

Why Israel?

Biblical understanding concerning God's purposes for Israel and the Church

Studies

HOW DO JEWS INTERPRET THE BIBLE ?

By Tzvi Marx

God's Word is Opaque

Does prophetic revelation mean that the divine message is clear and unambiguous? According to the Psalm writer, "the words of the Lord are pure words, silver purged in an earthen crucible, refined sevenfold (shivatayim)," It would seem that all one has to do is listen to or read, the sacred text well, and the message will be as clear as pure silver. How surprising then Rabbi Yannai's comment that "the words of the Torah were not given as clear cut decisions." For with every word which God spoke to Moses, He offered him forty-nine plausible arguments by which the duty to carry out the precept may be confirmed and forty nine no less plausible arguments by which it could be negated. "When Moses asked: how shall we know what to do? God replied that the majority is to be followed." When the majority confirms, you carry it out, when it does not, you do not. (Midrash Psalms 12:7). He arrives the number forty nine by cleverly playing with the word "shivatayim" which actually means fourteen (two times seven, shiva is seven) and reading it as if it says "seven times seven" which shouldn't be taken literally. It means many arguments. This means that unless God's word is much discussed and debated, it remains like raw unrefined silver, unusable. From this we can get an idea of the role of the Jews (through their learned sages as representatives) in mediating what the intent is of sacred scripture as the written testimony of God's communication. Without their mediation, God's word remains opaque.

The Rabbi is not a Prophet

At the same time this opens the door to a lot of different views, each vying for legitimization in the life of the community, in particular regarding its practices, for

which it needs to have a standard that is accepted by all. Unlike a prophet, the rabbi is not pronouncing absolute truths. Unlike the clear cut distinction between true and false prophets (Deut. 18:15-22), rabbis can disagree without being "false" rabbis. "The utterances of both are the words of the living God" (Talmud Erubin 13b) even when for practical issues we choose as community to follow one view setting it as the norm. . What does that majority think of the minority which disagrees with them? Traitors? Heretics? Disbelievers? Not at all!. Only "disagree-ers- bar p'lugta" which is a dignified status, so long as the "disagree-er" follows the ruling of the majority, in practice, if he is part of that community. Even while conforming in practice, he may continue to advocate for change. Should he persuade his colleagues, at a later occasion, they could change the decision. Freedom of thought and speech, coexist together with the practical rule of common law in the rabbinic reality.

Is not the word of the Lord likened to the sparks that flit from the the fire, each spark a gem in its own divinity. "Is not My word like as a fire?' says the Lord; `and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?'" (Jer. 23:29). Concerning this biblical text the Talmudic sages comment: "Just a a hammer is divided into many sparks, so every single word that went forth from the Holy One, Blessed Be He, split up into seventy languages." (Talmud Shabbat 88b). Just as the hammer disintegrates the rock into different pieces, so does the Word of God, itself remaining firm and unchanging, generate different sparks in the minds of its disciples. The medieval French Talmudic -sage, Rabbenu Tam, goes further. "Just as the hammer, when it smites an extraordinary hard object, may itself be split,- so may the Biblical verse, when subjected to the scrutiny of a very keen intellect, split up into different meanings" (Soncino trans. of Talmud Sanhedrin 34a, p. 215, note 9). God's word itself is split, not only are the opinions that it generates divided.

70 Facets to Torah

Would we not risk losing some of that light were to repress the illumination that the one sees which the other doesn't? Are not the words of the Torah not like a diamond with seventy facets, each revealing a brilliance that is unique to its perspective? Are not the words of prophecy contained in the holy book to be penetrated by levels of Peshat (literal, and literary meaning), Derash (interpretive elaborated meaning), Remez (allegorical meaning) and Sod (mystical meaning), an acronym for which is "PaRDeS"- an orchard (Talmud Haggiga 14b). God's word is depicted as located in an orchard

wherein fruits of many spiritual sorts are waiting to be plucked. Paradise, sounds like *pardes*, is a garden awaiting us gardeners if we are willing to get our hands dirty so that we can cultivate the fruits that can only be brought forth by the labor of love that is the rabbi's lot in his preaching which is his teaching.

What are the limits of legitimate rabbinic interpretation? In his ground-breaking book, *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit of Traditional Judaism* (Free Press, 1985), David Hartman writes: "A careful study of rabbinic interpretations and responsa would reveal that it is a near-impossible task to define the limits of interpretative freedom found in the tradition. As the historian Jacob Katz once remarked to me, the limits are simply what the community is in fact prepared to accept as Torah" (p. 8).

Belief and Praxis

Regarding narrative, philosophical, theological, and mystical points of view, there is no need to decide on any majority rule. Each is free to follow his/her conscience since the word of God is rich with possibilities. It is only with regard to practice that one needs a procedure to adjudicate the disagreements between the rabbis. And this is based in the above midrash and reinforced in other sources on the sacred text instruction "after the majority must one incline." (Ex. 23:2). Indeed, even this phrase is lifted out of its context by the rabbinic sages (as any intelligent reader can ascertain) in order to underpin their methodology. This in itself shows with what audacity they approached the Bible and to what extent they felt themselves empowered by God to be the official interpreters of His (opaque) words. In doing so they did not feel rebellious. On the contrary, they felt it as an intimate task of loving God "with all their heart, soul and might" by which His instructions and inspiration might reach the public in their concrete living context.

An Example of How a Jew Reads the Bible

In the Ten Commandments God insists that: "Thou shall have not other gods before Me" because the Lord is a jealous God who "visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of them that hate me" (Ex. 20:3-5), By contrast another biblical teaching clarifies that "every person shall be put to death only for his own sin" but no child for the father's nor a father for a child's sin. (Deut. 24:16).

How are these apparently contradictory descriptions of the divine behavior to be reconciled? Here are two rabbinical midrashim and the strategies for decoding the divine will.

1) Midrash, Numbers Rabba 19:33

“When God said to Moses ‘visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children,’ Moses said to him: ‘Many are the wicked who have begotten righteous men. Shall the latter bear some of the iniquities of their fathers? For example, Terah worshipped images, yet Abraham his son was a righteous man...Is it proper, that the righteous should be punished for the iniquity of their fathers?’”

Note the ethical revulsion expressed in this question that any sensitive person will similarly feel upon hearing that children will be punished for their parents’ behavior. Note also the audacity of Moses to question God’s uprightness. It reminds us of Abraham’s “chutzpa” in criticizing God for thinking to entirely destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah taking no account of the righteous (a possible minority) among the wicked: “Shall the Judge of all the world not do justly?” (Gen. 18:25). And in both cases the midrashic so as the biblical, God does not respond with indignation (as he does towards Job) for the fact that mere mortals are criticizing Him.

“God responded: ‘You have taught Me something! By your life, I shall cancel My words and confirm your; as it says, “The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers; every man shall be put to death for his own sin. (Deut. 24:16)”

Note the bold statement of God being taught something from Moses. In this one sees the feeling of intimate partnership that Israel feels with God, daring even to “correct” Him and being acknowledged to be in the right. The interpretative strategy is tantamount to deleting the import of the Exodus text. Indeed the text is not erased, but it’s relevance is rendered moot.

2) Talmud Berachot 7a

“There is no contradiction between the two verses (Ex. 20:3-5 and Deut. 24:16).. The first verse (Exodus) deals with children who continue in the same course as their fathers, and the latter verse (Deut.) with children who do not continue in the course of their fathers.”

The distinction is drawn between a nuanced God who distinguishes between children who carry on or discontinue the criminal way of life of their parents..

Which interpretation is right? We don't have to decide that. It is for God to know. It is for us to try to find a reasonable way to live with our sacred writings so that they don't undermine our sense of righteousness and fairness so that the God in which we believe lives up to His own ideals “all of Whose ways are justice, righteous and fair is He.” (Deut. 32:4).

An Accessible Tradition

When a rabbi preaches in the synagogue, one thing he knows for sure: he is no "prophet," merely a "rabbi." He is not a "see-er," but one who opens the eyes of others. His authority derives from his knowledge, a knowledge that can be shared and not from any gnosis to which only he and/or a small group of initiates is privy. It is accessible to anyone who has been Jewishly educated- "your elders, ... your little ones, your women, and your stranger... from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water" (Deut. 29:9-10)-, so that he can check the Biblical and talmudic sources which form the heart of the classical sermon. The rabbi inspires by educating. The rabbi is not an indoctrinator of the truth, but a bearer of a tradition that he feels is worthy of being shared and lived by. He wants above all to clarify, to open the discourse of ideas around which the values and norms of Judaism revolve. Sometimes the texts he chooses are narrative, sometimes normative (laws). But always they provide guidance about something that the listener is called upon to do, "what the Lord requires of you; to do...]" (Micah 6:8). The benediction that introduces the doxology, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One" (Deut. 6:4), implores God to "give it into our heart to learn, to teach, to observe, and to do all

To Learn or To Do

The Talmud raises the question: "is the study (of Torah) more important or its implementation?" (Talmud Kiddushin 40b). Is the mere intellectual, spiritual engagement with the word of God or is putting the precepts into practice the highest achievement? Cleverly ambiguous, it is concluded that "learning is greater," but only "because it leads to action."

The rabbi is thus engaged in elaborating on the significance of "the Teaching," the literal meaning of Torah. Nomos- "law" is a misleading translation of Torah. It has led to a false apposition of Moses' teaching as "law" and Jesus' as "love": "For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). Neither is Moses' teaching merely "law" nor is Jesus' teaching merely "love." After all, Jesus is associated both by Matthew and Luke with the teaching, "think not that I have come to bring peace to the earth; it is not peace I have come to bring, but a sword!" And this not directed against external foes, but within the family itself- "for I have come to set son against father, daughter against mother, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law; a person's enemies will be the member of his own household" (Math. 10:34; Luke 22:36). And it is Moses, in the first place, who taught the world the meaning of the word "love," with reference to God (Deut. 6:4), to one's neighbor (Lev. 19:18), and to the stranger (Lev. 19:34), not to speak of "honor your mother and father" (Ex. 20:12), or to extend help your to enemy (Ex. 23:4).

Torah is Instruction for Life

Torah is instruction in the way that the human being can live an ethical, moral and spiritual life as an individual, as a member of a particular covenantal community (Israel), and as a member of the universal community, i.e., the human race which is organized into so many particular collectives- nations, countries, ethnicities and such. The Jew learns through its precepts (mitzvot) how to navigate these different loyalties in a decent way, with the full awareness of the conflicts that inevitably arise in this complex of loyalties. "It is," after all, "the heart that the All- Merciful wants" (rachamana liba ba'i- Talmud Sanhedrin 106b). Despite the difficulty in achieving this ideal, the

it beyond the sea, that you should say, `who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" (Deut 30:12).

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Marx is author *Disability in Jewish Law* (Routledge, 2002) and publicist on Judaism in Holland since 1996 where he edits *Tenachon*, a quarterly magazine on Jewish themes and is on the advisory board of *Berkeley California Judaica* magazine, *Tikkun*. He teaches in various colleges, institutes and study groups in Holland and participates in interreligious activities internationally. Ordained at Yeshiva University, he received his Ph.d at the Catholic Theological University of Utrecht, was formerly Educational Director of the Shalom Hartman Institute (Jerusalem) and director of the Folkertsma Stichting voor Talmudica (Hilversum, Netherlands).