



Dead Sea Scroll Family Night

Rabbi Andrew Pepperstone

Rabbi-in-Residence

apepperstone@grossschechter.org

While visiting family in the Twin Cities this week, my family looked online for fun things to do around town. When we came across the website for the Science Museum of Minnesota, the words “Dead Sea Scroll Family Night” leapt out at us. Ok, they leapt out at me. Not so much the rest of my family. We did make this part of our plan for the week, and in the end I went with our ten-year-old daughter.

The Science Museum has on display five fragments from the Dead Sea Scrolls, one from Psalms, one from Jeremiah, one from Deuteronomy, and two from books that are unique to the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Book of Thanksgiving, which is probably a scroll containing prayers for a particular group, and the Community Law, which contains the rules and procedures for a particular group’s way of life. These five tiny fragments that were no larger than one sheet of regular paper were enshrined in this elaborate exhibit.

The larger exhibit details the geographical, political, social and archeological significance of Qumran, the village nearest the cave where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, and the Dead Sea region in general. It was appropriate that we saw this exhibit just one day after Tishah B’Av, the day that commemorates the destruction of the First and Second Temples. The Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans, the empire in control of Judea during the time of the writing of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Dead Sea Scrolls may have been brought to the area of Qumran by former members of the Sadducees, the priestly families who ruled Jerusalem and the Temple. Some Sadducees were angry at the then current leadership, and reacted by leaving Jerusalem and creating their own community by the Dead Sea. Scholars are not sure if these are the Essenes, the group made famous in the writing of Josephus Flavius, or some other group that has been lost to us over the centuries.

What I saw at the exhibit this week were two important processes that have always kept the Jewish people going. First, one of the fragments is from the Community Law, a book that lays out how a Dead Sea community ran their communal and private lives. Some scholars call them the Yachad (Together) group because the book is called Serekh HaYachad (the Law of the Yachad community), and because this group did everything together. The fragment on display described how someone who had sinned against the community was removed from the community and had to work their way back into normal life. This elaborate process included eating separately for two years and being a social outcast, and in the end the offending person was granted atonement “without the fire-offerings and burnt fats of the sacrifices.” This community was beginning to deal with a changing reality. They no longer had access to the Temple, and soon would be living in a world with no Temple. This Dead Sea Scroll fragment records how the Jews at that time

adapted Judaism in a creative and dynamic way that kept Judaism alive. This creative and dynamic drive has kept the Jewish people alive through a slew of empires, exiles, political and historical upheavals, tragedies and triumphs.

The second element is found in a kind of writing called a Peshet scroll, which are interpretations of Torah verses. A Peshet scroll contains a list of biblical verses each followed by an interpretation of what the author thinks that that verse means. In essence, this was a simple form of midrash, which is the process of interpreting the Torah to uncover new layers of meaning. The midrashic process had already been going on before the Dead Sea Scrolls were written and has been going on ever since.

The Dead Sea Scrolls allow us to peek into these two processes that enabled the Jewish people to survive the destruction of the Second Temple by Rome, and to help us shape Judaism to meet the needs of each generation. When we take the words of the Torah seriously, and read the Torah through the lens of our experiences today, we figure out how to live out the Torah's demands in our own lives.

At Gross Schechter, these two processes are integral to our Judaic curriculum. Through the study of our Siddur, the Tanakh, midrash, mishnah and other Jewish writings, history, and ideas, we aim to bring our students into this ongoing process, to understand where we have come from, how we got here, and how to shape the Jewish community of tomorrow.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Pepperstone

AS A FAMILY:

Read this week's Torah portion, and find discuss which passages you find meaningful. How will you live out the words from the passage in the Torah during the coming week?

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION VA'ETCHANAN, READ THE PORTION AND FIND ANSWERS TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

1. Moses asked God if he could go over and see the land that is beyond the Jordan. According to Moses, whose fault was it that God refused his request? Did God leave the matter open for discussion?
2. God made one concession to Moses in this negotiation. What was it?
3. Moses begged the children of Israel to listen to God's statutes and ordinances and to follow them. What was the reward for following this order?
4. What did Moses say would happen if the children of Israel built idols and were evil?
5. After the people would be scattered all over the world and lose their connection to God, was there any chance of returning? At what time?
6. Why does the Torah forbid making any likeness of God?
7. There is a reference in this week's portion to the "iron furnace." What does this refer to?
8. For those who commit idolatry, God says God will remember the sin for how many generations? And for how many generations will God remember those who obey Him?
9. Moses tells the people that they were chosen by God, even though they were one of the smaller nations. Why were they chosen?