

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## IMMERSION IN FIRE

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

*This past Sunday was the levayah of David Wicks, a student who became a deep friend and wise adviser, and whose generosity made many of my dreams possible. One theme at the levayah which resonated with many of our conversations was the constant kiddush Hashem he made at his workplace. This week's dvar Torah is dedicated to his memory as a first installment on a lifetime debt. יהי זכרו ברוך.*

The most recent episode of "Sherlock" included a scene at the Diogenes Club, where absolute silence is enforced. Watson attempts to communicate with the concierge via signs; radical misunderstanding and hilarity ensue. But is it truly funny?

I imagine that this scene is experienced very differently by those who speak Sign fluently. For most viewers, physical signs are terribly imprecise stand-ins for verbal signs. But for those who speak sign, any comedy of the scene results not from the inherent and inevitable imprecision of this mode of communication, but rather from Watson's bumbling efforts to communicate in a foreign language. We are in the realm of "Ich bin ein Berliner" rather than the Three Stooges.

Reading Talmudic *aggada* sometimes makes me feel like Watson, in a world without living Sign speakers. The texts feel precise, but I don't understand them well enough to capture that precision, and I don't trust modern interpreters.

Why aren't *aggadot* written straightforwardly? Sir Arthur Conan Doyle invented the Diogenes Club as an exercise in antisocialism, or privacy. Verbal speech imposes itself on all within earshot, whereas one can look away from visual signs. Somewhat analogously, Talmud imposes itself on all learning Jews, but aggadic esotericism protects them from truths they can't handle.

The problem is that not everyone realizes their own linguistic deficiencies, and some go so far as to argue that the texts mean only what they appear on first glance to say. And, not everyone who speaks aggadic Sign can handle the truth.

Maimonides in an intended irony uses his own challenging metaphor, taken from *Mishlei* 25:11, to explain the Rabbis' use of challenging metaphors: "Golden apples in silver filigree." For Maimonides, codes that transform plaintext into gibberish are ineffective when everyone knows the text's author was wise. What is needed is a code that creates an apparent meaning with enough value to pass for the true meaning. An effective code makes most people see a silver apple and never suspect that there is gold underneath. At the same time, the apple must be filigreed rather than silver plated, because there must be a way for the most perceptive to see through to the golden apple underneath.

At least, that's what the metaphor appears to mean. But perhaps that meaning is intended to conceal as much as to reveal.

I want to take you rapidly through a Talmudic passage, which I argue is written in aggadic Sign, and several historical moments of interpretation; you can evaluate for yourselves which are gold, which silver filigree, and which dross. But I need two moments of introduction: First, Rav Ahron Lichtenstein zt"l wrote that the rabbinic command to "Know what you will say in response to a heretic" applies to the heretic within: "There is a snake lurking within the finest of Edens." On that basis it seems reasonable to argue that Talmudic dialogues with *minim* etc., like the first Rashi on *Chumash*, are often projections of internal struggles within the *frum* consciousness.

Second, a deep truth that was esoteric in Maimonides' day, but seems exoteric in our own, is the utter incorporeality of G-d. But the difference may not be as stark as we presume; contemporary affirmations of incorporeality may often be mere catechismic recitation. Here is the passage, from *Sanhedrin* 39a [edited on the basis of *Ein Yaakov*]:

*A min said to Rabbi Abahu:*

*Your G-d is a Kohen,*

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as Scripture writes: “They must take me *terumah*”  
and *kohanim* must not bury the dead,  
and if they bury, they require immersion;

He, when He buried Mosheh, in what did He immerse?

If you were to say: In the sea.

But Scripture writes: “Who measured in his container all water,”  
so what source of water would suffice for Him?

Rabbi Abahu said to him:

He immerses in fire, [as Scripture writes: “for behold G-d will enter fire.”

The *min* said to him:

Since when is immersion in fire effective?

Rabbi Abahu said to him:

The genuine immersion is in fire, and we only pass through water what would  
be consumed by fire,

as Scripture writes: “All which cannot go into fire etc.”

Tosafot (ad loc.) point out that the *min* does not ask why G-d was *allowed* to bury Mosheh, but only how he immersed afterward. This is because Scripture call us G-d’s “children,” and *kohanim* are not only permitted but obligated to become *tamei* when G-d forbid they bury their children.

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik explained that this obligation is an expression of mourning; the death of a close relative properly alienates us from the sacred, and so mourning *kohanim* must make themselves ineligible for Temple service. *Tum’ah* is a valid and necessary reaction to the scandal of mortality.

So G-d not only buried Mosheh; He mourned him, and recognized that Mosheh’s death diminished the sanctity of His name. Indeed, Mosheh’s mortality was seen as so scandalous that some kabbalists denied it, and argued that the Torah’s account of his burial was a silver filigree.

But Tosafot’s answer is insufficient. Firstly, G-d is presumably no ordinary *kohen* but rather a *kohen gadol*, High Priest, who may **not** become *tamei* for the burial of relatives. Secondly, doesn’t this logic require G-d to become *tamei* whenever **any** Jew dies? So the better answer is that Mosheh was a *meit mitzvah*, a corpse with no relatives available to bury him. Even a High Priest must become *tamei* if necessary to bury a *meit mitzvah*.

Yad Ramah, however, thinks this response still concedes too much:

Rabbi Abahu did not answer the *min* with precision,  
so as to fulfill “Answer a fool in accord with his foolishness.”

What Rabbi Abahu meant was:

Within your assumptions:

Even if He needed to immerse,

I could say to you that He immerses in fire,  
and you would not be able to challenge me from Scripture  
the way you challenged yourself regarding water.

However –

**G-d forbid that there is any *tum’ah* before The Holy Blessed One,  
and nothing whatever sullies him so that He would need to immerse in fire or in anything else.**

So far, so good. But Yad Ramah continues:

Furthermore:

That which Scripture writes “He buried” –  
it certainly did not happen via action,  
rather it arose in thought before Him that he should be buried, and he was buried.

So if G-d *had* “touched” Moshe’s corpse, He *would* require immersion?! The brief flash of gold we saw in Yad Ramah’s first answer seems newly and painfully obscured.

And yet, perhaps it would be a mistake to remove the filigree. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a converso would-be returnee to Judaism was caught and burnt at the stake without being given the opportunity to immerse. R. Moshe of Zurich was asked whether this martyr could be buried in a Jewish cemetery, seeing as the general practice was to require immersion before reintegrating conversos. His response was taken from our passage: Fire is the *lekbatchilah* immersion, and we use water only as a practical concession to mortality. The contemporary R. Yitzchak Zilberstein suggests that this would apply as well to a would-be convert lacking only immersion. These seem to me proper halakhic conclusions, but they come from the silver filigree, not from the gold apple.

And yet, should the *halakhab* really be different for martyrs killed by fire and those killed by the sword? Literalist reads of metaphors give with one hand but take with the other. Perhaps all those who die to sanctify the Name should be considered to have passed through flames.

Furthermore, let us note that dying *al Kiddush Hashem* is an absolute atonement, so that all such martyrs pass through the flames of *gehennom* unscathed.

Furthermore, perhaps all those whose lives sanctified the Name, such as David Wachs ז”ל, merit His involvement in their burial, as His truest children, and it is not beyond the pale to suggest that – a thousand times *kebeyakhol* – He needs immersion thereafter, because the sanctity of our world has been much diminished. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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