

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

Sof but is symbolized by attributes (also called *sefirot*) like Wisdom, Love, and Justice. The character "God" who wants to kill us is part of *Ein Sof* like all things, but he is something broken; not to be worshipped or imitated. He is not the true God of Wisdom, Love, and Justice.

The Zohar (III 144a IR) reveals this secret in its commentary to Bereishit 6. This chapter tells the story of how God (the character) became sad, regretted creating human beings and so killed them all except Noah and family. The Zohar explains that this cannot be the transcendent God because then it would be inappropriate to speak of God experiencing sadness and regret. The character "God" who destroys humanity is symbolized not by Wisdom, Love, and Justice but by Rage, Pain, and Destruction. This is not "the One we love and imitate."

The Zohar further explains that this (not-) "God" of Rage, Pain, and Destruction is responsible not only for the flood but also for the ongoing desire to kill the Israelites. The point of these stories, in which "God" is not really God, is to teach us the dynamics of Rage, Pain, and Destruction in heaven and on earth. Moshe is the ultimate servant of the true God who knows how to awaken the divine attributes of Wisdom, Love, and Justice by evoking the thirteen attributes of mercy (Shemot 34:9; Bemidbar 14:17-18). We are meant to learn to do the same.

So, the secret is that "God" in the Chumash is not always God. But you already knew that. Anyone who reads the simple meaning of the story understands that Moshe was not supposed to say, "Hey God, great idea, let's kill all the Israelites except me." Moshe was supposed to resist "God" and the reader is meant to identify with him. Think about it for a minute and you'll see that the Zohar is just stating the simple meaning of the text using more complex mystical-philosophical-psychological symbolism. The message is the same.

And it's a radical message. Each time the Bible says that God did X or said Y, you need to ask yourself: the character "God" or God "the One we love and imitate"? For instance, would the God in which you believe command that we exterminate the seven nations that lived in Eretz Yisrael (Devarim 20:16)? By revealing this secret to you, Jewish tradition has entrusted you with a powerful interpretive tool. You and I are the living link in thousands of years of Jewish interpretation. May it be God's will that we use this tool wisely.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Shelah lekha *Shabbat Mevarekhim Hahodesh*

June 29, 2019 | 26 Sivan 5779

Annual (Numbers 13:1-15:41): Etz Hayim p. 840; Hertz p. 623
Triennial (Numbers 15:8-15:41): Etz Hayim p. 851; Hertz p. 631
Haftarah (Yehoshua 2:1-24): Etz Hayim p. 856; Hertz p. 635

D'var Torah: When God is Not God

Dr. Shaiya Rothberg, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

There is a secret in this week's Torah portion. At first, it's shocking but in the end, I think you'll conclude that you already knew it. There is a character in this week's Torah portion called Y-H-V-H who tells Moshe that he wants to kill the Israelites (Bemidbar 14:12): "I will hit them with a plague and eliminate them and make a bigger greater nation from you!" The secret, revealed by the Zohar, is that this character is not God.

But before we get into the secret, a clarification: For the Zohar, everything is God. The aspect of God that the Zohar calls *Ein Sof* / Infinity contains all things. So not only the character Y-H-V-H who wants to kill the Jews is part of God, so are the spies, the grapes they brought back, and if a spy stubbed his toe on a rock on the way home, as Rabbi Moshe Cordovero says (quoted in Daniel Matt's **The Essential Kabbalah**), "Don't say 'this is a rock and not God' – God forbid! – Rather, all existence is God." But if everything is God, how can the character in question not be God?

The answer is that when we as Jews today use the word "God", we don't generally mean the *Ein Sof* of the Zohar but rather something more in the spirit of Maimonides like "the One we love and imitate." For the Zohar, too, we are meant to love and imitate God. But the Zohar uses different names to capture different aspects of God, and what we are supposed to love and imitate is not called *Ein*

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D'var Haftarah: The Gift of Faith

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Rahab is considered a heroine (and a prophetess in the rabbinic tradition) not only because she saved the spies sent by Yehoshua to reconnoiter Jericho, but even more so on account of her inspiring faith in God: "... For we have heard how the Lord dried up the Sea of Reeds for you when you left Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two Amorite kings across the Jordan, whom you doomed. When we heard about it, we lost heart, and no man had any more spirit left because of you, for the Lord your God is the only God in the heavens above and on the earth below." (8-11)

In this verse, Rahab expresses her belief and faith in God, fueled by the miracles God has performed for the children of Israel here on earth. Her praise, based on evidence at hand, is effusive, declaring God to be Master over heaven and earth. This faith inspired the following midrash: "Rabbi Yehoshua from Sichnin in the name of Rabbi Levi: The Holy One Blessed be He said to Rahab: You said: 'for the Lord your God, He is God in the heavens above and on the earth below.' (verse 11) [Your declaration] makes sense when you say that God exists on the earth below [since you have personally experienced His presence], but regarding the heavens above, how can you talk about things that you have not seen with your own eyes? By your life, your progeny will stand and see that which the prophets were unable to see [and will bear witness], as it is written [regarding the prophet Ezekiel]: 'The heavens opened and I saw visions of God' (Ezekiel 1:1) (adapted from Midrash Shmuel 9:6 Lifshitz edition p. 37)

Rabbi Levi asks a poignant question. Rahab's faith is based on things she knows, but the midrash asks rhetorically where is her evidence that God rules on high? Her faith is based on supposition. This faith, Rabbi Levi declares, is a gift, so to speak, that Rahab gives to God. Her reward for this faith in God will be that one of her descendants, the prophet Ezekiel, will actually experience the very proof of this faith. (The sages were known to presume relationships between biblical characters.)

What is faith then? It is trust in God's existence and God's rule even when and where it is a bit of a leap. This midrash asserts that such faith provides a foundation for a relationship with God, and the energy born of this relationship fosters human optimism and synergy which strengthens

both God and humanity. In this way, it is God's gift to us, but also our gift to God.

Parashat Shelah Lekha Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Moshe sends a delegation (often referred to as 'the spies') to tour the land of Israel prior to entering it. Their report causes a panic, at the end of which the people get 40 years in the desert, and only the next generation will enter the land. In the second part, there are several Mitzvot that might have some connection to what happened.

- 1) Moshe sends a 12-person delegation of tribal representatives. For the tribe of Ephraim, he sends Yehoshua son of Nun (13:8), whom we have met as Moshe's assistant. What difficulty might this dual role cause Yehoshua?
- 2) Moshe directs the delegates to investigate several things, among them whether there are trees there (13:20). Why do you think that Moshe asks about this, having already asked if the land is fat or lean?
- 3) The delegation's report to the people apparently creates turmoil. Caleb quiets the people and tells them they can conquer the land (13:30). While Yehoshua will be at his side later (14:6), he is absent from this first counter-assessment. Why do you think that he did not speak up there?
- 4) After being told that they will wander 40 years in the desert and not enter the land, some of the people decide to go ahead anyway, despite warnings that God is not with them (14:40-45). What do you think that these people wanted to say by their actions?
- 5) The parashah ends with the well-known passage requiring us to put *tzitzit* on 4 cornered garments as a reminder of the mitzvot. Why do you think that a mitzvot-reminder is placed in the realm of clothing?

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