

Shavu'ot

Torat ha-Maggid (*from the Manuscript of R. Shmelke*)

Everyone agrees that the Torah was given on Shabbat ... (b. Shabbat 86b).

Our sages taught: “Torah was given only to those eat the manna” (*Tanhuma Be-Shalah* 20).

Moses received the Torah. In the great clarity of his mind he indeed took it all in within those forty days. Our sages said that he kept learning and forgetting it until it was finally given to him as a gift. They also said that it takes forty years for a student to truly understand his teacher’s mind.

This was why God had to rain food down on us from heaven. He makes Shabbat flow down upon us, giving us spiritual sustenance as a gift. Understanding of Torah comes to us as “food” as well. The *Zohar* says (2:60b) that even now food that is consumed by a true sage is not just corporeal, but includes a subtle spiritual essence. That spirit derives from Torah, since “Man does not live by bread alone, but by all that comes forth from the mouth of Y-H-W-H” (Deut. 8:3). This refers to the divine word by which the food itself was created. That word is the Torah that flows on to us all; we are nourished by the spirit of Torah.

This is the meaning of: “Three who sit at the table and speak over it words of Torah, it as though they ate at the table of the Everpresent” (m. Avot 3:3)... Everything contains Torah ... the true sage can attain Torah through his food; the eating itself is engaging with Torah. The word *shulhan* (“table”) can be derived from “sends fifty” (*shole’ah nun*) the fifty measures of wisdom that God sends to awaken us to purify ourselves....

This is also the meaning of “Had He fed us the manna but not brought us to Mount Sinai, it would have been enough” (Passover Haggadah). We would have acquired Torah as we ate the manna. Just being fed the manna would have been enough.

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On our own, we are not truly able to grasp Torah. It would take us decades to sharpen our minds; only Moses was able to receive it in the course of a forty day fast. For the rest of us, God has to bestow it upon us like a gift, coming down like the *sukkah* of peace that flows over us on Shabbat or the food we ingest at a holy table.

It is worth recalling here that most of the texts in this volume are *Tischreden*, talks given at the table in the course of a meal. The two great activities of our highly oral Jewish culture are thus deeply linked to one another. Here is a rare articulation of that truth. But it is hard for a reader living amid a Christian culture (as did the Maggid!) not to compare this sort of insight to the experience of Eucharistic theology. As Jews we will never understand what a Christian experiences in the act of ingesting “the body of Christ.” But here it is claimed that *all* the food taken in by the person of true spiritual insight is in fact a way of ingesting God’s spirit, that ever-present creative word of Torah. This can be seen as an authentic “incarnational theology” within Judaism.

Or ha-Me’ir

Y-H-W-H said to Moses: Behold I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people will listen when I speak to you (Ex. 19:9).

In *Parashat Va-Ethanan* it says: **I stood between Y-H-W-H and you at that time to tell you the word of Y-H-W-H, for you feared the fire and did not ascend the mountain, saying: I am Y-H-W-H your God ...** (Deut. 5:5–6).

This means as follows: Moses our Teacher had so purified and clarified his own bodily self that God could have shown him the power of Torah with full clarity, without any “garbing” or diminution of intensity. Our sages were stirred to comment on the verse “He is the most faithful of all My house” (Num. 12:7, referring to Moses) that he knew the permutations of letters by which heaven and earth had been created. He had the ability within his hands to create worlds, but nevertheless “he was the most faithful of all My house” [i.e. he did not use his potentially magical powers].

But if that is the case, why did the blessed Holy One dress up the brilliant light of Torah in stories, until it became something like tales one person would tell another? Elsewhere I have commented on the verse: “Y-H-W-H spoke to Moses face to face, like one [person] would speak to another” (Ex. 33:11). This means that God garbed the powerful light of Torah in “face” after “face.” There are in fact seventy “faces” of Torah. In its original state it was just a clear light, comprising holy names, all of them none other than the single blessed name Y-H-W-H. That is why Torah is referred to as “the keepings (*pekudey*) of Y-H-W-H” (Ps. 19:9), because all the teachings and narratives are really

kept and hidden within that single name. But God dressed them up in face after face, so that they now appear to be the sort of tales one person would tell another. But in truth the *opening* of her words would shine a brilliant light....

Sometimes a marvelous bit of wisdom falls into an intelligent person's mind, something that contains a real insight into understanding God. But when you try to share that thought with another person, you are unable to reveal the wisdom that lies buried deep within your own heart. It would just be too subtle for them to understand. You therefore have to dress it up as a comment on a biblical verse or some saying of the sages. For this purpose one can employ any of the four ways of reading Scripture, the obvious, the allegorical, the homiletical, or the esoteric. Those people in any case will not be able to grasp the depth of your thoughts, however they are garbed. They therefore pay attention only to the garments themselves. "How well this one preaches! How nicely this one speaks!" They are just too unaware to pay attention to that wonderful inner wisdom and the good counsel for serving God that they could be finding in the multiple levels of his preaching.

Our holy Torah herself is in the same situation. Her words as open in their own setting indeed shine a high and lofty light, but one so subtle that "thought cannot grasp it at all." But when the time came for the [ten] words [or "commandments"] to be revealed in the holy event at Sinai, they had to be garbed in the outer meanings and narrative tales of Torah....

This is true even of the prophets, of whom we are told that "they had the great merit of depicting the human form to be like its Maker" (*Bereshit Rabbah* 27:1). They still did not have the power to see Torah clearly, without its being dressed up in visual forms and images. Moses alone, "most faithful of all My house," was greater than the rest and could look directly into the shining light.... He "heard the voice speaking to him" (Num. 7:89), in a spiritual manner that needed no covering up ... in stories.

But this was to be "the Torah that Moses placed before the Children of Israel" (Deut. 4:44), and the whole people did not have the strength perceive in their learning the light of Torah in its own intensely spiritual core. God nevertheless sought their good and wanted to give this precious vessel to the entire people. That is why Scripture tells us: **Behold I will come to you in a thick cloud.** The whole Torah, with its point of departure

of the word *anokhi* (“I am”), will come to you ... clothed and with reduced intensity, all for the sake of this holy people in its entirety, since they are not prepared to receive Torah in its clear state. **So that the people will listen when I speak to you.** They will hear and understand the Ten Commandments, each in accord with their own levels of personal purity and the ability of each soul to hold fast to the letters of Torah.

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This bittersweet comment on the revelation to Moses is also a statement of the Hasidic *tsaddik*'s own role as mystic and communal leader. The *Or ha-Me'ir*, one of the most intellectually rarified thinkers within this circle, might have preferred to seek out the Torah of pure light and permutations of letters. But the Torah he needs to receive is one that he can “place before the people,” a Torah dressed up in attractive parables and stories, one that every Jew could find a way to absorb.

The notion that “the Torah herself” has this same problem is quite a stunning formulation of the ongoing tension between the inward heart of Torah's teaching and the outer garb, including both narrative and ritual, that fills so much of the Torah text itself.

We too, as teachers within Judaism, have the same tension. So much of our energy has to go to just passing on the forms and seeing that they are preserved! How much of our attention are we free to devote to the heart of our message, one of uplifting and transformation? How might we right that balance?

Kedushat Levi I

Our rabbis of blessed memory taught, “The Torah was given as black fire on white fire” (*Devarim Rabbah* 3:13).

One might say that this alludes to the fact that on account of *mattan Torah* (“the giving of the Torah”) Israel possesses [great] power, as in the saying of our sages, “You decreed from below and the blessed Holy One will fulfill it from above” (b. Ta'anit 23a). Now the color white includes all colors, for it absorbs all colors. This alludes to Y-H-W-H, who is inclusive of all.

This is not the case, however, with the color black, for it does not include the other colors—it is simply black [and excludes all light and color]. This alludes to the human being.

This is what it means that through *mattan Torah* the Children of Israel merited that the black fire would be “on”—that is to say, *above*—the white fire; Israel would be above [God], so to speak. The words of Israel would be more operative than the words of the Divine; as in the saying of the rabbis, “The blessed Holy One makes a decree, and the *tsaddik* annuls it” (b. Mo‘ed Katan 16b).

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To celebrate Shavu‘ot fully means that we recognize the great power we have to shape God’s Torah in this world. While God’s teaching is forever greater and more glorious than ours—containing the full color spectrum—the Divine wishes for us to take ownership of it. Every year on this festival, we renew our commitment to the covenant by thanking God for this loving and awesome gift and recommitting ourselves to the great responsibility it implies, that of fashioning lives of Torah, knowing that our attempts are always imperfect.

We of the “black fire” keep out much of the divine radiance, allowing ourselves to survive by hiding the great light, but also creating a Torah appropriate to the dimly lit world in which real people live.

Kedushat Levi II

I was asked in the province of Lithuania why the holiday of Shavu‘ot is also called *‘Atseret* (Assembly). Is it not the case that only the holiday of Shemini ‘Atseret [following *Sukkot*] is called by this name (Num. 29:35)?

... This follows the words of Nahmanides (*Sefer ha-Emunah ve’-ha-Bitahon*, Ch. 19), who commented on the verse: **Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires** (Song of Songs 2:7). He said that when you are aroused by the love or fear of the blessed Creator, you should be careful to immediately create a vessel. That is, as soon as possible, carry out a *mitsvah*—give charity, sit and study, etc. For it is known that an arousal that comes to one suddenly is a light emanating from above as is called “soul.” You must clothe it in a “body” so that it has strength and a foundation so that it not be misdirected, heaven forbid, as is known to those of spiritual understanding.

Now this is the meaning of the verse: **Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires**. The word *hefets* can be read as “desire” or as “vessel.” Meaning, the arousal that

comes upon you needs to immediately become [be placed in] a vessel—this is the [alternative] meaning of “until it so desires (*‘ad she-tehpats*).” Here I conclude my paraphrase of Nahmanides’ interpretation.

Now at the time of the giving of the Torah, when Israel certainly experienced a great arousal, they did not have a single *mitsvah* to serve as a vessel. Therefore, we must say that they carried out the *mitsvah* of *hagbalah*, setting limits around the mountain, which Moses had warned them not to touch (Ex. 19:12). They stopped themselves (*ne ‘etsarim*) from touching it, and by enacting this *mitsvah* they created a vessel for the arousal. It is for this reason that Shavu‘ot is also called by the name *‘Atseret* (Assembly or “Stoppage”).

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The Berditchever here reminds us of the importance of channeling our spiritual impulses into concrete acts of goodness and righteousness. We need to be mindful in moments of arousal to direct these surges of energy appropriately. Using a teaching from one of his favorite medieval commentators, Nahmanides, R. Levi Yitshak explains that even in the moment of the great revelation at Sinai—before the Israelites were given the *mitsvot*—they sought to create a holy vessel for themselves by adhering to Moses’ instruction to set a limit around the mountain. In so doing, they shaped a space into which God’s great flow could be contained and actualized.

‘Avodat Yisra’el I

In the third month after the Children of Israel had left Egypt, on that day they came to the wilderness of Sinai (Ex. 19:1).

The third “month” (*hodesh*) can also be read as “the third renewal (*hithadshut*).” First God took them forth from the iron furnace of Egypt, and they ate those matzah loaves they had brought out of Egypt, tasting in them the taste of manna. Then they rose higher and God actually brought both bread and meat down from heaven for them. Now they were at their third renewal, moving still higher, and they drew near to Mount Sinai to receive the holy Torah.

The zodiac sign of this month is Gemini, the twins. This indicates that the blessed Holy One and those who do His will are like twins, as it were. Scientists tell us that if one twin falls ill, the other feels it as well. If one improves, so does the other, since they stand under the same sign, having been born at the same time.

The same is true of our blessed Creator and those who do His will, as it were. They too are twins. That is why we are called *yisra'el*, which can be read as *yashar el*, “straight with God,” meaning equal with God. [The letters of *yisra'el* may also be read as] *rosh li*, “I have a head.”

Thus they drew near to Mount Sinai in the third month. The blessed Holy One was revealed and spoke to them the way a man speaks to his brother, for they were together under the sign of twins.

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Astrological symbolism has a long history among Jewish thinkers, and is occasionally found in Hasidic sources. One major Hasidic work of the generation following the teachings recorded here (*Beney Yissakhar* by R. Tsvi Elimelech of Dynow) is entirely based on this heritage.

The description of God and Israel as “twins” may seem surprising, but it too has an ancient history. The prohibition of leaving the corpse of an executed convict hanging overnight (Deut. 21:23) is explained by a parable of a king whose twin brother became a bandit and was executed. The sight of the degraded corpse would be an insult to the King’s image, since every human being—even the worst among us—is made in the image of God.

‘Avodat Yisra’el II

Moses took the people forth toward God (*elohim*) from the camp and they stood at the base of the mountain (Ex. 19:17).

The Midrash says that on the day the Torah was given the people sought to doze off in the morning (*Pirkey de-Rabbi Eliezer* 40). They were sleeping sweetly until Moses awakened them to receive the Torah.

The *tsaddik* R. Levi Yitshak taught: God forbid that we should think the holy people were just lazy and fell asleep on that glorious day when they knew that God was about to give them His Torah! Surely their intent was for the sake of heaven. Ever since the second day of Sivan (four days earlier) they had been preparing to receive the Torah. They put so much effort into their holy thoughts that they had simply become exhausted. Now they feared that they would not be able to receive the Torah with the proper clear mind. They gave their eyes some rest so that their minds would be refreshed and they would regain the strength and clarity needed to accept the holy Torah. Thus far his words.

Reading the Torah simply, we are told that **Moses took the people forth**. “People” generally refers to the ordinary folk. It is indeed imaginable that they were sleeping until Moses woke them up in order to take them forth toward God. Even if that *hasid* was right in saying that their intentions were good, it is still clear that these folks were not on a very high level. One who truly trusts in God does not need such preparation. Such a person goes forth strongly, based on trust, toward the service of God. You trust that heaven’s mercies will grant you the strength and clarity you need. But if you are not closely attached to God, you lack that trust. Then you need to rely on the way of nature. You preserve your mental powers, being sure to get proper sleep and all the rest, instead of casting your entire burden on Y-H-W-H and paying no attention to your own physical welfare.

We know that whatever a person thinks, says, or does down here arouses those same qualities above. Therefore we read that **Moses brought the people forth**. These were the ones who remained on a lower rung. They wanted to take care of their minds and get enough sleep, all in a natural way. Moses awakened them and took them forth to **toward *elohim***. The word *elohim* has the same numerical value as “the nature.” Since their path was that of nature, it was the name *elohim* that was aroused in response.

This is the meaning of: **They stood at the base of the mountain**—on a low rung.

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The Hasidic masters, fully engaged in the work of reaching out to “the people,” understand full well that it is not an easy task. You want to bring them along to the top of your mountain, but they are simply not prepared to go there. They are in fact “asleep” at a moment when you are more than wide awake. The best you can do is to bring them forth to a level of religious awareness that fits with their state of mind, one in which nature reveals itself to be identical with the divine presence within it. For them that “low rung” is itself quite a climb.