

An old Jewish folktale tells of a group of travelers crossing a river on a ferry boat. Among them were various craftsmen carrying the tools of their trade and several well-to-do merchants laden with coins and precious jewels. Each in turn boasted of the worldly success he had attained and of the importance of his craft or business to the community. One of the travelers was an elderly man, modestly dressed, who, unlike the others, spoke little and carried no baggage with him. Suddenly a violent storm churned the waters of the river and capsized the boat, which split in two. The passengers had to jettison their tools, their jewelry, their coins and whatever else they carried in order to ease their load as they swam safely to shore. All loudly bemoaned their fate, the loss of their fortunes and of their means of earning a livelihood. When they arrived at the city which was their destination, they heard news of a famous sage who was visiting the town and who would be teaching and lecturing there. Perhaps, they thought, he can advise us concerning our dire situation. Lo and behold, when they went to seek out the sage, they were surprised to see that he was their fellow passenger from the ferry boat. “What can we do now that we have lost everything?” they asked. “and how come you were carrying nothing with you on the boat?” “What I carry with me is inside, in my mind and in my heart,” the sage replied. “I carry with me Torah, the wisdom of our ancestors, which teaches that all things pass, and yet as long as there is life there is hope, and things that have been lost may also be restored. But only the things of the spirit endure. Torah is my treasure. It can not be taken from me by thieves nor swept away in a natural disaster. It is truly the best merchandise.”

Twice a day in our prayers, morning and evening, in the *beracha* immediately preceding *Sh'ma* we give thanks to God for the gift of Torah, the sign of God's love for the people of Israel. It is Torah which stands at the center of our faith tradition, just as the Ark, the repository of the Torah, is the dominant feature of our sanctuary. It is through the study of Torah and the fulfillment of its teachings that Jews are able to approach and experience the nearness of God. Indeed it has been observed that the word “Judaism” is a term of recent coinage; if a Jew of ancient or Medieval times had been asked to identify his or her religion, he or she would have replied instead with the word Torah.

Torah is central to the purpose of these Days of Awe. We strive at this season to do *teshuvah*, to “turn back”, to overcome our estrangement from God and fellow persons,

and we do so through embodying the ideals of *avodah*, service, and of witness, which are taught to us in the Torah, The *shofar*, the preeminent symbol of Rosh Hashanah, is rich in diverse meanings, but one of the main ones (as we observe in the *shofarot* verses of the Musaf prayer) is the *shofar's* association with *Matan Torah*, the giving of Torah, at Sinai.

But what does Torah mean, what can Torah mean to a Jew of modernity, who is not convinced of the fundamental premise of Jewish Orthodoxy, that the Five Books of Moses were revealed literally word for word by God to our great liberator and lawgiver at Sinai? Modern Biblical scholarship, which questions the unity and Mosaic authorship of the Torah, along with the findings of archaeology, which tell a tale at variance with the Biblical account of the history of ancient Israel and her neighbors, constitute a major challenge to the belief system of Jewish traditionalists. What precisely happened at Sinai; can the Divine (a God, Who exists solely as spirit) make itself known to humankind in the form of audible sounds, of spoken language comprehensible to the human mind? What does it mean to speak of the will of God? Can we truly know the Divine will or confidently identify it with the precepts contained in an ancient text? And what does it mean when we speak of Covenant, the notion that our people, who are but an infinitesimal percentage of earth's population, have a special relationship with the Creator of the universe?

The line that divides Orthodox Judaism from non-Orthodox varieties (religious or secular) is probably the most significant boundary within the Jewish world today. Grappling with the meaning of Torah, Covenant and Divine Will from a non-literalist point of view is one of the prime challenges confronting the non-Orthodox Jewish theologian. Here I acknowledge my indebtedness to the writings of Rabbi Arthur Green. My remarks today are, in large part, based on his thinking. Rabbi Green – scholar, teacher, theologian and deeply spiritual personality – is the expounder of a radical Jewish theology rooted in the teachings of Hasidism and Jewish mysticism, intellectually honest and yet capable of inspiring serious commitment to Jewish learning, practice and belief.

Revelation, as experienced by the prophets of ancient Israel or by the Israelite people as a collective at Sinai, is akin to the creative experience of artists or scientists, gifted with flashes of insight and understanding and with the ability to express them

through various media – spoken, written or plastic. What differentiates the prophet or recipient of Revelation is that understanding and the capacity for expression are accompanied by a sense of love and awe of the Divine. Our Sages debated what exactly it was that the people of Israel heard at Sinai. According to some it was just the first two commandments; the remainder of the Decalogue was transmitted to Moses alone and communicated by him to the people. There is warrant in our tradition for going even further and proposing, as Rabbi Green does, that all that was revealed at Sinai was God's Presence and that the text of the Torah as we have it is Midrash, interpretation, a response *bil'shon b'nai adam*, in the language of humankind, to what was experienced.

Sinai is where the people of Israel made a covenant with God, committing themselves to serving God, witnessing to God's Presence and, through their way of life—which embraces both ritual observance and ethics – making that Presence manifest in the world. The liturgy of the Days of Awe is filled with references to *b'rit*, Covenant. *Zocher ha-b'rit*; God remembers the Covenant and, for its sake, is prepared to temper judgment with mercy and extend forgiveness to us at this season of judgment. To speak of our Covenant with God is not to boast or assert our superiority but rather to proclaim the ongoing validity of our faith tradition, its legitimacy as a path to the Divine, our intention to bind the future generations of our people to the commitments we have made, and our hope that our children and our children's children will indeed carry on and continue the tradition. The idea of Covenant embodies the uniqueness of the way of Torah. Every culture, every religion has its unique features, and it is the uniqueness, that which is specific to a particular tradition, that accounts for the hold that that tradition has over those who affiliate with and participate in it.

Service and witness as enjoined upon us by Torah, by the Tanakh and by the Rabbinic tradition are beautiful and lofty ideals, but the devil, as it has been remarked, is in the details. A life lived in faithfulness to the *halacha* (the Jewish legal tradition) enables us to affirm life and to see the image of God in others; it imbues us with an awareness of the Divine, fosters acts of kindness, and enjoins responsibility to family, to community and especially to those less fortunate than ourselves.

But religion, as we know, has its dark side. How could it not be that in constructing our own system of ultimate meaning, we would not confront the temptation

to denigrate others' beliefs (if they diverge from our own) or to enshrine our own self-regard, our own prejudices and invidious distinctions and project them as Divine writ? Torah is a tree of life; Torah is service of God and of fellow persons undertaken in a spirit of humility, but the text of **the** Torah is replete with passages that grate against our humane sensibilities. Torah is our response to the Presence of God at Sinai and throughout our history, responding to God is our ongoing and eternal mission as Jews, but the received texts contain much that is reflective of the cultural milieu of bygone ages, particularly in regard to the status of women, to sexual orientation, and to toleration of and co-existence with those of other faiths. In recent weeks in Israel , an ultra-Orthodox man (mentally deranged but doubtless influenced by the text of Leviticus) stabbed six people at a Gay Pride parade, killing a teen-age girl, and a venerable church, associated in Christian tradition with a miracle attributed to Jesus, was vandalized by Jewish extremists, the latest in a series of so-called "price tag attacks." The head of a radical extremist Jewish group subsequently justified arson and vandalism of churches on the grounds that Christianity is a form of idolatry and Deuteronomy commands the destruction of sites of idolatrous worship.

What the zealots and the Biblical literalists fail to understand is that Torah has evolved and must continue to evolve. The texts do not exist in a vacuum independent of the history of their interpretation. The Sages were able to employ the tools of interpretation to soften the harshness of Biblical law, to abolish capital punishment for all intents and purposes, to enhance the status of women, and to adjust to the realities of a more complex economy. Over the generations, much that appeared to be commanded or sanctioned by Biblical or Rabbinic texts was allowed by our spiritual leaders to fall into disuse or neglect. Whether the Sages acted intentionally and consciously or whether they truly believed their interpretations were implicit in the Scriptural texts is a question I will leave to the historians. But we must follow in the footsteps of the Sages, whether through interpretive skill or through a forthright "pick and choose" approach. Torah for our generation must reflect our humane sensibilities and must, as Rabbi Green observes, address our contemporary concerns about genocide, weapons of mass destruction and impending ecological crisis. *V'asita hayashar v'hatov*, the general principle of doing that which is upright and good takes precedence over the specific and literal words of the text.

Beyond the question of problematic texts is the tension Dr. Heschel spoke of between *keva* and *kavvana*, the outward actions and behaviors involved in complying with the law and the inward focus, concentration and spirituality that should (ideally) accompany observance. Torah and the legal tradition that derives from it lay out a way of life that covers every aspect of our daily existence and that demands a significant measure of self-discipline practiced on a daily basis. Some would question the need for such a regimen. There are other and less burdensome ways of affirming and reminding myself of my Jewish identity. God can be found in contemplating the starry night-time sky or the beauty of a mountain landscape as much as in the pages of a prayer book. And I can devote myself to the pursuit of justice and the practice of lovingkindness without the need for archaic ritual to remind me of my obligation to do so. Rabbi Green's rejoinder is to acknowledge that some Jews do indeed overemphasize the externals and that discipline in religious life is sometimes attained at the expense of joy. However, without the *keva*, the regularity of a discipline, it is difficult to cultivate spiritual awareness. Moreover, the particular forms enjoined upon us by Jewish tradition – the prayers, the rituals, the holiday observances – have been imbued with a power that comes from the generations that brought to them their sense of God's Presence, a Presence that, with the appropriate *kavvana*, can be accessible to us as well.

In the *beracha* preceding the *Sh'ma* in the morning prayers, we pray that God might implant within us the ability to hear and to understand, to study and to teach, to observe, to do and to fulfill lovingly all the words of Torah. Note that *lilmod*, to study or learn, precedes *l'lamed*, to teach. Rabbi Green stresses the importance that Judaism assigns to the study of Torah, a *mitzvah* in its own right because it leads to the fulfillment of all of the other *mitzvot*. Every Jew is potentially a contributor to the understanding of Torah and a participant in interpreting and shaping its message to the circumstances of time and place. But the prerequisite is study; before we can offer our own insights and interpretations, we must acquire a depth and breadth of knowledge, re-connect ourselves to our spiritual and intellectual roots, and familiarize ourselves with the manner in which tradition has evolved from its earliest beginnings to the present. Or to paraphrase one of my mentors, when we are deciding what to affirm and what to reject, let us do so out of knowledge and not out of ignorance.

May the knowledge of Torah guide us to true repentance and impart to us the awareness that we are connected to a reality far larger than ourselves. May it spur us to fulfill the Divine will, that the image of God in others be honored and respected and that the Divine Presence, first revealed at Sinai, be made manifest to all in the deeds of kindness and righteousness we perform. The Psalmist proclaimed *shalom rav l'ohavei Toratecha*, that those who love the Torah would have great peace. May 5776 be a year of health, of happiness and of peace.