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Shmini Atzeret/Simhat Torah

**October 9 (Sundown) - October 11 (Evening) 2020
22-23 Tishrei 5781**



**By: Rabbi Gail Labovitz
Professor, Rabbinic Studies
Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies
American Jewish University**

Starting Again on Blursday

The last time I attended a Torah reading at my synagogue was the Shabbat of March 14, parashat Ki Tissa, in the latter part of Exodus. By Monday, Los Angeles was under lockdown and the American Jewish University took classes on-line. Since then, we've all been living what my husband often

refers to (I think he got it from Twitter...) as an endless cycle in which every day is "Blursday." I volunteered to teach an on-line Talmud class for students and alumni of the Ziegler School over the summer precisely so that I'd have something specific in my schedule, something that isn't just another Blursday.

At least there's Shabbat...

I avoid using electronics on the Sabbath, and so since mid-March, my Shabbat morning routine has been to pray in my living room. I say Shaharit, and then in lieu of the Torah service (and before I say Musaf), I read through the weekly parashah. Typically I do so in *Etz Hayyim*, toggling between the Hebrew, the English, and the commentary; I might occasionally add the *Women's Torah Commentary* for a deeper gender perspective, or go check some of the classical commentators to look more closely at something that has been paraphrased in *Etz Hayyim* or to see if any have addressed a question not covered there. In this way, I have since learned the last parashah of Exodus, all of Leviticus and Numbers, and very soon, all of Deuteronomy. I will not be the least bit surprised if I come full circle through the entire Torah before we can consider safely returning to ordinary, open-to-all, communal services inside our synagogue buildings.

A number of years ago, I wrote another drash for this site (<https://www.aju.edu/ziegler-school-rabbinic-studies/our-torah/back-issues/whats-it>), on the transition between the end of Deuteronomy to the beginning of Genesis on Simhat Torah, and the leap of faith that is involved in starting over yet again and committing to another year of the cycle, another year of engagement with Torah:

So it seems to me no accident that V'zot haberacha and Simhat Torah and Parashat Bereshit - that is, an annual celebration in which we complete the reading of the entire Torah, and then the process of starting over at the beginning - should be linked. This is a moment of awesome transition, what anthropologists call a "liminal" moment. According to the midrash, the other nations of the world were once - and only once - presented with the choice, "Will you accept the Torah?" But they did not make the leap of faith necessary to do so. And us? We get the choice annually... Maybe this is why we dance and sing and make sure everyone has an aliyah (and maybe even why some of us enjoy a little "I'hayim" during the proceedings) - so that we will all be in a joyous and celebratory and accepting mood, one that will carry us over our doubts and challenges and questions until we've already begun again, until we're already committed to another year... By the time we enter Shabbat Bereshit, we've already embarked on the journey - again.

There won't be that communal celebration this year, at least not in anything like its recognizable form. If you are feeling exhausted and dispirited, and all the more so because the holidays too are not the joyous communal occasions they should be, because even the holidays are starting to feel like Blursday - you (and I) are far from alone.

How do we find the wherewithal to make this day not just another Blursday, find the wherewithal not only to keep going (do we have a choice?) but to make it a day of renewal?

"All beginnings are hard," the rabbis tell us. In fact, this rabbinic truism first appears in a midrash to Exodus 19:5 (Mekhilta BaHodesh 2), "Now if you will hearken...", which is part of the lead in to the

great Revelation at Sinai and the giving of the Aseret haDibrot, the Ten Commandments. But they also imagine God saying to the people, through Moses, “Hearken now.” Or as a famous ad campaign would one day put it, “Just do it.” And that is just what the people pledge: “All that the Lord has spoken, we will do!” (19:8). This is very similar to another famous verse, Ex. 24:7, when again the people respond to Divine instructions with the words: “All that the Lord has said, *na’aseh v’nishmah* – we will do and we will hearken...” What’s more, the word order matters here, according to the rabbis. First the people pledge to do what God asks. Only after making that commitment do they turn to probing and learning and understanding.

If there were ever a moment when we need to emulate our ancestors, and put *na’aseh* first, the commitment to do and keep going, this year is it. It will probably be a long time before we fully, if ever, reach the place of *nishmah*, of understand everything we have been through in these last months and are still going through. Will we feel this week, or in retrospect, that this holiday was, as it is usually known, *z’man simhateinu*, the time of our great happiness? I can’t say. But at least I hope to keep finding some respite, and even some joy in learning Torah – the joy of Torah, which is what Simhat Torah means. Which demands that I (and we) stare down this hard (re)beginning, and just do it. A new world stands to be created if we can just get ourselves to Gen. 1:1.

Shabbat shalom and hag sameah!

Rabbi Gail Labovitz, PhD, is Professor of Rabbinic Literature and former Chair of the Department of Rabbinics for the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. She also enjoys serving as the Ziegler School’s faculty advisor for “InterSem,” a dialogue program for students training for religious leadership at Jewish and Christian seminaries around the Los Angeles area. Dr. Labovitz formerly taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) and the Academy for Jewish Religion in New York. Prior to joining the faculty at AJU, Dr. Labovitz worked as the Senior Research Analyst in Judaism for the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project at Brandeis University, and as the Coordinator for the Jewish Women’s Research Group, a project of the Women’s Studies Program at JTS. Rabbi Labovitz is also preparing a *teshuva* (rabbinic responsum) for consideration by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly on whether a person who is unable to fast for medical reasons may nonetheless serve as a leader of communal prayer on Yom Kippur.



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Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies
American Jewish University
15600 Mulholland Drive
Bel Air, CA 90077
310-440-1218
www.aju.edu/ziegler

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