

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



A Set Table

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I try to bless
When I wear Your stars as my blanket;
My winter coat when days are dark
When life is a knife
Resting on the altar of time.

I try to bless
Because my bread is warm,
And the salt at my table
Is my reminder.
Fine grains of labor and endurance.

When the smoke fills you
When the fat is burned
And the flour poured
I have to ask
Do you bless as well?

Your table is set
Widows and orphans, your guests.
If we could sit together,
I know, I am certain,
I would only be able to try.

Parashat Tzav 5776

פרשת צו תשע"ו



How Many Torahs Are There?

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Exodus 12:49 reads, famously, “You shall have one Torah for the one who is native born, and for the stranger who dwells among you.” The upshot is clear: the Jewish people, along with noncitizens who are present in their society, are to be organized around a single, egalitarian legal system. The experience of Mount Sinai was not only one of theophany (divine encounter), though it was that, but also of a revelation that continues through law. The experience of the biblical Israelite was one in which God’s presence was meant to be felt primarily through performing certain actions and refraining from others: God’s will is mediated and met through *mitzvot*. This experience is further emphasized by rabbinic Judaism, as the Talmud states, “R. Hiyya, the son of Ami, said in Ulla’s name: ‘From the day that the Temple was destroyed, the blessed Holy One has nothing in this world, except for the four cubits of the halakhah’” (BT Berakhot 8a). The Torah is singular; there is to be one singular Torah for the one singular God’s one singular People.

And yet, for the Rabbis, the Torah is not singular, but dual. The basic truth claim of rabbinic Judaism is that a second Torah was given to Moses at the Sinai event—an oral one to complement and balance the written one. As the following story of the potential convert who approaches both Hillel and Shammai demonstrates, one cannot join rabbinic culture without accepting the divinity of the Oral Torah:

Our Rabbis taught: A certain gentile once came before Shammai and asked him, “How many Torahs do you have?” “Two,” he replied: “the Written Torah and the Oral Torah.” “I believe you with respect to the Written, but not with respect to the

תנו רבנן: מעשה בנכרי אחד שבא לפני שמאי, אמר לו: כמה תורות יש לכם? אמר לו: שתים, תורה שבכתב ותורה שבעל פה. אמר לו: שבכתב - אני מאמינך, ושבעל פה - איני מאמינך. גיירני על מנת

the Oral Torah; convert me on condition that you teach me only the Written Torah!" Shammai] scolded and repulsed him in anger.

[The gentile] went before Hillel [and went through the same dialogue.] Hillel converted him. On the first day, [Hillel] taught him *Alef, bet, gimmel, dalet*; the following day, he reversed [their order] to him. [The convert] protested, "Yesterday you did not teach them to me this way!" "Aren't you relying on me? Then rely upon me with respect to the Oral [Torah], as well!"

שתלמדני תורה שבכתב. גער בו והוציאו בנזיפה.

בא לפני הלל - גייריה, יומא קמא אמר ליה: א"ב ג"ד, למחר אפיך ליה. אמר ליה: והא אתמול לא אמרת לי הכי? אמר לו: לאו עלי דידי קא סמכת? דעל פה נמי סמוך עלי!

—BT Shabbat 31a

Hillel and Shammai have radically different approaches to outreach, but they share a view of the dual Torah.

So we might be shocked by this week's parashah, Tzav, in which the Torah is neither singular nor dual. The general ordering principle here is a fivefold repetition of the clause *This is the Torah*, which introduces the laws of different kinds of sacrifice: "This is the Torah of the *Olah*" (Lev. 6:2), "This is the Torah of the *Minḥah*" (Lev. 6:7), "This is the Torah of the *Ḥatat*" (Lev. 6:18), "This is the Torah of the *Asham*" (Lev. 7:1), and "This is the Torah of the *Shelamim*" (Lev. 7:11). Apparently, as far as the priests in the Tabernacle were concerned, there are at least five Torahs. And we see this locution elsewhere, as well. The beginning of the set of laws concerning the ritual impurity caused by human corpses reads, "This is the Torah concerning when a person dies in a tent" (Num. 19:14). Altogether, the Pentateuch uses this phrase 15 times! Scholars of biblical Hebrew would tell us that *Torah* simply means a set of instructions. After all, the word *Torah* is one of many words formed from the root *ת.ר.ה.* which means "teaching," so each "Torah" in our portion tells the priests how to perform a particular kind of sacrifice.

But Rabbi Akiva heard this word differently; seemingly it was just as jarring for him to hear it used in such a banal way as it is for us:

R. Akiva said: "Did Israel have only two Torahs? Were not many Torahs given to them? [For example:] 'This is the Torah of the *Olah*', 'This is the Torah of the *Minḥah*', 'This is the Torah of the *Asham*', 'This is the Torah of the *Shelamim*,' and 'This is the Torah concerning when a person dies in a tent', 'which the Lord set forth between God and the children of Israel' (Lev. 26:46). Moses merited to become the messenger between Israel and their heavenly Parent, *on Mount Sinai by the hand of Moses*' (ibid.). We are taught here that the [entire] Torah—its *halakhot*, inferences, and interpretations—was given by Moses at Sinai."

אמר ר"ע וכי שתי תורות היו להם לישראל והלא תורות הרבה ניתנו להם לישראל זאת תורת העולה זאת תורת המנחה זאת תורת האשם זאת תורת זבח השלמים זאת התורה אדם כי ימות באהל אשר נתן ה' בינו ובין בני ישראל זכה משה ליעשות שליח בין ישראל לאביהם שבשמים בהר סיני ביד משה מלמד שניתנה התורה הלכותיה ודקדוקיה ופירושיה ע"י משה מסיני:

—Sifra Beḥukotai, par. 2, ch. 8:

Rabbi Akiva looks to the repetition of the word *Torah* to indicate that the Torah is neither singular nor dual—it is multi-vocal and polysemous. But instead of this complexity being confusing or off-putting, he prefers to read that the multiplicity of Torah serves only to increase the wonder that Moses was entrusted with every aspect of it.

Our Torah *is* confusing. It contains timeless wisdom, and yet it reflects the flaws of the society in which it was first understood. It encourages us to see the eternal value of every human being, while allowing for slavery and mandating hierarchy of gender. It spends an enormous amount of time delineating a system of sacrifices which has not been in effect for almost 2,000 years. And yet there is profound meaning in the structure of a parashah like ours. The multiplicity of Torahs here can be understood as mirroring our fascinatingly complicated world. And when we read it this way, we can return to where we began. There is one Torah for the one God's one People. Yet all three—Torah, God, and Israel—are multifaceted and utterly complex. And yet, they are all one.

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