

Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



Finding the Golden Apple

Rabbi Tim Daniel Bernard, Director of Digital Learning and Engagement, JTS

The Sage has said, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings (*maskiyyot*) of silver” (Prov. 25:11). Hear now an elucidation of the thought that he has set forth. The term *maskiyyot* denotes filigree tracers . . . When looked at from a distance or with imperfect attention, it is deemed to be an apple of silver; but when a keen-sighted observer looks at it with full attention, its interior becomes clear to him and he knows that it is of gold. The parables of the prophets, peace be on them, are similar.

—Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* (trans. S. Pines) (11–12)

By applying his interpretation of this verse from Proverbs to the Bible (and by “parables of the prophets” he includes the contents of the Five Books of Moses), Maimonides is both deeply traditional and totally radical; both elitist and somewhat democratic.

Rabbinic understanding of the Bible has always been interpretive, and Midrash—from a root meaning “to examine”—is often in conflict with the plain meaning of the text. However, one of Maimonides’s main projects in the *Guide* is to lay out an interpretation of the Bible that he thinks is the “golden apple,” one that is consistent with his contemporary philosophical perspectives, including such innovations (biblically speaking) as: God is entirely non-corporeal; the universe is eternal; philosophical contemplation is the highest of pursuits; all laws must serve some rational purpose.

Although Maimonides doesn’t affirm the equality of those who are less enlightened, his use of this verse indicates an acknowledgment that those who only see the “silver,” the simple meaning, are still finding something genuinely valuable (even if it is not as valuable as “the real thing” that is inside). Furthermore, the “keen-sighted observer” is not a genius on an entirely different plain from the masses. If this beautiful metaphor holds, any of us who have minimal human capabilities can find the “golden apple.” We must only invest a little effort and a little time to carefully and determinedly examine the Torah, to discover the treasures within it.

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Beshallah 5778

בשלה תשע"ח



Israel: Between Tears and Songs

Dr. Hillel Gruenberg, Director of Israel Engagement, JTS and HUC-JIR (NY)

Beshallah holds special importance for me and my family—it was the parashah of the week of my son Zeke’s bris three years ago, and that of the week of my wedding to Yael two years before that. Under the huppah, my rabbi (and brother-in-law) Aaron Brusso referenced the Zohar’s likening of the parting of the Red Sea to a wedding for having weeping on one side of the event and singing on the other (Zohar 2:170b). Between the tears and songs, however, lies the Children of Israel’s experience of actually traversing a supernaturally divided sea, one of immense physical insecurity as they walk in the sea knowing that at any moment, the “waters that were to them a wall from their right and their left” (Exod. 14:22, 27), **והמים להם חומה מימינם ומשמאלם** could come down, crash, literally liquidating everything in their midst. However, this physical insecurity is only one part of the equation.

We can see the actual crossing of the sea floor—not the departure from one shore or the arrival on the other—as what anthropologists refer to as a liminal moment, one in which the Israelites are “betwixt and between” the identities and realities of their past and those of their future. As they were between the opposite banks of the Red Sea, the Israelites were neither the slaves they had been in Egypt, nor were they the free people they would become on the other side. The uncertainty of their very identities at this critical moment dovetails with the experience of literal existential uncertainty that I assume comes with traversing a supernaturally divided sea.

As significant as the potential crashing in of the waters is the *conceptual crash*, to borrow from the terminology of Rabbi Benay Lappe, during this liminal experience of sea-crossing. In this crash, the children of Israel had lost the master story that informed their secure if downtrodden lives as slaves of the man-god Pharaoh, but had yet to receive the Torah, the new master story that will inform their lives as free people. While the walls of water remained at bay—

no pun intended—the walls of the Israelites’ collective identity were already coming apart. In Rabbi Lappe’s “three option” framework that informs her explanation of Talmudic logic and Jewish history, the Israelites might just as easily have run back to Egypt to the enslaved life they had known under the Pharaohs, or struck out on their own after crossing the sea—rejecting Moses’s leadership and fending for themselves to get by. Instead, they chose the third option—Torah and a life of new values and practices that stood in stark contrast to those of the societies that made up the “civilized world” of the time.

In thinking of “crash-inducing” and moments in the contemporary Jewish experience, there are few subject to more controversy and debate than the question of our relationship to the State of Israel. Though this subject is one that is, by definition, relatively recent, it seems at times to loom larger than issues more explicitly related and central to Jewish law and philosophy such as intermarriage or belief in God. Events in the history of the modern Jewish state have precipitated a number of crashes regarding our own identity—whether the passive support of Israel that emerged from a three-way struggle in the years after 1948 between American Zionists, Israel’s leadership, and the non-Zionist leadership of major American Jewish organizations; the unprecedented upsurge in active support for the Jewish state in the wake of 1967; or the more multifaceted and critical engagement of recent decades.

Dr. Dov Waxman artfully points out in his book *Trouble in the Tribe* that though the American-Jewish relationship with the State of Israel once served as perhaps the most potent point of internal communal unity, it has increasingly grown to become a splinter issue that is too often avoided for fear of offending or provoking others. In what Ahad Ha’am might have considered a somewhat counterintuitive realization of his vision of a Jewish state as a cultural center serving world Jewry, the “pro-Israelism” that Waxman discusses was, for a long time, something of an American Jewish civil religion that transcended other divisions in the community. While throughout the past 70 years there have been American Jewish individuals and groups of varying size that have criticized and/or opposed the State of Israel, the internal American Jewish debate over Israel has never been as intense, as prominent, or as widespread as it has been in recent years.

This growing divide is in part a generational one—many members of my generation who came of age against the background of ultimately fruitless peace negotiations and intifadas, relate to the State of Israel differently

from our parents’ generation, who experienced the existential anxiety that preceded the unexpected all-encompassing victory of Israel in the 1967 War and the euphoria that followed it. However, no generation is uniform, and there is much disagreement about Israel’s past, present, and future within all generational cohorts.

With this discordant conversation between and within different generations of American Jews, it is both easy and common for people to pursue one of the first two of Rabbi Lappe’s “three options.” In option one we build a wall around the master story we originally accepted, shutting out ideas and perspectives that challenge initial assumptions. With option two we pursue a wholesale repudiation of the master story, rejecting any notion of its legitimacy or disengaging entirely from acknowledgment or discussion of it and related issues. The real challenge lies in blazing a trail toward option three—acknowledging the master story as we build anew to adapt to a changing world.

The all-too-common trepidation surrounding discussing Israel and the conflict in the American Jewish community bears a metaphorical resemblance to the uncertainty and anxiety one would feel crossing through the Red Sea with the fear that if one raises the subject, they might face a deluge of hostile responses, whether **מימין**, from their right, or **משמאל**, from their left.

The scholar Hillel Cohen has pointed out that when people on all sides make bold, sweeping claims relating to the Israeli-Arab conflict they should add the words “I wish” to their statement. For example, “the persistence of the conflict is entirely attributable to the stubbornness of the other side . . . I wish,” or “our claim to the land is totally unassailable, while that of the other side is fundamentally illegitimate . . . I wish.” It is imperative upon all of us to seek out a viable “option three” and to recognize our own “I wish” statements, to see the impermanence and malleability of our master stories, and to develop the patience to engage with and to *actually hear* those with whom we disagree on even those issues most important or sensitive to us. With that, I hope we might move away from the shore of the tears and the uncertainty and angst of divided waters and closer to the joyful side of the tempestuous sea of American Jewish engagement with and discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the past, present, and future of the modern Jewish state.

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