

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

Rabbi Yohanan, perhaps the most important sage in Eretz Yisrael in Talmud times, took things a step further. He taught that this verse shows the **centrality** of the Oral Torah: "The Holy One Blessed be He **only** made a *brit*/covenant with Israel on account of the things which were taught orally..." (Gittin 60b). What accounts for Rabbi Yohanan's elevation of Judaism's oral tradition at the expense of written tradition? One midrashic account suggests that the non-Jewish world had already taken over the "Bible" as its own. Consequently, the Oral Torah was God's "secret" covenant, preserved exclusively for the Jewish people; it is what gives the Jews their unique identity (See Exodus Rabbah 47:1;3) Another midrash suggests that the great effort required for learning the Oral Torah made it indicative of the effort the Jews were willing to expend in order to maintain its covenant with God. (Exodus Rabbah 47:4)

The late Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbi Gerson Cohen gave voice to this unique attachment to the Oral Torah. He noted that Rabbinic Judaism was responsible for two incredible religious innovations. First, it introduced the idea of universal study as a religious discipline and means for communicating with God. Study and, in particular, the study of Judaism's Oral tradition, was meant to be a way for everyone to commune with God, not just a wealthy or scholarly elite.

The other great innovation of the rabbinic "oral" tradition, according to Cohen, was the idea that Judaism does not have a priestly class. Sure, we still have our "*kohanim*" and "*leviim*", but we do not live our Jewish religious lives vicariously through them. Nor are rabbis supposed to mediate for us between us and God. Religious observance is democratic - the privilege and responsibility of the mitzvot is for every Jew. (See Cohen's essay, "The Rabbinic Heritage" in Studies in the Varieties of Rabbinic Culture)

The embrace of "Oral Torah" as the central expression of the Jewish People's covenant with God rabbinic is what makes rabbinic Judaism unique and our covenant with God special.

For Discussion: How has the learning-focused democratic culture of Rabbinic Judaism influenced Jewish character and the role Jews have played in history?

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Ki Tissa

March 3, 2018 | 16 Adar 5778

Annual | Exodus 30:11-34:35 (Etz Hayim p. 523-546; Hertz p. 352-368)
Triennial | Exodus 31:18-33:11 (Etz Hayim p. 529-538; Hertz p. 356-362)
Haftarah | 1 Kings 18:1-39 (Etz Hayim p. 1286-1289; Hertz p. 999-1001)

D'var Torah: The Gift of Oral Torah

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Very discerning readers of the Torah, the rabbinic sages sought to plumb the depths and uncover the significance of each and every word and expression. Seemingly difficult language provided them with opportunities to thrash out God's will. In Parashat Ki Tissa, a verse describing the giving of the second set of tablets after the sin of the golden calf seems to have particularly intrigued them: "And the Lord said to Moses: 'Write for yourself (*k'tav lekha*) these words, for according to (*al pi*) these words I have sealed a covenant (*brit*) with you and with Israel'" (Exodus 34:27) The idiom "*al pi*" means "according to," but it is built from the word "*pi*" whose literal meaning is "mouth."

The juxtaposition of *k'tav*/write, *pi*/mouth, and *brit*/covenant prompted voices within the rabbinic tradition to discuss the relationship between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah and, in particular, the significance of the Oral Torah. (The Written Torah, or *Torah she'bikkhtav*, is the term given by our tradition for the Tanakh or Bible - a collection of fixed texts subject to an infinite number of creative readings. The Oral Torah, or *Torah she'b'alpeh*, is the term given for the rabbinic tradition which was originally preserved and passed from generation to generation in oral form.) Exodus Rabbah 47:1 reads the inclusion of the word "*pi*" as teaching that the Oral Torah was **also** included in the revelation at Mount Sinai: "When the Holy One Blessed be He was revealed at Sinai to give the Torah to Israel, He spoke to Moshe about Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud, and Aggadah (nonlegal lore) ... and even that which a student will ask his teacher."

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D'var Haftarah: The Test of Loyalty

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Since its very beginnings, the Jewish tradition has had to struggle against idolatry. It might even be said that the real “original sin” for Jews was not to be found in the story of Adam and Eve but rather in the sin of the Golden Calf where the people betrayed God soon after the events of Mount Sinai. The struggle over loyalty to one’s intrinsic identity vs. the pull of the outside world is, in fact, a major element of Jewish identity. It was true in Moses’ day, it was true in the days of Eliyahu HaNavi (Elijah the prophet), and it is equally true today.

Eliyahu Hanavi, not unlike Moses, stood up against the forces of assimilation. It was he who decided to face down the idolatrous prophets of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel when they threatened to overtake belief in God. He fashioned a miraculous test on Mount Carmel that would route the people’s attachment to Baal, a foreign deity. He invited the foreign prophets to a challenge: “Let them place before us two bulls and let them choose a bull, cut it up and place on the wood without putting fire and I will do [the same] for the other bull and I will put it on the wood and I [also] will put no fire. And you call in the name of your god and I will call in the name of the Lord and the one who answers with fire, he will be God.” (23-24)

A midrash reports on the behind the scenes action: “What did Eliyahu do? He said to them: ‘Choose for yourselves two twin bulls from the same mother, who grew up in the same stall. They cast lots on them, one for God and one for Baal. Eliyahu’s bull followed him immediately but the bull for Baal could not be budged by Baal’s worshippers, until Eliyahu said to it: ‘Go with them.’ The bull replied: ‘I and my fellow [bull] came from the same womb, we grew up together. He is sacrificed to God and God’s name is sanctified through him and I am offered to Baal, to anger My Creator. Eliyahu said to it: ‘Go with them. Don’t cause a scene. Just as that bull will sanctify God, so will you.’ The bull replied: ‘I will go only if you hand me over to them.’” (adapted from Tanhuma Masei 8)

What are we to make of this talking bull and its rejection of being offered as a sacrifice to idolatry? It is intended as a subtle reminder that if an animal is capable of loyalty to God, maybe we should be equally capable. In our day, the image of the loyal bull may not be so relatable, but we are very aware of the immense loyalty of our pets, a loyalty we reciprocate with great love and care. Perhaps this text suggests that even our pets can inspire us to deepen our spiritual practice as God’s servants.

For Discussion: What in the relationship of pet and master “works” as a model for how humans should relate to God? What about it does not work?

Parashat Ki Tissa Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

We open with a few more instructions for the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) and then move on to see what the people are doing while Moshe is up on the Mountain receiving the tablets. Here comes the story of the Golden Calf!

- 1) In the early part of the Parasha we meet one more furnishing of the Mishkan: The basin that is placed before the tent (30:17-21). What is placed in it? What is the purpose of it? Who is supposed to use it? When are they supposed to use it? Why do you think that washing hands and feet was given such an emphasis?
- 2) The Golden Calf: Moshe has been up on the mountain for 40 days and nights receiving the Torah. The people turn to Aaron, who was left in charge, demanding ‘a god that will lead us, for this man Moshe that took us out of Egypt – we don’t know what became of him!’ (32:1.) How have the people come to view Moshe? How do we understand this, in light of the many times that they complain to Moshe?
- 3) After Moshe comes down from the mountain, sees the calf, breaks the tables and destroys the calf, it is time to punish those who participated actively in this event. He stands at the gate and calls out – ‘whomever is for The LORD – to me!’ (32:26-29.) Why do think that he asked for volunteers? What are these volunteers asked to do? Why might they agree? What do you think would happen if they would not do this?
- 4) As the episode draws to a close Moshe asks God to understand His ways. Eventually God agrees, partially, and in 34:5-8 is the amazing moment when God comes down. Who speaks the words in vv.6-7? Where do you know these words from? What attributes of God are described? What picture of God seems to emerge?
- 5) When Moshe comes down after another 40 days on the mountain, having written new tables, his face is radiant (34:29-35). Why do you think that the people are scared to approach him when they see him like that?

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