

## Does God Speak?

Dr. Benjamin D. Sommer, Professor of Bible and Ancient Semitic Languages, JTS



The final verse of Parashat Naso is easy to miss. It comes after a long passage that describes the gifts the leader of each tribe presented at the Tabernacle or Tent of Meeting (both names are used for the structure) in the wilderness. Twelve times we read six verses listing the exact same set of items donated from each tribe. The substantial amount of repetition may lead readers to lose some focus as they move through the passage. But Numbers 7:89, the verse that comes right after those twelve sets of six verses, is highly significant. It provides crucial information about the nature of revelation as understood by the *kohanim* (Priests) who wrote this section of the Torah.

Numbers 7:89 describes what transpires between God and Moses at the Tent of Meeting. In doing so, it uses an unusual verb that I'll leave untranslated for now:

When Moses came to the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him, he heard the voice *middabbeir*-ing to him from above the covering that was on top of Ark of the Covenant, from between the two *kerubim*, and He spoke to him.

To understand what the Torah tells us about God's way of talking to Moses, we need to realize that the word our verse uses for God's speaking, *middabbeir*, is quite rare. It is related to another verb that means "speak," *m'dabbeir*, which appears over a thousand times in the Bible. But the verb *middabbeir* shows up only three or four times in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> The grammatical construction of the verb as it appears in our verse is known as the *hitpa'el* (whereas the much more

frequent construction, *m'dabbeir*, is known as a *pi'el* verb).<sup>2</sup> The *hitpa'el* construction carries several types of meaning. It describes a reciprocal action—that is, action that goes back and forth between two parties. (In modern Hebrew, the verb *mitkatteiv*, "correspond, exchange mail," is an example of this use of the *hitpa'el* verb.) If *middabbeir* conveys that sort of meaning in our verse, then, it refers to communication that moves back and forth between God and Moses. In this case, the Priestly author of our verse is telling us that the revelation of the law was not just a top-down affair; it involved some degree of dialogue between God and Moses. This conception of revelation fits well with five other Priestly passages in the Torah, where Moses and the Israelites request clarification from God on specific points of law and God responds by producing new legislation that answers the questions they ask. This Priestly picture of lawgiving as being at least in part dialogical, as involving some sort of human input and not just divine decree, may be indicated in our verse through the *hitpa'el* verb it uses.

Additional possibilities exist as well. Sometimes the *hitpa'el* construction conveys ongoing action, which suggests that we can translate our verb, "he would hear the voice continually speaking to him," "he would hear the voice as it went on speaking to him." (This understanding is suggested by the modern biblical commentators Baruch Levine and Everett Fox.) Further, the construction often conveys a reflexive meaning—that is, it describes an action that people do to themselves. This possibility leads Rashi to suggest that this voice "would speak to itself, and Moses would hear on his

<sup>1</sup> It appears in Ezekiel 2:2 and 43:6 (which also describe communication between God and a prophet), and possibly in 2 Samuel 14:13 (but scholars debate the identity of the verb there).

<sup>2</sup> People familiar with Hebrew grammar may wonder: If this verb is a *hitpa'el*, why does it have no letter *tav*? The letter *tav*, after all, is the characteristic feature of a *hitpae'el* verb. But that *tav* acts oddly when it comes right next to the letter *dalet*. In modern Hebrew the *tav* converts into a *zayin* when it's next to a *dalet* (for example, in the verb *mizdaqqein*, "grow old"). But in biblical Hebrew the *tav* in this situation converts into a *dageish*, the dot found inside the *dalet* in a printed Hebrew text of the Bible, yielding our form, *middabbeir*.

own”—that is, at the Tent, Moses somehow attained access to God’s internal ruminations. These various meanings, it should be clear, are not mutually exclusive; it’s possible that all of them or several of them are implied at once in Numbers 7:89.

By choosing this rare *hitpa’el* verb to explain what took place when God communicated with Moses, our text suggests that this communication was not a simple matter of speaking in the way that humans speak. A voice that entails both giving and taking information, or one that allows for continuous rather than punctual communication, or for overhearing internal dialogue, is not a voice speaking in any normal sense of the word. The phrasing of our verse indicates that its description applies to all the times God communicated laws to Moses. It informs us that whatever communication transpired when Moses went to the Tent differs from what happens when one human talks to another human. In its own subtle and allusive way, then, Numbers 7:89 is making a significant theological claim similar to one that Maimonides would much later expound in *The Guide of the Perplexed*: God doesn’t literally speak, and whenever the Torah refers to God as “speaking,” we need to understand that something much more complex and mysterious was occurring.

This sense is especially strong in one other possible meaning of our verb. The *hitpa’el* construction can denote simulation—that is, it can be used when the subject of the verb acts as if he were doing something. For example, in 2 Samuel 13:5 the verb *mithalleh* means “pretend to be sick”; in Genesis 42:7 and 1 Kings 14:5–6, the verb *mitnakkeir* means “act like a stranger.” If our verse employs this sense of the *hitpa’el* construction, then our narrative is indicating that “speaking” is not something that the deity really does, and whenever the narrator attaches the verb “speak” to the subject “God,” it intends something different from that verb’s usual meaning. God’s “speaking” is something that only a prophet has experienced, and therefore something for which no word exists among us non-prophets who make up the narrative’s audience. My use of quotes in the previous sentence, in fact, may be exactly what the Priestly authors of our passage intend when they use the strange *hitpa’el* form of

this verb: it reminds us that God’s “speaking” is not really speaking at all.

In that case, *mattan Torah* or lawgiving did not involve God literally pronouncing or writing the words we find in the Torah. God’s commands to the nation Israel were not conveyed in language, and one of the most important roles played by Moses, by the prophets who came after him, and by the sages who succeeded them, has been to translate God’s communications into human terms. The process of *parshanut* or interpretation, then, did not begin *after* the revelation of the Torah. Instead, interpretation was part of the ongoing, dialogical process of revelation itself. Interpretation is not only an activity that is performed on the Torah; interpretation helped to create the Torah. We read each day in the paragraph that precedes the *Shema* in the Morning Service that all Jews have the responsibility of studying and teaching the law, fulfilling it and guarding it. When we do so, we continue Moses’ work: by studying and interpreting the law, we contribute to the ongoing process of creating the law anew. Since we celebrated the holiday of *Shavuot*, the season of the giving of the law, earlier this week, now is a good time to think about this lesson from the little-noticed but highly important verse that concludes our parashah.