

דבר אל בני ישראל ויקחו

In Parashat Terumah and the following two parashiyot, God gives Moses detailed instructions for the design and construction of the Mishkan, the portable sanctuary that accompanied the Israelites on their journey from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land.

At the heart of the Mishkan was the Holy of Holies, the chamber containing the Ark. The Ark was a chest containing the two Tablets of the Covenant. It was covered with a lid adorned with two three-dimensional figures of cherubs.

What did the Ark signify to our ancestors? What did it resemble in their experience? Prof. Nahum Sarna, in his book *Exploring Exodus*, observes that scholars have found the greatest similarity to the Ark, and to the entire portable sanctuary, in the *Utfah* and the *Qubbah*, two Arabic artifacts used as far back as Biblical times.

The *Utfah* is "a tentlike structure made of thin wooden boards and having a domed top. It is fastened on the baggage saddle of a camel...Allah is believed to reside in it and supernatural properties are attributed to it. When the camel carrying it begins to move, the entire tribe follows suit, and where it kneels is where the camp is pitched. At critical moments in battle the *Utfah* is brought out to ensure victory," just as the Ark was in the days of Samuel [1 Samuel 4.3ff.].

Even older than the *Utfah*, Prof. Sarna reports, "is the pre-Islamic *Qubbah*, which was a small portable tent shrine constructed of red leather...[It] con-

Terumah

Exodus 25.1-27.19

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דָּבַר אֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ דָּבָר אֵחֶר. TELL THE ISRAELITE PEOPLE TO BRING ME GIFTS. [EX. 25.1-9]. At an education Shabbat, I will be reading from Exodus Chapter 25.1-9. "THE LORD SPOKE TO MOSES, SAYING: TELL THE ISRAELITE PEOPLE TO BRING ME GIFTS; YOU SHALL ACCEPT GIFTS FOR ME FROM EVERY PERSON

the Tabernacle. The Israelites gave these gifts willingly, thereby building the Tabernacle and causing God's presence to dwell among them. Our students are faced with a task much more daunting and overwhelming than that of building a Tabernacle. They must create a future

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tained the idols and cult objects of the tribe and was often mounted on the back of a camel. When the tribe pitched camp, the tent shrine was unloaded and set up beside the tent of the sheik. People would come to it seeking oracles," as was regularly done at the Ark of Israel.¹

These parallels suggest that the Ark was similar to a small, portable shrine, which in contemporary nomadic culture was used to house the idol representing the deity. But there was a crucial difference: in the Israelite Ark was no idol, but instead the two Tablets of the Covenant containing the first statement of God's law, the Ten Commandments. In Judaism this implies that the Ten Commandments, and later the entire Torah, take the place of idols as the representatives of God's presence. Representations of God's person are banned and replaced by texts containing statements of His

will. With the giving of the Torah and the prohibition of idols, the study of the Torah and its commandments becomes the means of access to God.

This distinction is dramatically represented by the way we treat the Torah scroll in the synagogue. It is given the treatment which in other cultures is reserved for monarchs, or popes or, *le-havdil*, for icons and idols. Like all of these, the Torah is carried in procession when it is taken out of the Ark and when it is returned there after the reading. Like a monarch, an Ashkenazi Torah is dressed up in a mantle, belt, and crown, and even has a hand (the Torah pointer). The Torah is housed in an Ark that, in traditional Jewish sources, is called the *heikhal*, the "palace," and we pray facing this Ark. In Japan, there are temples constructed exactly like synagogues, with an ark at the front—the difference being that the

Japanese ark contains an idol. The similar treatment of the Torah and statues is even more obvious in the case of oriental Torah scrolls, those of Jewish communities from the Middle East and further east, which resemble portable Japanese shrines. An oriental Torah scroll is mounted in a hard case resembling a building. When the Torah is read, it stands vertically on the reading table, with the two sections of the front opening sideways on hinges to expose the scroll. The portable Japanese shrines are virtually identical to these Torah cases, but inside is not a scroll, but an idol. The Ark and oriental Torah cases are thus an artistic denial of idolatry in favor of the Torah. Ashkenazi and oriental Torahs signify what the biblical Ark indicates: access to God is not gained by means of idols but through the Torah and its commandments. In other words, the Torah and its commandments are

more than a book and a series of rules and customs; they are a way of establishing a relationship with God and coming to know the Deity. These inferences are supported by statements in Talmudic literature that speak of the role of the Torah as God's representative. According to *Pirkei Avot* 3.2, "If two sit together and exchange words of Torah, the Divine Presence abides between them." In the *Sifrei*, the rabbinic commentary on Deuteronomy, Rabbi Meir explains the meaning of *v'Ahavta* in the following way: Why does *v'Ahavta* begin with "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD" and then add: "AND THESE WORDS WHICH I COMMAND YOU TODAY SHALL BE ON YOUR HEART..." Because "YOU SHALL LOVE" by itself does not tell us *how* to love God; therefore the Torah adds: "THESE WORDS SHALL BE ON YOUR HEART," meaning: take to heart these words—God's commandments and actions described in the Torah—for

Synopsis: The parashah begins with instructions about the gathering of materials needed to outfit the sanctuary. These gifts are to come from public contributions. Detailed instructions follow about: the ark (אָרוֹן *aron*); the covering (כַּפֵּרֶת *kapporet*); the cherubs (כְּרוּבִים *keruvim*); the table (שֻׁלְחָן *shulhan*); the lampstand (מְנוֹרָה *menorah*); the coverings; the boards (קְרָשִׁים *kerashim*); the inner curtain (פָּרֹכֶת *parokhet*); the outer curtain (מַסְכֵּה *masakh*); the altar (מִזְבֵּחַ *mizbeah*); and finally, the court (חֲצֵר *hatzer*).

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that is how you come to know the Creator and adhere to His ways.² The point is clarified further by the *Sifrei's* comment on the command to "CLING TO GOD" [Deut. 11.22]: "How is it possible for a human to ascend to heaven and cling to God, Who is like fire? What the Torah means is: cling to the scholars of the Torah and their students. Interpreters of *aggadot* say: If you want to know The Creator, learn *aggadah*, that is, the non-*halakhic* Bible interpretations of the rabbis—for that is how you get to know God."³ By referring to scholars of the Torah and *aggadic* interpreters, these comments tell us that Torah, as a means of knowing God, means all of Torah—the Talmudic interpretation of the Torah as well as the original text.

The Torah is not regarded as the only way to learn about God. Maimonides, for example, held that studying God's works of creation—in other words, studying science—was another avenue for knowing

God.⁴ But the Torah and the mitzvot are the most explicit and indispensable method we have.

How does this work? How do we come to know God through the Torah and the commandments?

(1) On the simplest level we learn about God's qualities and His will from the way they are depicted in the Torah. The story of creation teaches that God is beyond nature, from which we learn that we are not to deify and worship anything within nature. From the same story we learn of God's great solicitude for humanity, from which we learn that He is not indifferent to humanity and its aspirations. From His anger at human sinfulness we learn of His passionate involvement in the life of people. From God's discussion with Abraham about Sodom, we learn that He does not invoke power or authority to exempt Himself from objective standards of justice. From His willingness to forgive the penitent we learn that His aim is not to punish

wrongdoers but to reform them. From the story of Moses at the burning bush we learn of His patience and His willingness to adjust God's own plans to the weaknesses of His human partners. From the laws of the Torah we learn of God's love of justice. From the prophets' condemnation of the sacrifices of those who oppress the poor we learn that God hates religious hypocrisy. From the story of the Exodus, and from our annual reenactment of that story at the Seder, we learn of His aim that people be free.

The branch of Jewish learning that excels at learning about God's qualities from the Bible is *aggadah*. A lovely example is provided in an *aggadah* quoted by Rashi in his commentary on the story about the three angels that visited Abraham [Gen. 18.1ff.]. The Torah says that God appeared to Abraham when Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent at the hot time of the day. Rabbi Hama bar Hanina noted that in the previous chapter Abraham had

been circumcised, and so he reconstructed the following sequence of events: This was the third day following Abraham's circumcision, and God's visit was an act of *Bikkur Holim*, the mitzvah of visiting the sick. The reason for the heat was as follows: God knew that Abraham loved to perform the mitzvah of *Hakhnasat Orhim*, welcoming guests, and He feared that if guests came by while Abraham was still sore, he would cause himself great discomfort providing hospitality. So God removed the sun from its sheath so that it would blaze hotter than usual and prevent travelers from going out on the road and passing by Abraham's tent. But the plan backfired and Abraham was grieved because he had no guests. Therefore God sent three angels to him, disguised as persons, so that Abraham could have the pleasure of performing the mitzvah. The story, of course, is sheer fiction, but it expresses a perception of God's tenderness that is a genuine outgrowth of the Torah,

and it shows how the rabbis used the text of the Torah as a vehicle for teaching the nature of God.

(2) This story also hints at another way in which the Torah and the commandments teach us about God. The rabbis view the commandments as emulations of God's qualities. Just as He visits the sick Abraham, so are we commanded to visit the sick. We are commanded to clothe the naked because He does so, to bury the dead, to comfort mourners, to give charity, to be merciful to those who offend, to be gracious, and to be just—all because He does so. In this way, too, the Torah and the commandments represent God to us. By studying and performing them, we learn about Him.⁵

The Torah is regarded as so effective a representative of God that the rabbis went so far as to say that if a choice had to be made between abandoning God and abandoning the Torah and commandments, God would prefer that Jews abandon Him and observe the Torah, since study-

ing the Torah and practicing its commandments would lead them back to Him.⁶

(3) There is yet another way in which the Torah represents God. It is a criterion by which to judge the claims of those who claim to speak on God's behalf. Since the cessation of prophecy at the end of the Biblical period, the highest authority in Judaism has been that of the *halakhic* scholars, the masters of Jewish law. The extent of their authority is indicated in the Talmudic story:

Rabbi Eliezer once used all possible arguments to validate a legal opinion of his, but his colleagues would not agree with him. So he said to them: "If the law is as I say, this carob tree shall prove it." The carob tree then uprooted itself and jumped 150 feet! But Rabbi Eliezer's colleagues said to him: "We don't bring proof from a tree."

So he said to them: "If the law is as I say, the canal will prove it." The waters of the canal then flowed backwards. But Rabbi Eliezer's colleagues said to him: "We don't bring proof from a canal."

So he said to them: "If the law is as I say, the walls of the Academy shall prove it." Then the walls began to teeter, but Rabbi Joshua shouted at them: "If scholars debate the law, what has it to do with you?" So the walls didn't fall, out of respect to Rabbi Joshua, but they did not straighten up again, out of respect to Rabbi Eliezer. They remained tilted from that time on.

Then Rabbi Eliezer said: "If the law is as I say, it shall be proven from heaven." Then a small voice from heaven declared: "What business have you arguing with Rabbi Eliezer? The law is always in accordance with his opinion!"

At this, Rabbi Joshua jumped to his feet and quoted the Biblical verse "IT IS NOT IN HEAVEN" [Deut. 30.12]. What is the meaning of 'IT IS NOT IN HEAVEN'? Rabbi Jeremiah said: The Torah was already given to us at Mt. Sinai, and since that time we pay no attention to voices from heaven, for at Mt. Sinai it was written in the Torah: 'You are to make legal decisions by majority vote.'"

Afterwards, Rabbi Nathan met Elijah and asked him: "What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do when that debate took place?" Elijah answered: "God smiled and said, 'My children have defeated me, my children have defeated me!'"

In this story God acknowledges that man cannot live on the basis of continuing communications from heaven. God made a record of the basic principles of His will for the Jewish people in the Torah, and from then on decisions on how to conduct ourselves must be made in conformity with the Torah as interpreted by the majority vote of each generation's

experts on its legal interpretation. It is very important to note the stress on the principle of decision by majority. No single authority, no matter how learned or charismatic, can carry the day on his own. There is no room for the extremist whose teachings are so inconsistent with the Torah's values, as interpreted in Jewish tradition, that they cannot command the assent of a majority of qualified halakhic scholars.

These three avenues illustrate how the Torah serves as God's representative to the Jews: through the study of its contents, the performance of its commandments, and as a repository of God's will guiding Jewish behavior and setting limits on what may be claimed as God's will.

Modern insights into the symbolism of the Ark help us to see that the physical decoration of the Torah and the way in which we treat it reflect its role in Judaism as our chief avenue to God. This symbolism is well worth remembering each time we see the Torah carried in procession. This role of the Torah is beautifully expressed in a prayer that forms

part of the *Birkhot ha-Shahar*, the prayer known from its opening words as *ve-ha'arev-na*:

O Lord our God, please make the words of Your Torah pleasant in our mouths and in the mouths of Your people Israel, so that we and all our descendants may all come to know Your name [that is, to know Your nature] and to learn Your Torah for its own sake. Praiseworthy are You, O Lord, Who teaches the Torah to Your people Israel. ●

1. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken, 1986), pp. 198-99.
2. *Sifrei Deuteronomy* 33; thus interpreted by Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 3.28, 52; *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, positive no. 3; *Sefer Ha-Hinukh* sec. 118.
3. *Sifrei Deuteronomy* 49. Cf. also *Midrash Tehillim* 105.1.
4. *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2.2.
5. Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1961), pp. 199ff.; *Mekhilta Shirta*, 3; *Sifrei Deuteronomy* 49; Maimonides, *Hilkhot De'ot* 1.6.
6. *Yerushalmi Hagigah* 1.7, p. 76c; *Eikhah Rabbati*, proem 2 (ed. Buber, pp. 2-3); *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 15 (ed. Mandelbaum, p. 254).
7. *Bavli, Bava Metsia* p. 59b.