



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

TORAT HESED: READING TORAH TO HEAR GOD'S VOICE

In the famous description of the woman of valor, the Book of Proverbs lauds her because “she opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is Torat hesed, a Torah of love.” High praise indeed, but it also poses a curious dilemma: doesn't the existence of a Torah of hesed, of steadfast love or lovingkindness, imply that there is a Torah that is not a Torah of love. Can there be a Torah of hate?

There are compelling reasons to discriminate among passages of Torah, separating the voice of God (a Torah of love) from the voice of pain (a Torah of hate). In his book *Jewish Renewal*, Rabbi Michael Lerner courageously and openly advocates categorizing sections of Torah in order to maintain loyalty to God as the Force that makes transformation and transcendence possible, and loyalty to a Jewish ethic of justice and compassion. Passages in the Torah which seem cruel, sexist, or oppressive are held to reflect the inherited pain and alienation imposed on its human recipients/authors, which they perceived as God's will, written into the very structure of the world. In the service of hope and justice, Lerner refuses to grant those passages status as God's word.

Separating out good from bad passages possesses great integrity and ethical rigor. If we understand God's revelation of Torah as a book, a finite text given on a specific day, then it is hard to avoid the conclusion that there are parts of it that cause serious religious/ethical problems for a sensitive and enlightened reader. But that approach raises two serious problems that weaken its intuitive appeal: identifying a passage as the voice of pain precludes deriving anything of spiritual or ethical value from that passage. The only reasonable progressive response is to condemn and then ignore that verse, so it is lost as source of Torah: of wisdom and renewal.

Additionally, identifying a specific passage with a particular voice mistakes Torah the p'shat (contextual meaning) with Torah the drash (the interpretive meaning). While the Book is, indeed, the vehicle for God's voice, God's voice is to be located in how we read the entire Torah, not with the content of particular passages within it. Identifying God's voice with specific verses assumes a single, intrinsic meaning inherent in the text. Both rabbinic and post-modernist readings assume that Torah is what emerges from the interaction between reader, written word, and interpretive community: “when two people meet and exchange words of Torah, the Shekhinah hovers over them (Avot 3:3)”.

It is not the passage, but how we read it that creates a Torah of love. Rather than saying, for example, that Biblical verses condemning to death a ben sorer u-moreh, a stubborn and rebellious son reflect only the voice of pain, the rabbis of the Talmud went out of their way to assert the value of continuing to study those passages even as they rendered them legally unenforceable. Why? Because that law is a poignant reminder of the value of honoring parents, a worthy lesson indeed. To simply dispose of ben sorer u-moreh as the voice of pain would preclude our learning that sacred lesson. The voice of God can emerge from every passage of the Torah, provided we read in such a way as to make that voice audible. Such reading takes honesty, effort, and ingenuity, which is precisely what God would have us bring to an encounter with Torah. As the Turei Zahav notes, “one is perpetually commanded to derive new teachings from the Torah... for it is incumbent every moment to labor in the study of Torah and to innovate to the full extent of one’s abilities.”

How Do We Articulate God’s Voice in Torah?

Reading the Torah to hear God’s voice through its words, as with any strategy of reading, begins with certain assumptions. The first premise is that God is loving, wise, just, and compassionate. The second assumption is that the Torah, when read piously, will reflect those divine values. Hence, when we read Torah and it appears to be hateful, unjust, or callous then we must read it differently. Even when the p’shat supports a harsh explication, our religious premise precludes identifying that p’shat with the voice of God. And it is God’s voice of love, not the p’shat, that is commanding.

In Parashat Be-Har, for instance, we read of the laws of slavery, both for an eved Ivri (a Hebrew slave) and an eved K’nani (a Canaanite slave). The Hebrew slave is an indentured servant—limited in the duress he must endure, and limited also to a finite term of service. But the eved K’nani enjoys none of those prerogatives. The Torah allows the master to impose onerous burdens on his slave, and prohibits the master from ever liberating the slave or the slave’s children.

If God’s revelation is the p’shat, then this part of the book forces us to ask—what kind of a God would allow slavery as part of an eternal revelation? What kind of a God would mandate the ownership, and would permit the degradation, of another human being? There are many Jews who understand the notion of Torah min ha-Shamayim (Torah from the Heavens) literally, and they do see God as having dropped down a particular book, the Torah. They grapple with such a text and try to interpret it in as humane a way as possible (often by confusing what the Torah has to say about the eved Ivri with what it says about the eved K’nani and then insisting that the Jewish slave laws weren’t as harsh as in other cultures.)

For many other Jews, however, such an apologetic reading seems forced and untenable. It still puts God in the obscene position of mandating slavery and of permitting the ownership of another human being. Are we forced to simply concede that this passage is a Torah of hate? Is the most that we can do to condemn it and try to ignore it? What, then, of Torah and its holiness? What, then, of God and our Covenant?

Identifying this voice as hateful Torah renders the entire Torah suspect, and encourages simply bypassing it when seeking spiritual or moral growth.

I would propose that our solution is to be found in another traditional understanding of the idea of Torah min ha-Shamayim. This understanding is less literal, and requires a more dynamic, interactive way of reading the Torah. One can understand Torah not just as a particular book, but as a process of God interacting with the Jewish people and all humankind. That midrashic process starts at Sinai, resulting in the Torah, but it continues with full force in the interpretations of the Prophets, the rabbis, medieval and even contemporary sages. God's voice cannot be contained between the covers of any book (or set of books), it is the interaction between book, reading community, and inherited tradition that is electric. It is in that dynamic that a Torah of love emerges. Just as each wave on the shore leaves a new mark in the sand, each new interpretation marks another refraction of God's Torah, so that Torah min ha-Shamayim describes a process that is very much alive.

How, with such an approach, would we hear a loving and just God amidst the painful presence of slavery in the Torah?

Seen as process, the issue would be not what was in Leviticus, but how Jewish tradition insists on reading hearing God's voice in that presence. How does the process of Torah deal with the existence of slavery in the book of the Leviticus? For it is the process (the drash), not the book (the p'shat), that is authoritative. It is in the drash, the mode of reading, in which God's voice is to be found. As the Zohar recognizes: "Just as wine must be in a jar to keep, so the Torah must be contained in an outer garment. The garment is made up of the tales and stories, but we, we are bound to penetrate beyond."

Let us penetrate beyond the outer garment, the book of Leviticus, to uncover the process of Torah within. Let us look at one such authoritative drash, that of the great medieval rabbi, Moses ben Maimon:

It is permitted to work an eved K'nani with rigor. Though such is the law, it is the quality of piety and the way of wisdom that a man be merciful and pursue justice and not make his yoke heavy upon his slave or distress him, but give him to eat and to drink of all foods and drinks. The sages of old let the slave eat of every dish that they themselves ate and they fed... the slaves before they themselves sat down to eat.... Thus also the master should not disgrace them by hand or by word, because Scripture has delivered them only to slavery and not to disgrace. Nor should he heap upon the slave oral abuse and anger, but should rather speak to him softly and listen to his claims.

The Rambam accepts the fact of the p'shat—slavery was technically permissible and one could ruthlessly oppress one's slave. Yet he also understands the values of Torah moving us beyond the p'shat, creating a religious obligation to be merciful and just towards slaves. In fact, he insists that one ought to share the same foods, and allow the slaves to eat first as a demonstration of compassion. A good master is one who speaks

softly and listens to what the slave has to say. In short, a Jewish master is one who affirms that the slave, too, is made in God's image. Ultimately, our understanding that all people are made in God's image precludes the very possibility of slavery at all. Verses in the Torah that are morally problematic call upon us to have the religious courage to read against the grain, so that we can hear God's voice in the process of reading. "Those who constantly create new interpretations of Torah are harvesting her (Or ha-Hammah on Zohar 3:106a)." In that process, we make God's gift of Torah our own, and affirm our status as b'nei rachamim, the merciful children of a merciful God.

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson (<http://www.bradartson.com>) is the Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at American Jewish University, where he is Vice President. He is the author of *The Bedside Torah: Wisdom, Dreams, & Visions* (McGraw Hill) and *Jewish Answers to Real-Life Questions* (Alef Design).