

But They Forgot the Books
Sermon for Confirmation / *Shavuot* 5783
Rabbi Jonathan E. Blake, Westchester Reform Temple,
Scarsdale, New York
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Confirmation Class of 5783!

When I was a student at Amherst College, I studied Hebrew down the road, at UMass Amherst, in the shadow of the W. E. B. DuBois Library which has towered over the campus since the year I was born.

At 286 feet and 4 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches tall, it is the third-tallest library in the world after the [National Library of Indonesia](#) in [Jakarta](#) and the [Shanghai Library](#) in [China](#). 28 stories tall, it exceeds them by 4 stories. It is also the 23rd tallest educational building in the world. It is so large that it maintains its own security force.

We are presently marking the fiftieth anniversary of the dedication of this library. Within six years of its construction, however, the tower had to be closed temporarily because chunks of brick started falling away from the exterior façade. No one knows why, exactly, but this unusual and scary phenomenon gave rise to a popular

legend: that the library was sinking into the ground, collapsing under its own weight.

When they built the library, the story goes, the architects and engineers forgot to take into account the books.

This legend, recounted about any number of libraries, and thoroughly debunked, nevertheless offers a pointed allegory:

Forget the books, and the building collapses.

Neglect the books at your own peril.

Chunks of brick may not be flying off into thin air, but chunks of our brains may very well be.

Most studies agree that reading, at least of books, is declining in the US. [A 2022 Gallup Poll](#) reports that Americans reported reading “an average of 12.6 books during the past year, a smaller number than Gallup has measured in any prior survey dating back to 1990... [and] roughly two or three fewer books per year than they did between 2001 and 2016.”

The drop is steepest among college graduates, with about one in six adults reporting that they read no books in the last year. While no one factor can account for the trend, it would not surprise any of us were a causal link discovered between the decline in reading books and the rise of social media accessed through smartphones.

From what I have observed of others, and from observing my decreasing attention span as I struggle to curb my own cell-phone usage, this explanation strikes me as plausible.

When, over the last few years, I made a concerted effort to reduce my own engagement with social media, my book-reading benefited in inverse proportion. It seems reasonable to conclude that, in the age of Tik-Tok and algorithmically engineered content, our smartphones are making us dumber. Big Data is warping our minds by manipulating our media intake in order to generate likes and click-throughs and feed us what computers and, increasingly, engines of artificial intelligence have decided we want to read, and it's most decidedly not a good book.

Speaking of Good Books, Happy *Shavuot* and *Chag Sameach*!

Shavuot marks the time on the Jewish calendar for celebrating *Matan Torateinu*, the revelation of Torah at Sinai, that is to say, the giving of a Book. Thousands of Jews are sitting this very moment on mats in front of the *Kotel*, the Western Wall, in synagogues and yeshivas and living rooms, for an all-night vigil called *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, a night dedicated to nothing but the study of the Books that have shaped the civilization of the Jewish people.

Following our service of Confirmation and celebratory dinner, I have plans to join colleagues in studying late into the night--not out of a sense of obligation, so much, but because we think this activity is worthwhile and even enjoyable, the way some people I know think about binge-watching *Friends* or *Seinfeld* for the umpteenth time.

I am grateful to you, Confirmation Class of 5783, for making a strong case this evening for the continuing relevance of the Book. Many years ago the *New Yorker* published an article called *The Good Book Business* which noted that “[t]he familiar observation that the Bible is the best-selling book of all time obscures a more startling fact: the Bible is the best-selling book of the year, every year. Calculating how many Bibles are sold in the United States is a virtually impossible task, but a conservative estimate is that in 2005 Americans purchased some twenty-five million Bibles—twice as many as the

most recent Harry Potter book. The amount spent annually on Bibles has been put at more than half a billion dollars.”

At the same time, the old joke about the Bible holds true: that it is the best-selling, *least read* book of all time. It is intimidatingly long, filled with hard-to-pronounce names like Obadiah and Habbakuk, and often presented in outdated translations that force the reader to decrypt verses like, “thou hast anointed my head with oil.” Is this some kind of shampoo thing?

And then there’s the problem of authorship. It is not an easy sell:

“Hey, I have a great book for you.”

“Oh, really, what’s it called?”

“The Bible.”

“Sounds interesting. Who wrote it?”

“Um, God.”

“Hmm. Did this God write anything else?”

“Depends on who you ask.”

“Alright, well, how long is it?”

“On second thought, never mind.”

I am reminded of the great Jack Handey who wrote several books of “Deep Thoughts” that used to be featured on Saturday Night Live. He said, “Whenever you read a good book, it's like the author is right there, in the room, talking to you, which is why I don't like to read good books.”

Which reminds me. We are giving each of you a book as a gift for your Confirmation. Don't get too excited. It's a Bible. But before you put fifteen more of the “world's best-selling, least read book of all time” in some corner of a bedroom closet, at least let me let you in on a secret.

It's not *really* a secret, actually, having been postulated centuries ago and proved beyond the shadow of a doubt more than 200 years ago by German scholars, but it's sometimes treated like a secret because many rabbis won't teach this from a *bimah* even though they believe it to be true. In many parts of the Jewish world, even the Reform Jewish world, it's taboo to say this, but here goes:

The Book we're giving you wasn't written by God. It is not a work of history. It is an anthology of writings by many authors over a vast span of time--comprising literatures from Ancient Near-Eastern communities from somewhere in the range of 2,500 to 3,000 years

old. It collects folklore and laws and spiritual practices, mythology and poetry, and yes, quite a bit of history or what we might think of as “historical fiction”: invented or imagined characters whom the authors depicted against a backdrop of real places and events. Many if not most of the cities, wars, and cultural practices described in the Hebrew Bible are real places, events, and things, and have been backed up by archaeological evidence, even if we don’t possess one fragment of the original tablets of the Ten Commandments or a single shard of pottery from the alleged hundreds of thousands of Israelites who made the Exodus from Egypt.

But even if we can’t prove the existence of an actual Abraham or Sarah, Moses or Miriam, and even if our stories of plagues and miracles smack more of fantasy than fact, the fact remains that stories change lives, and what extraordinary stories the Torah tells!

Rabbi Larry Kushner famously said: “The Torah is not true because it happened. It is true because it *happens*.” Great works of literature always convey great truths about the human condition, about what it means to be a person in the world. The Torah does this and goes one step further for us and our community, because it is *our* literature. It conveys great truths about what it means to be a Jew in the world, a person who belongs to a people with a unique history and destiny. I

for one could care less whether or not Moses's sandals ever turn up, because the character of Moses teaches me every day about the privileges and pitfalls of leading an unruly congregation of Israelites for forty years in the wilderness.

Please do not dismiss the Book we read today because it “never happened.” By that faulty logic you would also have to dismiss *Hamlet* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *1984* and *The Color Purple* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Books that opened hearts, changed minds, altered public perceptions, and transformed the world.

The Torah is true, not because it happened, but because it *happens*: because we discover ourselves in it. When you lobbied Congress on the *L'Taken* RAC tris this winter, fighting for the right and the just, you were Abraham arguing with God over the fate of the innocent citizens of the doomed cities Sodom and Gomorrah. When you raised thousands of dollars for *tzedakah* at this Spring's Confirmation fundraiser, you were the Book of Deuteronomy which insists that there be “no needy among you.” And when you led us in song and prayer today, you were Miriam with her timbrel at the Red Sea.

And so let me conclude my charge with a challenge. I challenge you to read one book on any subject of Jewish interest each and every year. It could be fiction or nonfiction. It could even be a cookbook or a graphic novel. Email me a receipt and a one-paragraph writeup and WRT will reimburse the cost of the book from the Rabbis' Discretionary Fund.

Keep leading and reading, Confirmation Class of 5783, with love in your hearts and a good Book in your hands, and may God allow you to fulfill what was written long ago:

Ki lekach tov natati lachem:

That a good doctrine has been given unto you,

Torati, al ta'azovu

My Torah: do not forsake it.

Etz chayim hi la machazikim ba

It is a tree of life to those who hold it fast,

V'tomcheha m'ushar

And all who cling to it find happiness

D'racheha darchei no'am

Its ways are ways of pleasantness

V'chol netivoteha shalom.

And all its paths are peace.