

Is Torah “Cool?”

Talking the Tongue of Torah: Do We Speak its Language?

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What Happened at Sinai?

The words in which the prophets attempted to relate their experiences were not photographs but illustrations, not descriptions but songs. A psychological reconstruction of the prophetic act is, therefore, no more possible than the attempt to paint a photographic likeness of a face on the basis of a song.... [The Bible's] intention is to celebrate the mystery.... As a report about revelation the Bible itself is a *midrash*. To convey what the prophets experienced,... any description of the act of revelation in empirical categories would have produced a **caricature**....

A hasid, it is told, after listening to the discourse of one who lectured to him about the lofty concept of God according to the philosophers, said: “If God were the way you imagine Him, I would not believe in Him.” However subtle and noble our concepts may be, as soon as they become descriptive, namely, definite, they confine Him and force Him into the triteness of our minds. Never is our mind so inadequate as in trying to describe God. The same applies to the idea of revelation. When defined, described, it completely eludes us....

And if you ask: what was it like when the people stood at Sinai, hearing God's voice? the answer will be: Like no other event in the history of man. There are countless legends, myths, reports, but none of them tells of a whole people witnessing and event such as Sinai.

- Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, pp. 185-189

How Do We Understand God's Word in Our World?

Torah Min HaShamayim Be'Aspeklariyah Shel ha-Dorot -

Heavenly Torah, as Refracted Through the Generations

<u>RABBI AKIVA</u>	<u>RABBI ISHMAEL</u>
תורה מן השמים - Torah in Heaven	"לא בשמים היא" - Torah <i>not</i> in Heaven
Mystical views, messianism, a dreamer	Rationalist, grounded - religion of “here and now”
Each crown on letter of Torah has a hidden meaning	13 Principles of Exegesis (no more)
Torah and God: Mysterious, unknowable	"דברה תורה בלשון בני אדם" - Torah speaks in human language

Where do YOU fit in the debate of world-views between R. Akiva and R. Ishmael?

שתי שיטות נשנו בנבואה: (א) משה רבינו אינו אלא כלי והקדוש ברוך הוא משתמש בו, חצוצרה שהא-לקים תוקע בה; הוא אינו פוחת ממה שנאמר לו, ואינו מוסיף עליו. (ב) משה רבינו שותף למעשה הנבואה.... על פי השיטה הראשונה, הנביא הוא "כחומר ביד היוצר, ברצותו מרחיב וברצותו מקצר." פני הנביא כפני הלבנה. כשם שהלבנה מקבלת אור מן השמש, ואין לה אור מעצמה, כך הנביא מקבל הפעולה או ההשפעה האלהית; סביל הוא, ונטול יזמה.

We have been given two approaches to prophecy: (1) Moses our Master was merely a vessel that the Holy and Blessed One used, a trumpet that God played; he neither subtracted from, nor added to, what was spoken to him; and (2) Moses our master was a partner in the matter of prophecy.... According to the first approach, the prophet is "as clay in the hand of the potter, who at will lengthens or shortens it" [Jeremiah 18]. The persona of the prophet is like the appearance of the moon. Just as the moon receives its light from the sun, not having any light of her own, so the prophet receives divine orders or divine inspiration; he is passive, devoid of initiative....

... the schools of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael differed on the issue of whether Moses always transmitted the words of God without any addition, subtraction, or stylistic change. According to the school of Rabbi Ishmael, when Moses used the expression "Thus says the Lord," he did not intend to transmit the word of God with exactitude. "Thus says the Lord means: this is God's will. And Moses was at liberty to alter God's language and to transmit the intent alone. But according to the school of Rabbi Akiva, the words "Thus says the Lord" and "This is what the Lord has commanded" are identical, and they indicate that however Moses heard it, so did he speak it.

According to Rabbi Akiva, all is wondrous, all happens according to the word, all is from on high, and all is according to God's power. The Holy and Blessed One was the one who gave forth, and Moses our Master was the recipient, and no adjustments or compromises were permissible. Moses ascended to Heaven, and at that time his soul was a perfect match to the heavenly thoughts.

- Heschel: *Heavenly Torah* (Tucker, transl.), pp. 479, 484-485

The Potential for a Radical Re-Understanding of How We Sense God

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵךְ אֶל־הָעָם וְקִדְשְׁתֶּם הַיּוֹם וּמָחָר וְכִבְּסוּ שְׂמֹלֹתֵיכֶם: וְהָיוּ נִכְנִיִּים לַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי כִּי אֶבְיִן הַשְּׁלֵשִׁי יָרֵד ה' לַעֲיִגִי כָל־הָעָם עַל־הָרֹם סִינַי: וְהִגַּבְלֹתָ אֶת־הָעָם סָבִיב לְאֹמֶר הַשְּׂמֹרֵי לָכֶם עֲלֹת בְּהָר וְנִגַּע בְּקַצְהוּ כָל־הַנִּגַּע בְּהָר מוֹת יוֹמָת.... וַיֵּרֶד מֹשֶׁה מִן־הָהָר אֶל־הָעָם וַיְקַדֵּשׁ אֶת־הָעָם וַיְכַבְּסוּ שְׂמֹלֹתֵיכֶם: וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־הָעָם הָיוּ נִכְנִיִּים לְשִׁלְשֵׁת יָמִים אֶל־תִּגְשׁוּ אֶל־אִשָּׁה:

Adonai said to Moses, "Go to the people and warn them to stay pure today and tomorrow. Let them wash their clothes. Let them be ready for the third day; for on the third day, Adonai will come down, in the sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai. You shall set bounds for the people round about saying, 'Beware of going up the mountain or touching the border of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death....' Moses came down from the mountain to the people and warned the people to stay pure, and they washed their clothes. And he said to the people, "Be ready for the third day: do not go near a woman."

- *Shemot 19:10-15*

Heschel cites several cases in the midrash which even go further than the Ishmaelian view of the prophet as a partner with God in our reception of the message. In these cases, God stands corrected by Moses:

Said to him [Moses] the Holy and Blessed One: “You have taught Me; I swear by My life that I will nullify My words and confirm yours....”
- Heschel: *Heavenly Torah* (Tucker, transl.), p. 490

- ☆ Is this just *chutzpah*? What does it say about leadership: Divine, prophetic, rabbinic, professional, familial, interpersonal?
- ☆ Is it easier to accept an Akivan viewpoint of simple, unquestioning AWE - or an Ishmaelian approach of an impure transmission of the message? Which is more realistic? More authentic?

Heschel's Poetry as a Window into Prophecy

Everything demands of me: “Feel us!”

Everything begs of me: “See us!”

God lend me Your eyes!

I've come to sow seeing in the world -

To unveil God - Who has disguised Himself in the world -

To wait to give the first cry:

It's becoming light!

- Heschel: “Intimate Hymn,” in *The Ineffable Name of God: Man* (Leifman, transl.), p. 69