

Alumni Study Session
May 13, 2015
From: Barry

On May 13th I led a study session for the MTEI alumni aimed at helping us prepare for Shavuot which will soon be upon us. I am going to try to capture my presentation in these notes, but quite honestly, I was too busy doing the teaching and responding to people to write down some of the really interesting insights that our participants raised in the conversation! So my apologies. I hope that you might be inspired to share them via the MTEI website.

Rather than focusing on the Torah readings that are actually done on Shavuot, I looked at the various texts in Exodus and Deuteronomy that describe the two sets of tablets (of the 10 Commandments)—the ones that Moses smashes when he encounters the rejoicing over the Golden Calf and the second set that Moses receives forty days later. How are the two sets of tablets different? How do texts in the Bible describe these events and how do some of our classical commentaries reflect on these issues?

We began by looking at Exodus 34:1—my question: so what, if anything is the difference between the first tablets and the second tablets?

One thing we see in this verse is that Moses is told by God to carve tablets “like the first”—in Hebrew *ka-rishonim*? What does the “like” actually mean here?

We all learned back in high school that a simile is a form of a metaphor that uses “like” or “as”—but my teacher, the poet Allen Grossman z”l, had the insight that the first point that a simile makes by saying “like” is that the two things are NOT the same. To say “my love is like a red red rose/that’s newly sprung in June” is a lot different from saying “But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.” LIKE may actually point out that they are—NOT THE SAME

So is the verse in Ex. 34:1 saying: “Like” but not “the same as”? Or is it saying in a more casual way, “just like”—that is, exactly the same as....?

Ibn Ezra (12th century) for his part tells us that the “like” here simply means that the tablets are the same as the first-- in size and in the material that they are made of. He then quotes Saadia Ha Gaon (9th cent.) who argues that in fact the second tablets are superior (נכדים) to the first. Ibn Ezra rejects this outright as being ridiculous! How could it possibly be true when both are from God’s hand?

So it appears that within the tradition we have two different views: one (represented by Saadia, let’s say) is that the two sets of tablets were different one from the next—“like” in the mode of Allen Grossman’s notion of simile; the other (Ibn Ezra) that the tablets were really the same, that “like” is to be taken as casual language referring not to some hidden meaning that they really were different from the first.

But Abarbanel (15th century) asks the obvious question: if God had wanted the tablets to be exactly the same as the first, why didn't God make them, as God did for the first tablets? Why did he give the job to Moses as we see in Ex. 34:1 and 34:4?

Perhaps there is a hint to the answer in the language of *psol-leha*. Usually translated as something in the order of "Carve you." This *leha* is an unnecessary addition—one doesn't need it to have the command by God be in place. But these "extras" are often viewed by our traditional commentators as revealing some hidden meaning. This is highlighted by Rashi (11th century), emphasizing that the meaning of this extra word is these tablets are "for you". Ibn Ezra compares this to the command to Abraham *Lekh L'ha* ("Go you") in its language, a point that Rashi doesn't make here but it certainly can bring us back to Rashi's important comment on Genesis 12:1: There Rashi says that the *leha* indicates that God is telling Abraham that leaving his homeland is for Abraham's own benefit—so I suspect that Rashi has that in mind here as well. Namely, these new tablets are *for you, for your benefit*. There is something about the two sets of tablets in which the second are for Moses, or perhaps for all of humanity in a way that perhaps the first were not. Those first tablets were ostensibly for human beings, but in some way we don't quite understand, they weren't; they were in the realm of the divine.

If you had asked me some weeks ago—how does the first tablet differ from the second, I would have said, the first is the work of God and the second is the work of Moses. But actually it is somewhat more complicated than that. In fact like the whole story of the revelation at Mt. Sinai the details are confused and presented in a non-linear fashion as if to help us re-experience what the Israelites experienced at Sinai.

If we look at various the Exodus and Deuteronomy texts to see what's going on we see a good deal of ambiguity over who wrote the second tablets

In the end it appears that in looking at these texts most of the evidence (but not all) leans toward saying that the writing remains God's but what Moses provides in the second set (which wasn't true for the first tables) is *the tablet itself*. That is what he is supposed to carve. Not the message, but the medium upon which that message will be written. What might that imply?

An image of revelation? It seems to me that the Torah here is playing with the distinctions of form and content. What does it mean that the form is the contribution of humanity and the content is the contribution of the divine? That perhaps our very being is inscribed with the word of God, but that at the same time that divine message is necessarily transformed by who we are as people.

Let me conclude with a midrashic reflection:

As I've said this narrative is filled with mystery and bewilderment. Like the smoke and thunder on Sinai, like the orgiastic party with the Golden Calf, we are in an almost dreamlike state of confusion.

I noted in the teaching that the word used for engraved/inscribed, *harut* (חרות) appears only once in the entire Bible, right here in our story. But oddly enough there may be a hidden series of puns that adds to our confusion. These are things I had never noticed before or seen in any of the commentaries. So we have *harut* in Exodus 34 but if we look at the story of the Golden Calf the Torah says (Ex. 32:4) that Aaron received a gift of the golden jewelry from the people and

וַיִּקְרֹב מִזְבֵּח וַיַּצֶּל אֶת בָּשָׂר וַיְעַשֵּׂה

“He took the things from their hands and created it (the Calf) with a *heret* (an engraving stylus) and made it.”

Now *heret* (an engraving stylus) is a word that is spelled with a *tet* at the end, not a *tav*, which is at the end of *harut* (inscribed). So the two words really aren’t connected. But at least to our ears, it certainly echoes *harut*/חרות (inscribed) even though etymologically the words have no relationship. It is as if the Torah is drawing our attention to a connection between the Golden Calf and the tablets.

And there is one other odd internal connection: Who are the Egyptian magicians that consulted with Pharaoh back at the time of the plagues? They are called *Hartumim* a term that IS etymologically related to *heret* meaning engraving stylus. So is the Torah drawing a connection between the magicians of Egypt and the Golden Calf AND the tablets in some elaborate word play? I can only offer this: when our parasha says that the tablets were written *b’etzba elohim*, the finger of God, there is only one other time in the entire Tanakh when the metaphor of the finger of God is used. It is what the *hartumei mitzraim*, the Egyptian magicians, say after the 3rd plague: this is the finger of God!

So what do we make of this? Well, first and probably most importantly, these inner biblical puns and allusions only add to the mystery of the revelation narrative. How to untangle all of these connections? One thing is certain: the Torah seems to be working very hard to communicate how difficult it is to communicate the nature and events of revelation!

And second, all these connections that I’ve just made—how seriously are we to take them? I am finding connections way beyond the plain meaning of the text or the scholarly approaches to the text—the connection of *heret*, *harut* and *hartumim* are merely midrashic with little semantic or even etymological justification as far as I can tell. And yet this way of reading, of making connections is part of the deepest commitment of the tradition. And do we not too have the leeway to play with the text in that fashion? My view is yes with a proviso: only if we do this with self-awareness and humility and maybe even a bit of humor.

Gershom Scholem in his great essay RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND MYSTICISM tells how the Church Father Origen quotes an unnamed early rabbi as saying that “the Holy Scriptures are like a large house with many, many rooms, and that outside each door lies a key — but it is not the right one. To find the right keys that will open the

doors — that is the great and arduous task.” Or to put it another way sometimes the Midrash might even seem like the Peshat.

Have a good holiday!