

Erev Rosh Hashanah Drash 5778/2017
Bet Mishpachah
Rabbi Laurie Green

“A Great Voice that Did Not Cease: Revelation, Queerness, and Our Role in Living Torah”

A poem:

Behold the Torah,
which we receive anew
today
The sheets of parchment,
tightly sewn together
Barely hold the letters -
They reach out to us,
reach out toward heaven,
They say:
Take me,
grasp me,
caress each line,
each curve,
I belong to you,
With me
God formed the world -
As you read me,
I will form your world anew.¹

¹ A poem by Rabbi Richard Levy.

Four years ago, India celebrated the 150th anniversary of the birth of Swami Vivekananda,² a Hindu saint. For the occasion, the Rama Krishna Ashram held a symposium inviting representatives of all the major religions. Rabbi Rami Shapiro represented the Jewish community.

Each speaker was asked to address what their religion brings to world spirituality? What is the unique thing that your religion brings that other world spiritual traditions do not contain?

Rabbi Rami's answer: *Lo Bashamayim Hi* – It is not in Heaven.³ A verse from the Torah, we Jews have understood it to mean that Torah is right here on Earth in our hands. Rabbi Rami told hundreds of swamis that “truth is not in Heaven, there is no ultimate authority.”⁴ “Questions open you wider and wider, and answers shut you down.”⁵

The Israeli author, Amos Oz, perhaps said it best: Judaism is a “civilization of doubt and argument.”⁶ “If there’s one thing Judaism brings to the world, that’s it!”⁷ Questions and doubts as a spiritual discipline, as the search for the Truth.

² Swami Vivekananda Biography (12 January 1863 – 4 July 1902), born Narendranath Datta, was an Indian Hindu monk, a chief disciple of the 19th-century Indian mystic Ramakrishna. He was a key figure in the introduction of the Indian philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga to the Western world and is credited with raising interfaith awareness, bringing Hinduism to the status of a major world religion during the late 19th century.

³ Deuteronomy 30:12.

⁴ Both this quote and this story come from a podcast which is available at- <http://www.judaismunbound.com/podcast/2017/5/22/episode-69-holy-rascals-rami-shapiro>. My thanks to Scott Reiter for introducing me to this podcast.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ A 2/23/15 interview of Amos Oz conducted by Natascha Freundel and posted on publicseminar.org.

⁷ Ibid.

Other religions search for answers. “The Jewish quest is for better questions.”⁸

Tomorrow morning we will read:

Kol asher diber Adonai, na’aseh!

All that you have said, God, we will do.

But we don’t just do it, do we? We say, well, an eye for an eye clearly means monetary compensation. This verse about stoning rebellious children, we say, it isn’t meant to be followed, but rather we should study it and gain reward – so the Talmud tells us.

We Jews never can just shut up and do something. Everything is a production.

We are ‘traditionally radical,’ to borrow a phrase from my teacher, Rabbi Benay Lappe. Benay was the first Conservative rabbi to come out as a lesbian, and she is the founder of Svara, the world’s only queer yeshiva.

Benay loves the word ‘queer.’ It’s controversial, I know, but Benay has a broad and beautiful understanding of what it is to be Queer, and what it is to be Jewish. Benay will tell you that the Talmud is very queer. Jewish civilization as we know it is queer – the outsider sensibility.

Last year, I had the pleasure of studying once again with my beloved teacher, Rabbi Dr. Art Green. It was shortly before Shavuot, which fell on Pride that year - the year of the shooting at the Pulse.

⁸ Ibid.

Dr. Green is a founder of the Chavurah movement, a world-renowned scholar of Jewish mysticism, and the founding Dean of the rabbinical school at Hebrew College. If ever there was a straight man with a beard who could Queer Sinai, I knew Art was the guy. I asked him, “Art, this year Pride and Shavuot are on the very same day. What does that mean?” Art immediately started talking about the many uses of queer, and Benay’s particular understanding of queer sensibility as the subversiveness of Jewish tradition.

So I asked him, “How do we read the tradition without being afraid of the subversive?” Art said, and I quote, “by understanding the imperative of reinterpretation. The text stays alive because of not only our right, but our **obligation** to constantly reread it.”

Perhaps the best illustration of this comes from a traditional source – the *Sfat Emet*, a 19th century spiritual teacher. The *Sfat Emet* offers a beautiful reading of the blessing after the reading the Torah. In English, the blessing reads:

Blessed are You, Adonai our God,
Sovereign of the universe,
who has given us a Torah of truth,
implanting within us eternal life.
Blessed are You, Adonai,
who gives the Torah.

It's a nice translation, but the *Sfat Emet* renders the Hebrew entirely differently. For Hebrew is a language where the same word frequently means many things at once. The *Sfat Emet* tells us that Torah of Truth (*torat emet* in Hebrew) refers to the Written Torah, the Biblical text in the scroll. Implanting within us eternal life, however, does not mean life after death as we might assume, but rather "*m'chayei olam nata b'tocheinu*" refers to the Oral Torah, all the ways our tradition has been interpreted...to this day.

Oral Torah, the interpretation of Torah, lives within us (*m'chayei olam nata b'tocheinu*). Torah "demands we be involved in the process."⁹

That alone would be beautiful, but the *Sfat Emet* goes on. He notes that at the beginning of the blessing, Torah is given in the PAST TENSE, but at the end of the blessing, *natan* becomes *notein*, God GIVES us the Torah in the PRESENT TENSE. The *Sfat Emet* concludes, only when you combine the Torah in the scroll with the Torah that lives within us, only then is the Torah given in the PRESENT.

If God is beyond time, then Torah is timeless. It is new and old in each moment. It never ceases. It never changes. Yet we change. We see it anew in each moment, as we see past and future. And we apply it anew, to every new day and every new circumstance. As Torah says of itself, "*kol gadol v'lo yasaf*" – 'a great voice that did not cease.'¹⁰

⁹ Private conversation with Art Green 6/6/16 at Temple Isaiah in Maryland during Board of Rabbis Joint *Yom Iyun*.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 5:19.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel calls Torah “not a document sealed and finished. It is a book alive, a book that goes on and extends into the present – always being written, always disclosing and unfolding.”¹¹ As the Zohar explains, the words made of letters written in ink on parchment, they are merely garments concealing the inner truth which we seek, but can never fully know.

A Torah of Truth God gave to our people – *torat emet natan l’amo El*.¹² These words are sung in the traditional hymn, *Yigdal*. We have been given a truth. But what kind of truth? A historical truth? I don’t think so. A scientific truth? Definitely not! A spiritual truth, an ethical truth, an eternal truth? Indeed.

Lo bashamayim hi – It is not in heaven. But I do believe that the essence of Torah came from heaven, just as passionately as I believe that the words on the parchment, the garments, were written by people – by fallible human beings, Divinely inspired, seeking to convey an eternal truth.

In the words of a contemporary spiritual educator, “Truth is an eternal conversation,” says Parker Palmer, [an eternal conversation] “about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline. Truth is the process of inquiry and dialogue itself, that keeps testing old conclusions and coming up with new ones. It is commitment to the conversation.”

All the other religious traditions contain wisdom and truth. The sciences contain wisdom and truth. There is much we can learn.

¹¹ Heschel, Abraham Joshua, *Echo of Eternity*, 46.

¹² From the traditional hymn “*Yigdal*.”

No rabbi knew this better than Maimonides, the great scientist, rabbi, physician, and philosopher, who said: “Accept the truth regardless of the source.”

Maimonides believed it was impossible for there to be a contradiction between the truth God revealed and the discoveries of human intelligence. His goal was to reconcile the wisdom of his time, Aristotelian philosophy and physical science, with the wisdom of the Torah. Today, we think of Maimonides as an Orthodox rabbinical figure, but in his day he was radical. He suggested that Scripture should be interpreted in light of science and not the other way around.

In the introduction to his *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides argues that religious knowledge rests upon scientific knowledge and the former cannot be obtained without the latter. Furthermore, Maimonides believed the philosophical and natural sciences to be part of the original oral law, and that the exile only later caused the Rabbis to neglect these sciences.

Maimonides even went as far as to introduce the scientific knowledge of his day into his halachic rulings, as has been demonstrated by scholars as Orthodox as Isadore Twersky.¹³ As historian David Ruderman demonstrates, in at least one case, Rambam ruled allowing the knowledge of non-Jewish scientists, specifically astronomers, to supersede the Rabbis.¹⁴

In the words of Pirkei Avot: “Who is wise? She who learns from everyone.” But wisdom is not the same as Torah. Of course, Torah contains great wisdom, but so

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:8, commenting on *P’sachim* 94b.

do Chemistry and Buddhism and Psychology and Persian literature, and they are not Torah. What is the difference?

Each of us will have to answer this question for ourselves. For me, the answer is this. Everything that's not a Jewish text, I can take it or leave it. But Torah, any form of Torah, I'm stuck with it.

When the Bible commands us to massacre Amalekite women, children and cattle – I can't ignore it. When the Talmud records the opinion: 'He who teaches his daughter Torah, teaches her lewdness' – I can't remove it. Thousands of years ago, the sages of our tradition found those problematic as well. Thankfully, we have millennia of traditions for reinterpreting our text anew in each generation. I can choose from countless ways to address those texts, or even make up my own. The only thing I can't do, is not care.

"The word was given once; the effort to understand it must go on forever."¹⁵ *Kol gadol v'lo yasaf* – a great voice that did not cease

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev asks:

"Why do the Rabbis promise that all questions will be answered by Elijah the Prophet when he comes to announce the Messiah and not by Moses, who will then be resurrected? The answer is that Moses died, and we cannot hope to be helped with our current problems by Moses, who completed his life, peace be upon him. Since the days of

¹⁵ Heschel, Abraham Joshua, God In Search of Man, 273.

Moses, the Torah has been placed in our hands....Now a person who is alive and participating in this world knows well what the needs of these times are and the attributes we need to live by. A person who does not live on this plane of existence does not know the attributes we need to live by in this world. Since Elijah is alive, having never tasted the taste of death, and has remained all the time on this plane, he, and no other, is capable of resolving our questions.”¹⁶

There’s a great Aramaic word – *Teyku*. Literally, it means “let it stand,” as in ‘We can’t decide. We’ve tried and tried. Our best minds can’t find a solution to the argument.’ The rabbis tell us it’s an acronym for *Tishby Yitaretz Kushiyot U’ba’ayot* – The Tishbite will advise about all the questions and problems. Who is the Tishbite? Elijah!!

Remember the song – *Eliyahu HaNavi, Eliyahu HaTishby* – Elijah the Prophet, Elijah the Tishbite. When Elijah comes we’ll know the answers. Until then we delight in the questions.

Oral Torah, the interpretation of Torah, lives within us (*chayei olam natah b’tocheinu*). Torah “demands we be involved in the process.”

Each and every one of us has our own Torah to teach. That Torah is not only holy for us, but it is part of an ancient and ongoing tradition. Only when you combine the Torah in the scroll with the Torah that lives within **us**,

¹⁶ Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev (d.1810), *Sefer Kedushat Levi, Likkutim* 108b

only then is the Torah given in the PRESENT.

“Revelation is a great stream of truth, with more of it revealed in each generation.”¹⁷ Now that is a VERY SUBVERSIVE idea...How Queer!

In the words of our texts, “the stone the builders rejected has become the corner stone.”¹⁸ “Never shall we be ashamed again.”¹⁹ For from Sinai comes forth “a great voice that has never ceased.”²⁰ That voice declares:

‘I belong to you,

With me God formed the world -

As you read me, I will form your world anew.’²¹

¹⁷ Green, Art. *A Guide to the Zohar*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 125.

¹⁸ Psalm 118:22.

¹⁹ *Ahavah Rabbah*, Morning Liturgy.

²⁰ *Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:6.

²¹ A poem by Rabbi Richard Levy.