

## The Face of God's Text

AARON BRUSSO

During my first year in the pulpit I received a call that a man from my congregation was dying. I ran home to put on a jacket and tie so that I could look like I just graduated rabbinical school rather than Hebrew school. I had studied talmudic passages on visiting the sick, and I had spent one summer in chaplaincy. I had read the codes on Jewish burial and mourning practice. As I drove to the hospital I felt fairly prepared to provide direction to this man's family by allowing the tradition to be mediated through me. I would walk them through the steps of a well-worn path and they would be comforted.

I entered the waiting room and saw the man's wife surrounded by family. I was not prepared to see her face — a well-worn path of wrinkles. Around the outer corners of her eyes were wrinkles from years of squinting and smiling, and lining her forehead were lines from years of worry and surprise. The wrinkles on her cheeks had become rivulets as tears took alternating paths down her face. I was as unprepared to observe this face as I was to encounter my first page of Talmud; I was subsumed by its wisdom.


She looked at me and her eyes quietly asked: "What could you possibly have to say to me?" Just as Rabbi Chananya ben Tradion had described, Hebrew letters flew into the air. My jacket and tie weren't really helping me at this point. But rabbinical school had given me something that was of enormous use and I drew upon it as I replied, "Nothing."

"I don't think I have much to say to you, but I know you have a lot to say to me."

Medical school teaches how to be a doctor

and engineering school teaches how to be an engineer. Rabbinical school, however, teaches how to be a learner. It takes a rabbi to the shore of the known and, as Abraham Joshua Heschel describes, makes one aware of the vast expanse of the unknown. It prepared me to be expert at learning from others.

I added a crucial new text to my rabbinic library, *Torat Ha'Adam*, the Torah of people. I soon found that not only did I bring textual learning to my congregants but they had a great deal to teach me as well. When I left rabbinical school I knew how to live a life in tune with God's will. It is tempting to assume that people who are not as knowledgeable of the rhythms and laws of such a life are also inured to the presence of God. But just as Moshe learned from his father-in-law, Yitro, I learned not to confuse being open to learning about God through the lived experience of a person with devaluing tradition. Upholding communal standards does not require that one pretend to know God best.

In Jonathan Rosen's book *Joy Comes in the Morning*, the phrase "ecclesiastical functionary" comes to describe a rabbi who, detached from the wellspring of Torah learning, mechanically and formulaically performs the rites of tradition. This no doubt is a danger in my profession. Another danger: to not see the face of God's ultimate text. It has only been while functioning in ecclesiastical settings that I have had the privilege to introduce God's written text to God's walking text and let the perspective of one reinvigorate the spirit of the other. God is not in this or that place but in the moment in which one says to the other "I know you have a lot to say to me." 

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## Leadership and Creativity

JULIE SCHONFELD

Rabbis take great satisfaction in fulfilling what is commanded of us; we also need to feel that, through our own agency, we are shaping, in a personal way, our compliance with the mandates of Torah. The world is saturated with giftedness. Our challenge — our blessing and sometimes struggle — is to be sufficiently open and present to receive and appreciate our individual gifts and those our peers share with us.

In my imagination, the Torah's depiction of Bezalel, the artisan charged with constructing

the *mishkan*, has always called out for midrashic interpretation. I see Bezalel as a model, not for the technical abilities emphasized by the Torah and the *mefarshim* but for his personal qualities, as an individual, and, if one might take the poetic license to call him such, as a rabbi. We are told, in Exodus 31:2 that God has singled out Bezalel by name and given him wisdom, discernment, and knowledge in every kind of craft. This extraordinarily high level of skill and training will allow him to receive offerings of every

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imaginable material and incorporate them into the *mishkan*, a unified structure that permits the Israelites, as a community, to worship God.

It is remarkable that Bezalel has the personal strength to be able to accept all of the gifts that the Israelites brought to him. As rabbis, we know the challenge of receiving highly charged “gifts”; the bearers seek to elevate to holiness these gifts by incorporating them into a larger communal structure. Why doesn’t Bezalel weary of this task? Why doesn’t the Torah show him struggling to maintain the quality of his work against the constant onslaught of objects saturated with people’s aspirations?

A partial answer lies in the fact that Bezalel does not labor alone; he is supported by Oholiab and others. But Bezalel’s ability to directly receive these gifts, however diverse and numerous, indicates his personal qualities of openness and equanimity in the context of the highly charged atmosphere of an engaged community. These are qualities that some rabbis possess in greater measure than others; they can all, though, be

cultivated through ongoing disciplines of self-awareness and self-reflection. Our service as rabbis can be labors that energize us or enervate us, depending on our clarity about our relationships with God, self, and other.

Tradition posits Moshe as the rabbinic model, not Bezalel. Yet the Torah does draw a direct parallel between the qualities of Bezalel, the artisan, and the qualities of the communal leader when, in *Devarim* (1:13), Moshe lists three qualities required of the heads of the tribes. They must be wise, discerning, and knowledgeable, precisely the same three Hebrew roots ascribed to Bezalel. The Torah teaches that to see ourselves as actively engaged in a creative process — with all the attendant uncertainty — makes us effective leaders. We might see leaders and artists as distinct, but the Torah sees leadership as a creative process and the creative process as a powerful vehicle for leadership. Like Bezalel, our rabbinate requires that we possess both gifts and skills, and be fully open to knowing and receiving them. 

## Staying Fit and Fresh: A Spiritual Strategic Plan

BENJAMIN J. SAMUELS

The Talmud teaches that of the generation of the wilderness, only those less than 20 years old and over 60 would enter the Promised Land; all ages in-between would die in the desert (*BT Baba Batra* 121b). For a midlife, mid-career rabbi, these are not promising demographics! To reach the Promised Land, perhaps we must have the vision and vibrancy of youth and the wisdom and experience of age. The question at hand is how can those of us in the professional rabbinate during our in-between years, what some call our prime-time, maintain our DYR (dynamic young rabbi-hood) while tapping into our budding sagacity? How do we do this for the sake of our congregations whom we lovingly serve, and who may themselves demand it of us? And how do we accomplish this for our own spiritual, emotional, and intellectual welfare as midlife questions and crises bloom and congregational, communal, and familial obligations (usually in this order) override attention to self? Ignoring our personal spiritual needs puts at great peril our capacity to minister, teach, and worship, and will ultimately frustrate the noble aspirations with which we initially approached our career and calling.

Fifteen years ago, as a rabbinic intern, a beloved mentor told me that the first ten years of my rabbinate were to be my intellectual apprenticeship. At the time, I thought that this meant that were I to apply myself to learning during this period, I would arrive at the prime of my career full of knowledge, know-how, and wisdom. Having just turned 40, the alleged age of understanding (“*ben arba'im l'bina*,” *Avot* 5:21), and having celebrated my thirteenth year at the congregation I am privileged to serve, I feel less Solomonic than in tune with the observation of Kohelet: “All this I tried with wisdom, I said to myself, ‘I will grow wise,’ yet it is beyond me” (7:23). Thus, I struggle with issues of maturation and rejuvenation, and offer here a few examples of one rabbi’s effort to stay fresh and fit.

From time to time I compose, for my eyes only, a spiritual strategic plan — that is, a structured accounting of my sense of mission, personal and professional goals, and a road map to lead me to their fruition. Self-awareness and reflection are the first steps in self-care; following up resolve with concrete action, of course, makes for results.

For me, *ben arba'im l'bina* is not a terminus, but an invitation, and describes a primary

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