

Bringing Life to Life

Why do we read the same Torah portion every year, and what can it teach us about keeping our connection to Judaism fresh and relevant?

Repeating the Same Story

Generally, regular celebrities experience what is commonly known as “fifteen minutes of fame”—a brief period of publicity. If they’re lucky, they might enjoy a few years in the spotlight, during which time everyone talks about them. But sooner or later, their magic fades, and they are replaced by the next celebrity.

There’s a story of a Jew who arrived in a small Jewish village in Poland one late Friday afternoon, just before Shabbos candle-lighting time. He immediately needed a place to tie his horse over Shabbos. (This was 200 years ago, before cars.) He asked a fellow Jew if he could help him find a spot to tie up his horse, but the Jew sighed and apologized, saying he couldn’t help. The man asked another Jew and received the same response.

Finally, one villager told the man, “Go to the rabbi—he’ll definitely be able to help you.” The man asked, “Why the rabbi?” The villager replied, “Because no matter what, the rabbi always manages to tie everything to the Torah portion of the week.”

It’s a funny joke, but also a bit sad: The rabbi ties everything to the Torah portion because every year we read the same Torah

portions.

In the secular world, people read a book once, and then move on to another book. If they really liked it, they might read it again, but eventually, they always move on to something new. The same applies to learning: You study something until you know it well, then you progress to a new subject, a new class, or a new book. In school, if your second-grade teacher taught you the same things you learned in first grade, the teacher would be let go. In life, we constantly seek to learn new things—“You learn something new every day.”

However, all of that is different when it comes to reading the weekly Torah portion. Every year, we read the same stories. This week, we once again read the story most of you know well: G-d tells Moshe to speak to the rock so that it will produce water. Instead, Moshe hits the rock and, as a result, is punished by not being allowed to enter the Holy Land.

Every Hebrew school or cheder kid knows this story, and every year, when the Torah portion of Chukat comes along, we read it again.

There's a joke about a woman who came to shul one Shabbos and heard the story of Yosef being sold. She was so moved by pity for Yosef that she started sobbing. However, the next year, when the same story was read, she showed no emotion. Someone asked her, “Rebbetzin, do you have no pity for Yosef this year?” She replied, “Listen: Last year, he went to visit his brothers and got burned. Who asked him to go again?”

Like Today?

This issue of repetition is even more pronounced in the most famous Jewish prayer, Shema. In the first paragraph of Shema, we say: “And these words, which I command you today, shall be on your hearts.”

What exactly is meant by “today?” Did G-d give us a command today? If He did, I didn’t hear it! I may be a rabbi, but I didn’t get any fax or email from G-d today. Wasn’t this command given over 3,300 years ago? So what does “today” mean?

To answer this, Rashi explains (Devarim 6:6): “It should not be to you like an old book that no one reviews, but rather, like a new one that everyone runs to.” In other words, Rashi is saying that a person needs to constantly feel that the Torah is like the freshest headlines, which everyone is drawn to with great excitement. We should feel as if the Torah were given today.

This concept repeats itself in the second paragraph of the Shema. On the verse, “And if it will be that you listen to My commandments which I command you today...”, Rashi repeats his previous comments in similar words: “They should be new to you, as if you heard them this very day”—meaning, a person needs to feel like today is the first time he’s hearing about the mitzvos.

But practically speaking, what does this mean? The fact is, one might be an average American Jew, around 50 years old, and has read the Shema at least 50 times, if not 150 times, in his life—so what does it mean when it says you should feel like you’re hearing it for the first time?

In other words, imagine if a rabbi came along and said, “Today I’m going to repeat the same speech I gave last year—but I’d like you to feel it’s the first time you’re hearing it.” They’d stone the poor guy!

Clearly, that can’t be what the Torah means—especially since the Torah is the truth, and the Torah would not encourage people to play games.

The Answer

So the answer to this question, my friends, is that each weekly Torah portion contains a unique lesson that isn’t found anywhere else. No matter how much you study the Torah, you learn something new every week. Jews who study the Torah regularly discover insights and ideas they never considered before.

Each week, we uncover new depths, whether in the general understanding of the story or in a specific verse, revealing layers we never knew existed—even if we have studied the same portion many times before.

This is how the Torah is “new” every day.

This is also why all of Judaism revolves around the Torah portion of the week: the Midrash was written as commentary on the weekly portion, the Zohar serves as a mystical commentary on it, and the entire continuity of Jewish tradition is built on the fact that great Jewish leaders throughout history have studied the Torah portion week after week, consistently finding new pearls of wisdom.

Moshe, the Rebbe, and You

We find the same concept with the receiver of the Torah, Moshe Rabbeinu. At the end of the Torah portion of V'Zos HaBrachah, when the Torah describes Moshe Rabbeinu as being 120 years old and still healthy, it means that throughout his life, Moshe stayed alive, robust, interesting, and relevant. He was deeply involved in his people's lives and never lost his zest or energy. He always had that twinkle in his eye, the look of a man full of life. In fact, to this day, when you want to describe someone in modern Hebrew who has not lost their inner vitality, you use the very phrase the Torah used thousands of years ago: "Lo nas leicho"—"moisture did not leave his body."

We saw the same thing with the Rebbe. The Rebbe never allowed Judaism to become something old and boring. He constantly introduced new campaigns and ideas, whether it was putting tefillin on Jewish men in the streets, organizing Lag B'Omer parades, or launching other innovations. Before anyone could tire of one idea, the Rebbe would introduce a new one.

The mission was always the same: To never let Judaism become old.

This, my friends, is the mission of every parent in their home: To come home every day with a new idea, a new game, or even a new craze. The goal is to ensure that, when it comes to your Jewish identity and your Jewish life, your house is constantly crackling with energy and life.