



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Breishit 5773

By Leah Kaplan Robins

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We are, by nature, creatures of habit. We find comfort in things that are familiar, carving out routines that give our lives order. But repetition also leads to the curious subduing of awareness that we call “autopilot”—the feeling we get when we arrive at work having absolutely no recollection of the roads or steps we took to get there. Autopilot can free our brains for daydreaming or creative thinking, but when its numbing effect starts to creep into important activities in our daily lives, it can dim our passion for things that once excited or inspired us.

This week, as we begin the familiar refrain of the opening chapters of the Torah in *Parashat Breishit* for the umpteenth time in Jewish history, it’s so easy to zone out in this way. After all, “*In the beginning*” is not really the beginning; we’ve heard it before. How often do we sit in synagogue hearing the chant with our ears but thinking other thoughts? Suddenly the Torah is being lifted and tied 30 minutes later and we have no recollection of all of the *aliyot* in between—let alone any deep thinking about the vital content within them.

The rabbis, too, struggled against the receding of the familiar, and suggested ways to make the Torah come alive anew each year. In *Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of our Ancestors, Ben Bag Bag said: “Turn to it and turn to it again, for everything is in it. Pore over it, grow old and gray over it. Do not budge from it. You can have no better guide for living than it.”¹ This advice is admirable, but it requires extraordinary focus and self control to return to the same text or routine with fresh eyes, real wonder and curiosity—again and again.

The last of the 613 *mitzvot*, which we read just a few weeks ago, hints at another approach that may be more effective in our everyday lives. This *mitzvah* mandates that each Jew must write his or her own Torah Scroll.² Perhaps this commandment is intended as an antidote to the human tendency to pay less attention to the familiar. As we complete the Torah and prepare to begin the very same text yet again, this *mitzvah* is telling us to engage with it in a different way. By writing a Torah—rather than just reading or listening to it—it becomes something new.

This method of reviving one’s passion for the familiar by engaging with it in a new way was particularly effective for me this year, in an experience that reinvigorated an activity that had become habitual. After working at AJWS for four years I was no less committed to its critical work, but my passion—which burned so brightly at first—had naturally tapered to the gentle simmer of routine. To re-energize my work I craved something new—and that’s when AJWS sent me away from my desk and into the field.

In August, I traveled to Cambodia with two colleagues and spent 10 days engaging face-to-face with some of the extraordinary people AJWS supports—in their own communities. In homes and community centers and farms around the country, I met garment workers organizing to defend their labor rights, land rights activists striving to protect their ancestral territory and youth struggling to overcome their tragic past. It felt like I had stepped into the familiar

¹ Pirkei Avot 5:22.

² Deuteronomy 31:19.

stories that I'd been writing for years—and suddenly the urgency and fervor with which I had delved into my work in the beginning was there again.

This experience has made me look at other routines on autopilot in my life and think about how I might re-gain the controls by engaging with them in a new way. From my marriage to my religious practice to my work in social justice, everything can benefit from the feeling of wonder that comes from a new experience.

Taking stock of our routines is important in all of our lives, especially during this time of the year when we focus on new beginnings. What feels rote just because it's familiar? What could use a jump start—and how can we achieve it? If our commitment to Torah or Jewish life feels stale, it might help to find a new way to engage with the tradition with all of our senses. If we care about global justice but feel numbed by the constant march of natural disasters, wars and atrocities in the news, perhaps our passion could be reignited by spending a day with AJWS advocating for human rights in the halls of Congress, volunteering abroad or finding another way put our values into action.

While getting active in order to rouse ourselves from autopilot doesn't necessarily change our routines themselves in the long term, it changes the way we experience them. In my case, what I saw and felt in Cambodia impacted me deeply, and I returned with a new perception of my role at AJWS—and in the world. Afterward, my familiar job felt radically different because *I* was different. Nelson Mandela expressed this phenomenon beautifully in his memoir, *Long Walk to Freedom*: "There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered."³

As Jews everywhere sit poised this week to begin our beloved ancient text yet again, maybe we can achieve our own re-awakening to its wonders by finding ways not to change the text, but to change the way we interact with it—so that we ourselves may evolve. Though its words are well-worn, the Torah doesn't remain stagnant, but changes as we change, revealing new interpretations over time. As we embark on this brand new year, may we take action to bring about changes in ourselves that open our eyes to the Torah in new ways; and through its wisdom, may we find the inspiration to go out and change the world.



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³ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, New York: Little Brown & Co, 1995.

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