

## On How To Read Torah

In Rabbi Ishmael's school it was taught: "Is not My word like...a hammer that breaks a rock to pieces?" (Jeremiah 23:29). As the hammer splits the rock into many splinters, so will a scriptural verse yield many meanings.

— *Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 34a (originally 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Land of Israel)*

Ben Bag Bag would say: Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it; reflect on it and grow old and grey in it and do not turn away from it, for there is no better way than this.

— *Wisdom of the Sages 5:22 (3<sup>rd</sup> century, Land of Israel)*

Once, as Ben Azzai was expounding the Scriptures, flames blazed up around him, and being asked whether he was a student of the mysteries of the 'Chariot of God,' he replied: "I string together, like pearls, the words of the Torah with those of the Prophets, and those of the Prophets with those of the Hagiographers; and therefore the words of the Torah rejoice as on the day when they were revealed in the flames of Sinai."

— *Leviticus Rabbah, xvi (7<sup>th</sup> century, Land of Israel)*

A king of flesh and blood had two servants whom he loved completely. He gave each of them a measure of wheat and a bundle of flax. The intelligent one what did he do? He wove the flax into a cloth and made flour from the wheat, sifted it, ground it, kneaded it, and baked it and arranged it on the table, spread upon it the cloth and left it until the king returned. The stupid one did not do anything. After a time, the king returned to his house and said to them:

"My sons, bring me what I gave you." One brought out the table set with the bread and the cloth spread upon it, and the other brought the wheat in a basket and the bundle of flax with it. Oh what an embarrassment! Oh what a disgrace! Which do you think was most beloved? The one who brought the table with the bread upon it... (Similarly) when God gave the Torah to Israel, God gave it as wheat from which to make flour and flax from which to make clothing through the rules of interpretation.

— *Midrash Eliyahu Zuta (10<sup>th</sup> century)*

Rabbi Shim'on said,  
“...Come and see: There is a garment visible to all.  
When fools see someone in a good-looking garment they look no further.  
But the essence of the garment is the body;  
the essence of the body is the soul.

“So it is with Torah.  
She has a body: the commandments of the Torah,  
Called ‘the embodiment of Torah.’  
This body is clothed in garments: the stories of this world.  
Fools of the world look only at that garment, the story of Torah;  
They know nothing more.  
They do not look at what is under that garment.  
Those who know more do not look at the garment,  
but rather at the body under the garment.  
The wise ones, servants of the King on high,  
Those who stood at Mount Sinai,  
Look only at the soul, root of all, real Torah....

“...Woe to those who say that Torah is merely a story!  
They look at the garment and no further.  
Happy are the righteous who look at Torah properly!  
As wine must sit in a jar, so Torah must sit in this garment.  
So look only at what is under the garment.  
All those words and all those stories are garments.”  
—*Zohar 3:152a (13<sup>th</sup> century, Spain)*

...[T]he study of scripture is a venerable spiritual discipline in Judaism that has produced (during more than two millennia) a multifaceted system of Bible interpretation. The results are now not simply received as so many solutions to the plain sense of the text, or to its legal, allegorical, or even mystical character. Rather, these types of interpretation are understood to foster diverse modes of attention to textual details, which in turn cultivate correlative forms of attention to the world and to divine reality. In this way, a network of correlations is proposed between forms of reading texts, by attunement to their nuances and meanings, and forms of reading external reality, by attunement to its manifold details and their significance; and between (both) these various forms and modalities of divine perception, by cultivating types of theological consciousness and attunement. Textual study thus becomes a discipline of ethical and spiritual self-cultivation; and scripture is transformed thereby from an authoritative corpus of received laws, beliefs, and memories into an authorizing matrix for ongoing meditative reflection and reflective action.

— *Michael Fishbane, Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology page xi (2010, Chicago)*

It's a simple, clear sentence. But, in Torah Hebrew, nothing is simple. Tradition regards the words of Torah as the speech of God, and God's speech as the most multilayered, meaning-laden speech possible. To understand even one sentence, we have to look from at least 70 different perspectives.

— *Rabbi Laura Duhan Kaplan (Vancouver, B.C., 2013)*