

**God spoke to Moses in the Sinai Desert, in the Tabernacle, on the first day of the second month in the second year of the Exodus, saying:** (Num. 1:1)

There's a perplexing Midrash on this first verse in the Book of Numbers.

Parable: An Arab prince entered a country, but when the people there saw him they fled. He entered a second country, but the people fled there also. He entered a third place, a desolate and parched city, and when these people saw him they began praising and lauding him. He said 'This city is better than all those countries. This is where I will build my lodging, this is where I will live.'

This is what happened to God. When God approached the Red Sea it fled, as we read (Ps. 114) 'The sea looked and fled.' God revealed Himself on Mount Sinai, whereupon it fled, as we read, (ibid.) 'The mountains skipped like goats.' He came to the desolate wilderness and it welcomed Him, as we read, (Is. 42:11) 'Let the wilderness and its towns raise their voices; let the Kedar settlements rejoice.' God said, 'This wilderness is better than all those countries, here is where I will build home.' As soon as God descended into the wilderness they all began rejoicing that He had come down into it, as we read, (ibid. 35:1-2) 'The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will bloom profusely and rejoice with rejoicing and shouts of joy.' (*Tanchuma Bamidbar 2*)

The Midrash makes no sense. Did God actually want to build His dwelling place inside the Red Sea, on the sea or at the sea? The second country which supposedly fled from His presence is Mount Sinai, but the biblical narrative holds the revelation at Sinai was and remains to this day a very successful appearance. Why did God feel He had to move on from there to the wilderness? What was wrong with Sinai, and how is the wilderness any better?

The rebbe Reb Bunim (*Kol Simcha* - Bamidbar) explains it thus. God looks for a place to dwell. He tried making His home in the World of Miracles, but it fled. While it was happening, i.e. as we were passing through the Red Sea, we thought we'd never need another miracle to get us high again. We'd be carried on the crest of this wave for eternity. Yet three days later we couldn't even recall what it felt like to be that thrilled and awed, so high on the sheer marvelous miraculousness of it all. Miracles don't work beyond the immediate moment, they become memories, nothing more. God doesn't live in the memory of anything, only in the present moment.

Sinai didn't work either. We were dying to get there and be there, and the sheer anticipation of it had us shouting '*Na'aseh V'Nishma* - We will do and we will obey!' But once we'd arrived, and had to deal with it all on a day-to-day basis the thrill wore off pretty fast. As some future climactic event to look forward to, it was great - it was matchless. But God does not live in the future, He either lives in the here and now, or nowhere!

According to the rebbe Reb Bunim the wilderness in the story represents the Torah, and the Zohar agrees with him (Vol. III 117b). The parched and thirsty Torah lets God in and welcomes Him to stay.

When the Torah (Ex. 32:16) tells us about the Tablets of Stone which Moses brought down from Mount Sinai, saying that 'the writing was the writing of God,' what it really means is that God inscribed himself into the text of the Torah. The 'writing of God' is a process whereby God is written down in words for anyone to read, whenever they want to. The Torah is where He built His palace and makes His home. All miracles in the Torah are in the here and now, as soon as you open the book and start reading, you're right there in the world of miracles: passing through the Red Sea, standing at Sinai.

The Zohar (Vol. I 17a) says this about God's way of writing Himself into the Torah:

The description of God dividing between upper and lower waters on the Second Day of Creation is written left-handedly, while generally the story of Creation beginning with the First Day's narrative is written right-handedly. It is on the Second Day that splitting occurs.

Left-handedness writes a split which provokes a reaction from the left side creating friction, opposition, passion and rage. It is out of this rage that all Hell is formed.

It is as though the Zohar were suggesting that God's handwriting displays different and contradictory personality traits depending on which hand God is writing with. This is a very subtle way of saying there are various possibilities for the expression of divine will, and they are not all compatible with each other. If God writes with both hands and two different pictures of Him develop, if Moses in Deuteronomy<sup>1</sup>, Joshua, Samuel and King David in his Psalms each add their vision of God to Scripture and new paradigms of God emerge, where does the process end?

Well, it doesn't end - that's the whole point. The reason God chooses to dwell in the Torah is because the Torah never ends. When Scripture - the Written Torah is closed and completed, when the Prophet Micah has had his last word, then the Oral Torah just begins.

When the Babylonian scholars had finished writing God into the Talmud, then Sa'adiah in Baghdad, Ibn Gabirol in Spain, Rashi in France, Alfasi in Morocco, Maimonides in Egypt and a hundred thousand others began recording their own visions of Him for posterity, and they were no more qualified than you and I to say who God is and how He ought to act. Which, again, is the whole point. As soon as God is forced into an immutable construct, into a closed rule-book containing all the permissible basic assumptions, ways of thinking, and methods acceptable to members of the Jewish community - He is no longer there.

Torah is a wilderness; a wild and uncultivated region, inhabited only by wild animals. It is a tract of wasteland, a place where a bewildering mass or collection of things can grow unchecked. Basically what grows there is God.

If you study Torah in order to learn someone else's God, you will not find Him. God only reveals Himself to you when you add your own *Chidush* - new and fresh insight about Him to the Torah.

The Piaceszna rebbe, R. Kalonymous Kalmish says something very similar. He said that God only teaches Torah to a person if the Torah being studied is new and fresh, otherwise the person has to revise it on their own. God is only in the novelty:

Whenever we learn something new, and God as the 'Teacher of Torah to Israel' is our teacher, then there is a greater revelation of Torah in heaven. Even though the whole Torah belongs to God, even so, a greater revelation of Torah in the upper worlds occurs when God teaches something new to a human.

R. Moses Cordovero (*Pardes Rimmonim*) discusses the difference between a thought that has been articulated and a thought that has not yet been articulated. 'Once a thought has been made manifest in this world, then in heaven that idea stands revealed in a whole new way.'

Each time a child learns the shapes of the Hebrew letters for the first time, there is fresh revelation in heaven concerning these letters.

This is not the case with adults who are too familiar with the shapes of the letters. When we look at them we are not learning anything new, so we do not have God teaching us anything directly. The only revelation we can inspire in the upper worlds, is in the meaning of the Text of the Torah, in the *P'Shat*. When the Talmud mentions 'children' who explain the mystical meanings in the shapes of the letters, it is actually referring to holy people who approach the text as children. They bring about revelation even in the shape of the letters, and not just in the meaning of the text. They can still learn like children, and so are able to look at the *Aleph* and *Beth* and *Gimmel* and ask; 'Why is the leg of the *Gimmel* stretched out towards the *Dalet*, etc.?' (*Sacred Fire* p.p. 184-5)

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1 שיטה מקובצת מסכת ברכות דף כא: אפילו מאן דלא דריש סמוכין בכל התורה כולה במשנה תורה דריש. טעמא משום דמשנה תורה דברי משה הן. ואף על פי שכולן נאמרו מפי הגבורה מכל מקום כיון שכבר נאמרו תחלה בסדור אחר ועכשיו חזרו ואומר בסדור אחר ודאי כשסומך הרברים זה לזה לדרשא נסמכו כיון שאינם סדורין בסידור ראשון:

If you can learn Torah in a childlike way, you don't even have to learn the text - just by looking at the shapes of the Hebrew letters with fresh eyes you create a new revelation of God in the upper and lower worlds. God has a new face.

When R. Shimon bar Yochai went to observe youths in the house of study, he used to say, 'I'm going to look at the Face of God,'<sup>2</sup> because anyone learning something new about God is revealing a unique and hitherto concealed aspect of the divine: an entirely new and infinite God.

The consequences of this insight are very far-reaching when you think about it. The Talmudic dictum 'Torah is not in Heaven!'<sup>3</sup> means that God is not in Heaven. He's in the Torah, and the Torah is in our hands - God is in our hands. Whatever we make of Him, that is what He is and has to be.

When God wrote into His Torah (Ex. 23:2) 'It is up to the majority to decide,' He gave the majority permission to decide both who is God and what is Torah. So, for example, the seemingly endless debate about the 'authenticity' of the Zohar is senseless and foolish. The Zohar is Torah because we who learn it say so, not because this 2nd century rabbi wrote it himself, or that 13th century one did so pseudo-epigraphically. The Zohar is real Torah because we who study it value it as such, and the God of the Zohar is our God because we decided that's who we want Him to be. And if you ask by what right do we elevate R. Shimon bar Yochai to occupy the position of 'Man' in the verse, 'God said, "Let us make man!"' (Zohar Vol. I 22a) He had R. Shimon in mind? You may as well ask by what right does the Babylonian Talmud elevate R. Akiba to the position described in the following story:

When Moses ascended to the heavens, he saw God sitting and tying crowns to the letters. Moses asked, 'Who is forcing Your hand?'

God replied, 'A man who will be born in the future, after many generations. His name will be Akiba b. Josef, and he will derive heaps of laws and allusions from every letter and point.'

'Master of the Universe, show him to me,' Moses begged.

God said, 'Turn around.'

Moses turned [and finding himself in R. Akiba's academy] went and sat in the eighth row among students in R. Akiba's class. On realizing that he had no idea what was being said, Moses became uneasy. Only when a student challenged R. Akiba about a certain matter saying, 'How did you derive this teaching?' and Akiba replied, 'It's a Rule we have from Moses at Sinai,' Moses' mind was put at ease.

Moses turned to God, 'If You have someone like this, why give the Torah through me?'

'Be silent!' answered God. 'This is how it arose for Me in the Thought.'

Moses continued, 'Master of the Universe! You've shown me his teaching, now show me his reward.'

'Turn around,' said God. Moses turned and saw R. Akiba's flesh was being weighed out for sale, in the marketplace.

'Master of the Universe!' Moses cried. 'This is Torah, and this its reward?'

'Be silent!' answered God. 'This is how it arose for Me in the Thought.' (*Menachot* 29b)

The Talmud assumes R. Akiba arose in God's Thought before any thought of Moses, and certainly before the sentence 'Let us make man!' was said about R. Shimon. No one challenges the credibility of the Talmud story from a theological standpoint, no matter how many classical paradoxes it provokes.

2 מדרש הנעלם פרשת לך לך מאמר ב' וישמע אברם כי נשבה אחיו: דא"ר יצחק, המלמד תורה לתינוקות, דירתו עם השכינה. והיינו דא"ר שמעון, כד הוה אתי למחמי עולימיא בבי רב, הוה אמר, אזלנא למחמי אפי שכינתא.

3 תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא מציעא דף נט: אמר להם אם הלכה כמותי מן השמים יוכיחו יצאתה בת קול ואמרה מה לכם אצל רבי אליעזר שהלכה כמותו בכל מקום עמד רבי יהושע על רגליו ואמר לא בשמים היא. מאי לא בשמים היא אמר רבי ירמיה שכבר נתנה תורה מהר סיני אין אנו משגיחין בבת קול שכבר כתבת בהר סיני בתורה אחרי רבים להטות.

If you want to know the secrets of the Kabbalah, the mysteries of the Zohar and its ancient Jewish wisdom handed down from teacher to disciple through the ages, it is this: the words you are reading here on this page. God put Himself into our hands, trusting Himself to our creativity and our words. The Torah we write, learn and speak - that is the Face of God, His divine personality and attitude. The Master of all masters of this mystery was none other than R. Israel the Ba'al Shem Tov, who single-handedly smashed the barriers preventing us from imagining God in our image. The Ba'al Shem gave us permission and indeed encouraged us to be One with the God of our own understanding, rather than to sit at the feet of teachers trying to convey their God to us.

Try it!