



The Beauty of Every Word

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Matan torah, the receiving of Torah at Mount Sinai, is deeply associated with the senses. The verses that describe it emphasize sights and sounds.¹ What did we hear? What did we see? The Talmud introduces a new sensual experience: smell. What did it smell like to receive Torah?

On Shabbat 88b, R. Yehoshua ben Levi, a second-generation Amora whose powerful *aggadot* are found throughout the Talmud, offers a series of vivid descriptions of the experience at Sinai that draws on poetry from the Song of Songs. His first image explores this connection between God's speaking words of Torah and fragrance:

תלמוד בבלי שבת פח:

ואמר רבי יהושע בן לוי, מאי דכתיב: "לחיו כערוגת הבשם" – כל דיבור ודיבור שיצא מפי הקדוש ברוך הוא נתמלא כל העולם כולו בשמים.
וכיון שמדיבור ראשון נתמלא, דיבור שני להיכן הלך? הוציא הקדוש ברוך הוא הרוח מאוצרותיו והיה מעביר ראשון ראשון, שנאמר: "שפחותיו שושנים נוספות מור עבר". (אל תקרי "שושנים", אלא "ששונים").

¹ Most prominently, Exodus 20:15: "All the people saw the thunder and the lightning and the sound of the *shofar* and the mountain smoking."



Talmud Bavli Shabbat 88b

And said R. Yehoshua ben Levi: What is it that is written: “His cheeks are as a bed of spices” (Song of Songs 5:13)? [With] each and every utterance (*dibbur*) that went out from the mouth of the Holy Blessed One, the entire world was filled with spices.

But since the world was filled by the first utterance, where did the second utterance go?

The Holy Blessed One brought forth wind from His treasures and made the smells pass one at a time. As it is stated: “His lips are lilies (*shoshanim*) dripping with flowing myrrh.”

Do not read “lilies,” but “that they repeated” (*she-shonim*).

In giving us Torah God fills the whole world with smells so powerful and all consuming that, after each commandment, God has to pause and bring a wind to blow away the scent before the world is ready for the sharing of the next utterance. And the pattern repeats. From this we learn that accepting Torah is designed to be sensual.

But we also learn from this story something else powerful and easily forgotten: Torah should be read slowly. Very slowly. One idea—and maybe even one word—at a time. As my colleague R. Shai Held is fond of reminding his students, “However slowly you read these verses—go slower!”

As a dyslexic rabbi who is in love with Torah study, I find this lesson comforting, empowering, and intuitive. I read one word at a time. The experience of reading takes a lot out of me. I need to take breaks, and then push forward to the next idea and the next. This slow pace allows me to really smell the roses (or smell the Torah), and notice the sensual beauty of each phrase and breathe it in. The pace at which I read Torah helps me see its poetry.



R. Yehoshua ben Levi continues to teach this message of reading one line at a time in the next passage. He offers two more dramatic images of what happened at Sinai that each emphasizes the slow, piece-by-piece reception of Torah.

ואמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: כל דיבור ודיבור שייצא מפיו הקדוש ברוך הוא יצתה נשמתו של ישראל, שנאמר: "נפשי יצאה בדברו". ומאחר שמדיבור ראשון יצתה נשמתו, דיבור שני היאך קיבלו? — הוריד טל שעתידי להחיות בו מתים והחיה אותם, שנאמר: "גשם נדבות תניף אלקים נחלתך ונלאה אתה כוננתה".

And said R. Yehoshua ben Levi: [With] each and every utterance that went out from the mouth of the Holy Blessed One, the souls of Israel went out, as it is said, "My soul went out with His speaking" (Song of Songs 5:6).

But since their souls went out with the first utterance, how did they receive the second utterance? [God] brought down dew that in the future will revive the dead and revived them, as it is said, "You will sprinkle a bountiful rain, God; Your inheritance was weary and you established it" (Psalm 68:10).

ואמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: כל דיבור ודיבור שייצא מפיו הקדוש ברוך הוא חזרו ישראל לאחוריהן שנים עשר מיל והיו מלאכי השרת מדין אותן, שנאמר: "מלאכי צבאות ידדון ידדון" — אל תיקרי "ידדון", אלא "ידדון".

And said R. Yehoshua ben Levi: [With] each and every utterance that went out from the mouth of the Holy Blessed One, Israel went 12 miles backward and the ministering angels led them [back to the mountain], as it is said, "The hosts of angels will scatter (*yidodun*)"—do not read "scattered," but "led" (*yedadun*).

In this second story, the people are so overwhelmed upon hearing the Torah of God that they die and need to be revived after each commandment. In the third image, each of God's utterances sends the people retreating to the edge of the camp where they need to be walked

back slowly by ministering angels. Rashi describes this walking as the process of a mother teaching her child to take their first steps.² Only very slowly and with great care, intention, and support, we are able to encounter the next words.

R. Yehoshua ben Levi is teaching us: there is a rebound period needed after each and every word of Torah. To really take in Torah, to receive it properly, is slow and laborious—and also ecstatic, and entirely physiologically overwhelming.

R. Akiva, one of the greatest students and teachers of Torah ever, is known as *oker harim* (an uprooter of mountains). He was able to understand Torah differently and more deeply than any before him. According to the story of his origins in Avot de-R. Natan, R. Akiva's secret was that he studied not only word by word, but letter by letter:

אבות דרבי נתן (נוסחא א) פרק ו

אמר: אלף זו למה נכתבה? בית זו למה נכתבה? דבר זה למה נאמר?

Avot de-R. Natan (Version A) chapter 6

He said: “This *aleph*, why is it written? This *bet*, why is it written?³ This word, why is it said?”

Like a mason with a chisel who knows to chip away slowly and patiently, R. Akiva is able to move mountains.

In praise of R. Akiva's method, on Menahot 29b we find a story of Moses, still atop the mountain, asking a question to God about the meaning of tiny crowns on the letters in the

² On Shabbat 88b, s.v. *medadin otan*.

³ R. Akiva's questions about the *alef* and *bet* are not found in every version of Avot de-R. Natan, but are found in the version of the Vilna Gaon.



Torah. By way of answer, God brings Moses to the *beit midrash* of R. Akiva to understand the purpose of every minor detail received at Mount Sinai. Even Moses must learn from the teacher who reads Torah word by word, letter by letter, and crown by crown.

It feels so appropriate that we fill Shavuot with the smells of fresh cut flowers, baking loaves, and sweet cheesecake. Perhaps surrounding ourselves in these smells is crucial to reliving *matan torah*. May they remind us that to experience Torah at its most sensual, most fragrant, is to read it slowly and lovingly.

