



Wellsprings of Torah

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In Parashat Ki Tavo, Moshe and the elders of Israel command the people, on the day they arrive into Land, to set up twelve large stones, and “to write on them all the words of this Torah” (Deuteronomy 27:3). Moshe then repeats this charge a few verses later, but this time adds extra emphasis with an unusual verb:

דברים כז:ח

וְכָתַבְתָּ עַל הָאֲבָנִים אֶת־כָּל דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת בְּאֵר הֵיטֵב.

Deuteronomy 27:8

Write on the stones all the words of this Torah,¹ **clarified** (*be'er*) well.

The verb for “clarify” (לְבַאֵר, *leva'er*), can mean something more general like, “explain” or “expound,” but the Ibn Ezra tells us that here it refers specifically to the writing on the stones, indicating that the letters should be clear and easy to read.² This word is used in only one

¹ I am capitalizing Torah here, following the opinion of the Ramban that it refers to the whole text of the Torah.

² The Mishnah (Sotah 7:5) brings an interpretation of the phrase that indicates a far more elaborate writing process: “They wrote on it all the words of the Torah in seventy languages—as it says, ‘*be'er heitev*.’”



other place in the Torah, in Deuteronomy's introductory verses, just before Moshe begins to speak:

דברים א:ה

בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב הוֹאִיל מֹשֶׁה בָּאֵר אֶת הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת.

Deuteronomy 1:5

On the other side of the Jordan, in the Land of Moab, Moshe began to **clarify** (*be'er*) this Torah.

In both cases, the activity described by the word “*be'er*” is directly related to “this Torah.” Why does Deuteronomy select this uncommon verb to describe the process of speaking and writing words of Torah?

Another layer of meaning is added to the word by the masterful 19th century Hasidic commentator, R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, in his Sefat Emet, who notes a linguistic echo from a word that is central in earlier Torah narratives:

שפת אמת, פרשת דברים תרנ"ו

הואיל משה באר. כתבנו כבר כי מרע"ה הי' פותח פי הבאר.

Sefat Emet, Parashat Devarim 1896

Moshe began to clarify (*be'er*) this Torah—as we have written before, this is because our Teacher Moshe would **open the mouth of the well** (*ha-be'er*).



The Sefat Emet is playing with the fact that the verb, “לבאר - to clarify,” shares a root with the noun, “באר - a well of water.”³ Indeed the two words, as they are used in the Torah, look and sound almost exactly alike.

The Sefat Emet’s description also reminds us that Moshe is an established “well-opener,” having himself once drawn water from a well. When he first fled Egypt, he arrived in Midian and “sat down by a well” (Exodus 2:15). When Yitro’s seven daughters come to the well for water, and are driven off by other shepherds, Moshe comes to their defense and, as they report later, “he drew water for us and watered our flocks” (Exodus 2:19). Moshe is rewarded with an invitation to eat with the family, and he soon ends up married to one of the daughters. So Moshe—whose name means “the one who draws forth”—was indeed someone who drew forth water from a well.

But the particular phrasing in the Sefat Emet, that Moshe would open “**the mouth of the well** (פי הבאר),” also evokes another, similar scene at a well—this one from earlier on, in Genesis. For it is Ya’akov who, upon seeing Raḥel arrive at a well that has been sealed, “rolled the stone from off **the mouth of the well** (פי הבאר) and watered the flock” for Raḥel (Genesis 29:10). Like Moshe, Ya’akov ends up married to the shepherdess whose distress he alleviates.

The Sefat Emet’s weaving together of these different uses of באר serves to illuminate a pattern in the Torah’s usage of the word. The verb form, *leva’er*, to clarify, is a rare word, appearing only twice in the Torah, both times here in the Book of Deuteronomy. The noun form, meanwhile (*be’er*, a well) never appears in Deuteronomy, but is quite a common word in the other books of the Torah, where it appears nearly 30 times, and is at the center of many of the Torah’s most pivotal scenes. Hagar encounters God at a well (Genesis 16), Yitzḥak spends a

³ Or of tar, as in the first usage of the word: “וַעֲמַק הַשִּׁדִּים בְּאֶרֶת בְּאֶרֶת חֲמֹר” - Now the Valley of Siddim was dotted with tar pits [or: wells]” (Genesis 14:10).



whole chapter digging up his father's wells (Genesis 26). And wells, as we have seen, are a frequent setting for love connections.

As this verb introduces Moshe's speech in Deuteronomy, then—when he “began to clarify this Torah”—the reader of the Torah is invited to conjure up the image of a well and its many life-giving properties. It is as if Moshe, not usually so verbose, has begun to gush forth the waters of Torah, which will provide relief to the soul-thirsty people of Israel.

Yet in his treatment of the image, the Sefat Emet does not focus on the abundant flow of water so much as the difficulty in drawing it forth. He emphasizes Moshe's **opening** the mouth of the well. In the earlier passage he alluded to above, he elaborates:

שפת אמת, פרשת דברים תרנ"ב

הואיל משה באר אה"ת כו' הואיל התחיל. והוא הפתח שפתח משה רבינו ע"ה להיות הכנה שכל בני"י יוכלו למצוא מעין התורה.

Sefat Emet, Parashat Devarim 1892

“Moshe began to clarify this Torah...” He **began**. This was the opening that Our Teacher Moshe, created, as a preparation, so that the Children of Israel would be able to find the Spring of Torah.

Moshe's speech, his “clarifying” of the Torah, does not represent the water of the well itself, but the opening of the well. The removal of the stone is the preparation that allows others to draw forth their own waters. So Moshe is not just giving the people Torah; he is directing them towards the Torah they will one day have to find for themselves.

How, then, does the image of the well affect our reading of the command that Moshe issues in our *parashah*, to write all the words of the Torah, *be'er heitev*? Remember that they are being



asked to carve into stones.⁴ So their writing of the Torah is itself a kind of digging, and a removal of rock in order to find the waters of Torah beneath it.

This means that the Children of Israel are also being charged with creating an opening for Torah.⁵ Every generation must not only find the Torah they need to quench their thirst, but also help prepare the next generation to drink from the wellsprings of Torah. Recalling the images of our ancestors seeking water from wells reminds us that Torah, like water, is not always so easy to find. Still, we keep digging.

⁴ This kind of engraved writing in stone also seems to be suggested by the one other use of the verb form of באר in Tanakh: “וַיֹּאמֶר קְתֹב חֲזוֹן וּבִאֵר עַל הַלְּחֹת לְמַעַן יִרְוֶץ קוֹרְא בּוֹ” - The Eternal answered me and said, ‘Write down this vision and **inscribe it (ba’er)** on the tablets, so that it can be read by all’ (Habakkuk 2:2).

⁵ The Sefat Emet also suggests as much: “This is true for all the great ones of Israel—they have the power to open up the Torah. As it says [often in the Zohar]: ‘R. Shimon opened... R. Elazar opened...’ This, in fact, is the meaning of ‘the mouth of the well.’”

