

Yitro 5786

יתרו תשפ"ו



On Moses’ “Saying” and “Telling”

Alan Cooper, Elaine Ravich Professor of Jewish Studies Emeritus

The highlight of Parashat Yitro is undoubtedly the spectacular son et lumière at Sinai, accompanying the uniquely unmediated revelation of God’s “words” (the 10 Commandments) directly to the people. The gravity of the occasion demanded special preparation, and most of Exodus 19 is devoted to that preparation, beginning with God summoning Moses and instructing him (verse 3):

זה תאמר לבית יעקב
תגיד לבני ישראל

Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob,
And tell the children of Israel.

It seems at first glance that God is issuing the same instruction twice. In the first version of his Torah commentary, Abraham Ibn Ezra disparages commentators who differentiate between the two utterances, concluding, “It is as if they had never seen the words of the prophets who speak in doublets (*כפל*, viz., poetic parallelism) to fix the words in the mind. And it is the way of elegant expression (*צחות*).” Similarly, Samuel David Luzzatto (Shadal) states that the doubling is to set “this word, the introduction to the entire Torah,” firmly in the mind. Most modern scholars would agree that the doubling is both emphatic and stylish (poetic).

But that way of interpreting does not comport well with the traditional rabbinic mindset. The rabbinic view is that Scripture is economical, which means that there can be no redundancy or synonymy, certainly not for the sake of mere “elegance.” The burden on the interpreter is to determine the distinctive connotations of the terms that designate Moses’ speech act(s) and audience(s), respectively. Thus the earliest midrashic interpretation, in *Mekhilta Bahodesh*, chapter 2:

“Thus shall you say”: “thus”—in the holy tongue.
“Thus”—in this order. “Thus”—on this matter. “Thus”—that you neither diminish nor augment.

“Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob”—the women; “and tell the children of Israel”—the men.

“Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob”—gently. “Say”—give the women the basic ideas. “And tell the children of Israel”—be specific in speaking to the men.

According to the Midrash, the word “thus” connotes precision in the choice of language (Hebrew), the order of presentation, and the subject matter. “Speaking” is gentle, while “telling” is punctilious. Most provocatively, the women (“house of Jacob”) are addressed gently (*בלשון רכה*) with generalities, while the specifics are conveyed to the men (“house of Israel”).

Rashi adapts and condenses the *Mekhilta* interpretation, adding (from Shabbat 87a) that the men are to be “told” about “punishments and details, words as tough as sinews [or, as harsh as poison].” The latter comment is based on a word play between the term for telling (*תגיד*) and the word that means either sinews or poison (*גידין*).

Why would anyone think that “house of Jacob” refers to women in the first place? The starting point is a rabbinic comment in Berakhot 13a: “[The name] Israel is primary and Jacob is inferior to it.” This comment is a reflection on the fact that even after God changes Jacob’s name to Israel, the seemingly superseded name continues to appear in the text. Why so? To allow for different connotations of the respective names.

Correlating the Talmudic statement about the two names with the association of the “inferior” name with women leads to blatantly misogynistic interpretations such as this one by Joseph ibn Aqnin, translated from Arabic and quoted by Bahya ben Asher in his commentary on Genesis 32:30¹:

Know that the name Jacob connotes lowliness, derived from “his hand was holding onto the heel of

¹ See Abraham Lipshitz, *Studies on R. Bahya ben Asher ibn Halawa’s Commentary on the Torah* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 2000), pp. 78-80.

Esau" (Gen. 25:26), for the heel is the lowest part of the body. The name Israel, however, connotes authority and high stature.... That is the sense of "The Lord said to him, your name shall be Israel," as the sages said, "Israel is primary and Jacob is inferior to it." And Scripture goes on to state, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and tell the children of Israel," relating women to Jacob because they are inferior to men, and relating males to Israel because they are primary.

In his commentary on Exodus 19:3, Bahya elaborates, stating that God commanded Moses to speak "calmly" (בָּנְחַת) to the women first, "to teach them discipline and proper conduct and, moreover, so that they might direct a son towards the study of Torah and observance of the commandments." Moses is instructed to give the women only the "chapter headings" (generalities) "because their minds are not as settled as men's."

Some later commentators retain the midrashic sensibility while diminishing or eliminating the misogyny implicit in the midrash and spelled out in Bahya's interpretation. Hayyim ibn Attar does so explicitly, commenting:

It is necessary to explain the doubling of you shall say // you shall tell. Our rabbis said "house of Jacob" refers to women, to whom Moses would speak soothingly, and "to the house of Israel" he would declare words as tough as sinews. But the difficulty is that we do not find that God's words conveyed two different messages, but a single expression for men and women alike, whether tough or soothing.... Also, I see no "tough words" in God's words to the men, but words that revive the soul!

Following that assertion, Ibn Attar launches into a lengthy excursus on the rewards that people receive for observing the commandments, arguing that two verses in Deuteronomy (7:9 and 20:6, respectively) prove that the reward for observance out of love is twice as great as that for observance out of fear. When God reveals the words of Torah, then, there are two possible ways to present them:

One way is to speak loving and tender words, with the positive outcome that [people] will receive the Torah out of love, and double their reward.... The second

way is to speak tough words, like a king who decrees to his subjects with threats, with the positive outcome that they will not accidentally disregard a single commandment, although they will be entitled to only half the reward that they would get for doing them out of love.

In Ibn Attar's interpretation, God wisely commanded in both ways, by way of love and by inducing fear. "Saying" connotes love and tenderness while "telling" induces fear and reverence. Both are good and necessary for the fulfillment of the Torah: "Every Jew must acquire both love and reverence, and God's words entail both. As for the words of our rabbis, who said these are the women and those are the men, they are by way of homily." Overt (albeit polite) rejection of the rabbinic gender distinction yields a more palatable midrashic-style interpretation for the modern reader.

Malbim, who also is neo-rabbinic in his avoidance of textual redundancy or superfluity, is another commentator who sets gender aside. First, he asserts the difference between "saying" and "telling": "Telling entails something novel and difficult that is made known by the teller; it is a matter outside the hearer's knowledge. Saying includes any oral utterance." Then, he renders the rabbinic notion of Jacob as inferior to Israel as a class distinction: ordinary descendants of Jacob "are called by the name 'Jacob,' and the elite of the nation or the people, those of high stature, are called by the name 'Israel.'" The common people are to be instructed with "simple and easy words," in contrast to "the elite and the elders," who are to be addressed with "new and great words."

In the minds of our commentators, God's double charge to Moses carries diverse messages about how Moses should prepare the Jews for revelation at Sinai: (1) by conveying God's instructions precisely for memorability; (2) by addressing the women in one way, and the men in another; (3) by commanding both lovingly and threateningly; (4) by speaking to the masses in one way and to the elite in another. In every case, the interpretive decisions reveal as much or more about the interpreters as they do about the biblical text—about their prejudices and preoccupations, and about the circumstances of their lives. They provide endless fascination—and possibilities of meaning—for students of Torah.