy for all of us. As Rabbi Art Green writes us in his new work, Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition:

“We Jews began our life together as a sacred community by an act of covenantal engagement. This is the original community of Israel, gathered at the base of Mount Sinai, a gathering that takes place throughout all eternity, one at which each of us (including all who choose to join the people of Israel) is ever present...This is our message, the reason we continue to exist. All the rest is commentary.”

Shabbat Shalom