



God and Torah: Do They Need Each Other?

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Celebrating *The Heart of Torah*
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I. Seeking God and Torah--What is Gained and What is Lost?

R. Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 54-59

During much of the biblical period, Tanakh tells us, people spoke to God, and God spoke back. More, God actively sought people out and communicated God's will to them. But by the end of the biblical period, the line of direct divine communication had largely dried up. Instead of seeking direct dialogue with God, people began to seek guidance and inspiration in God's teachings - that is, in Torah. Insisting that God's will and presence could be found in Torah was one of Judaism's greatest innovations and achievements. It was also one of its greatest gambles...

So deep is the Jewish people's love of Torah and so confident are we that Torah mediates both God's will and God's presence, that even in the darkest moments in Jewish history, when God seems entirely absent, God's presence can nevertheless be found in Torah...To a Jew in search of God, that textual cord uniting heaven and earth can be the most precious thing in the world. But the Torah's standing between God and Israel can also be dangerous: whatever mediates God can also come to displace God. We can become so focused on Torah that we lose any sense of the reality of God, let alone of God's commanding presence. And then we run the risk of being text-worshippers rather than God-worshippers"...If we interpret Torah without a sense that we are serving a God of love and kindness, our Torah may become stale at best and cruel at worst. Torah is (supposed to be) a bridge connecting us to a compassionate God, but we can become so focused on the bridge itself that we simply forget about what (or Who) stands on the other side...

When it works, Judaism's text-centeredness renders our connection to God portable; we can have access to God in every conceivable circumstance. When it doesn't, it makes God marginal. We can forget whom we serve because we love the Torah more than God...Even in moments when we lose God, we still have Torah. But Torah is not an end in itself; the purpose of Torah is to bring us (back) to God.

II. How Can We Seek God?

בראשית פרק כה

(כא) וַיַּעֲתֵר יִצְחָק לִיקְנוֹל לְנִכְח אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עָקְרָהּ הָיָה וַיַּעֲתֵר לוֹ יִקְנוֹל וַתֵּהֵר רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ:
(כב) וַיִּתְּצֻּהוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם-כֹּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִכִּי וַתֵּלֶךְ לִדְרֹשׁ אֶת-יְקֹנָק:
(כג) וַיֹּאמֶר יְקֹנָק לָהּ שְׂגִי גַיִם גּוֹיִם בְּבֶטְנְךָ וּשְׂגִי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעֶיךָ יִפְרְדּוּ וְלֹא-מִלֶּאֱם יֵאָמְרוּ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר:

Genesis 25:21-23

Isaac prayed to the Lord in the presence of his wife--for she was barren--and the Lord responded and his wife Rebecca became pregnant. The children were crushing one another in her womb, and she said: If so, why me? She went to inquire of the Lord. The Lord said to her: "There are two nations in your womb and two peoples will separate out from your insides. One people will become greater than the other; the older shall serve the younger.

תרגום ירושלמי בראשית פרשת תולדות פרק כה פסוק כב

וַאֲזֵלַת לְמַתְבוּעַ רַחֲמִין מִן קֶדֶם יִי בְּבֵית מְדֻרְשׁוֹי דְשֵׁם רַבָּא:

Targum Yerushalmi

She went to ask for mercy from God in the house of study of the great Shem.

פסיקתא זוטריתא (לקח טוב) בראשית פרשת תולדות פרק כה סימן כב

וַתֵּלֶךְ לְדַרְוֹשׁ אֶת ה'. לְהַקְרִיב קֶרֶבֶן:

Pesikta Zutarta Bereishit

She went to inquire of the Lord--to offer a sacrifice.

רשב"ם בראשית פרשת תולדות פרק כה פסוק כב

לְדַרְוֹשׁ אֶת י"י - אֵל הַנְּבִיאִים שְׂבֹאוֹתֵן הַיָּמִים כְּדֹכַת לְדַרְוֹשׁ אֶת י"י מֵאֵתוֹ, וְכֹת' כִּי יָבֹא אֵלֵי הָעָם לְדַרְוֹשׁ אֶת י"י:

Rashbam Bereishit 25:22

To inquire of the Lord--to the prophets in those days, as it says (in II Chronicles 18:7): to inquire of the Lord through him [the prophet Mikhaihu ben Yimlah] and it also says: "for the people come to me to inquire of the Lord."

שמות פרק יח

(יד) וַיֵּרָא חֲתָן מֹשֶׁה אֶת כָּל־אַשְׁרֵי־הָיָא עֹשֶׂה לְעַם וַיֹּאמֶר מִה־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָמְרָה עֹשֶׂה לְעַם מִדּוֹעַ אֲתָהּ יוֹשֵׁב לְבִדּוֹ וְכָל־הָעָם נֹצֵב עֲלֶיךָ מִזֶּכֶר עַד־עָרֹב:
(טו) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לַחֲתָנוֹ כִּי־בָא אֵלַי הָעָם לְדֹרֵשׁ אֵלַיִם:

Exodus 18:14-15

Moses's father-in-law saw everything he was doing with the people and he said: "What is this that you are doing with the people? Why do you sit by yourself while all the people stand about you from morning until evening? Moses said to his father-in-law: It is because the people come to me to inquire of God.

עזרא פרק ז

(י) פִּי עֲזָרָא הֵכִין לִבּוֹ לְדַרוֹשׁ אֶת־תּוֹרַת יְקוֹק וּלְעֲשׂוֹת וּלְלַמֵּד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל חֶק וּמִשְׁפָּט:

Ezra 7:10

For Ezra had dedicated himself to study the Teaching of the Lord so as to observe it, and to teach laws and rules to Israel.

III. Replacing God with Torah?

תהלים קיט	
(יט) גֵּר אֲנִי בְּאֶרֶץ אֲלֵּ-תַסְתֵּר מִלְּפָנַי מְצֹחִיךָ:....	
(ל) דֶּרֶךְ-אֲמוּנָה בְּחַרְתִּי מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ שְׁוִיתִי:	שְׁוִיתִי יָלֹנָק לְנִגְדֵי תְמִיד כִּי אִמְיִנִי בִלְ-אֲמוּט: (תהלים ט:ח)
(לא) דְּבַקְתִּי בַעֲדוֹתֶיךָ יָלֹנָק אֲלֵ-תְבִישָׁנִי:....	דְּבַקְתָּ נַפְשִׁי אֲחֵרֶיךָ בִּי תִמְכָּה יְמִינֶךָ: (תהלים פרק סג פסוק ט) אֲתִי-יָלֹנָק אֶלֶתֶיךָ תִּירָא אֲתוּ תַעֲבֹד וְכוּ תִדְבָּק וּבִשְׁמוֹ תִשָּׁבַע: (דברים פרק י פסוק כ)
(מח) וְאֶשָּׂא-כָּפִי אֶל-מְצֹחֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר אֶהְבֵּתִי וְאֶשְׁיַחָהּ בְּחֶמְדֶּךָ:....	
(צב) לִוְלִי תוֹרְתֶךָ שַׁעֲשַׁעֵי אֲזִי אֶבְרָתִי בַעֲנִי:	
(צג) לַעֲוֹלָם לֹא-אֲשַׁכַּח פְּקוּדֶיךָ כִּי יָם חֵיתָנִי:....	
(צז) מָה-אֶתְבַּתִּי תוֹרְתֶךָ כִּלְ-הַיּוֹם הֵיא שִׁיחֲתִי:....	
(קמח) קִדְּמוּ עֲנִי אֲשַׁמְרוֹת לְשִׁים בְּאִמְרָתֶךָ:	אִם-יִזְכְּרֶתֶיךָ עַל-יְצוּעֵי בְּאֲשַׁמְרוֹת אֶהְיֶה-לָּךְ: (תהלים סג:ז)

Psalms 119	
I am a sojourner in the land; Do not hide Your commandments from me.	
I have chosen the way of faithfulness; I have set Your rules before me.	I have set the Lord before me always... (16:8)
I cleave to Your decrees, O Lord...	My soul cleaves to you...(63:9) Fear the lord your God and serve Him; cleave to Him, swear in His name. (Deut. 10:20)
I raise my palms to Your commandments, which I love; I study Your laws.	
Were not Your Torah, my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.	
I will never forget your orders, because through them you have given me life.	
How I love Your Torah, it is my meditation all day long!	
My eyes greet each watch of the night, as I meditate upon Your word.	I call You to mind upon my bed... I think of You in the watches of the night" (63:7)

IV. When Means Become Ends

תלמוד ירושלמי (וילנא) מסכת מכות פרק ב

אמר רבי פינחס [תהילים כה ח] טוב וישר למה הוא טוב שהוא ישר ולמה הוא ישר שהוא טוב על כן יורה חטאים בדרך שמורה דרך תשובה. שאלו לחכמה חוטא מהו עונשו אמרו להם [משלי יג כא] חטאים תרדף רעה שאלו לנבואה חוטא מהו עונשו אמרה להן [יחזקאל יח ד] הנפש החוטאת היא תמות שאלו לקודשא בריך הוא חוטא מהו עונשו אמר להן יעשו תשובה ויתכפר לו. היינו דכתיב על כן יורה חטאים בדרך יורה לחטאים דרך לעשות תשובה.

Talmud Yerushalmi Makkot 2

They asked wisdom: What should be the punishment of a sinner? And wisdom said: 'Misfortune pursues sinners' (Proverbs 13:21). They asked prophecy: What should be the punishment of a sinner? And prophecy said: 'The person that sins shall die' (Ezekiel 18:4,20). They asked The

Blessed Holy One: What should be the punishment of a sinner? And God said: 'Let him repent and he will be atoned for.'

R. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (1955): 261-262

Prophecy is superior to wisdom, and God's love is superior to prophecy... God is infinitely more sublime than what the prophets were able to comprehend, and the heavenly wisdom is more profound than what the Torah contains in its present form.

V. Maintaining Balance

תלמוד ירושלמי (וילנא) מסכת חגיגה פרק א הלכה ז

א"ר חייה בר בא אותי עזבו אוותרה שמא את תורתי שמרו שאילו אותי עזבו ותורתי שמרו השאור שבה היה מקרבן אצלי

Talmud Yerushalmi Hagigah 1:7

Said R. Hiyya b. Abba: "If they forsook Me, I would forgive them, because they might yet keep My Torah. If they forsook Me but kept My Torah, its leavening force would bring them close to Me."