

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

AND THE NUMBER ONE MO MEME IS...

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Designers of Modern Orthodox curricula need to think not only about ideas but about how to embed those ideas in memorable textual readings. What are the ten best Modern Orthodox *vorts* on the *parshah*? What are the three standard Modern Orthodox *divrei Torah* to give at a *sheva berakhot*?

One of my top 10 MO memes is that G-d stopped the angels from singing when He unsplit the Reed Sea. "The products of My hands are drowning in the sea, and you seek to sing?!" This sentence and setting beautifully capture and affirm the tension between universalism and particularism so central to Modern Orthodoxy. G-d loves us Jews, and protects us Jews, and yet He sorrows whenever His relationship with us comes at the expense of His other human creations.

So it was deeply upsetting to me when, in my freshman year at YU, I heard Meir Kahane claim that this midrash was a liberal invention, and that the *midrash* actually spoke of the angels being refused permission because the Jews were not yet fully across.

I found the overall experience of Kahane, in particular his capacity to insult his followers without consequence, simply terrifying. It gave me a lasting distrust and fear of charismatics and charismatic education. But what if he was right, and one of the foundations of my religious identity was hollow? Disliking a Torah claim is not sufficient grounds for rejecting it.

Here is the version of the Midrash found in Tanchuma Beshallah 13.

ד"א: "אז ישיר"

בשעה שהיו ישראל חונים על הים, באו מלאכי השרת לקלס להקב"ה, ולא
הניחן הקב"ה

שנאמר "ולא קרב זה אל זה וגו'"

ואומר "וקרא זה אל זה" (ישעי' ו ג)

למי היו דומיין?

למלך שנשבה בנו. לבש נקמה באויביו והלך להביא אותם, ובאו הבריות

לומר לו אימנן

אמר להן: לכשאני פודה את בני אתם מקלסין אותי!

כך-

ישראל היו נתונים בצרה בים. באו מלאכי השרת לקלס להקב"ה, נוף בהם
אמר להם הקב"ה: בני נתונים בצרה, ואתם מקלסין?! ...?

"Then did (Mosheh and Bnei Yisroel) sing" –

At the time that the Jews were camped by the sea, the Ministering Angels came to extol the Holy Blessed One, but He did not give them leave, as Scripture says (Exodus 14:20): "they did not near (karav) one to the other . . .",

and it says (Yeshayahu 6:3) "and they called (kara) one to the other".

To whom were they comparable?

To a king whose son was captured. He dressed for revenge against his enemies and set out to rescue his son, and the populace came to recite his glory.

He said to them: "When I redeem my son you may extol me!"

So –

The Jews were in peril by the sea. The Ministering Angels came to praise the Holy Blessed One, but He angrily rebuked them.

He said to them: "My children are in danger, and you are extolling Me?!"

It is indisputable that in this version G-d stops the angels from singing because the Jews are still in trouble, not because the Egyptians are drowning. The whole point is that G-d has not yet intervened, and so the Egyptians are not yet drowning. The clear implication is that the angel's singing would be premature rather than inherently inappropriate.

On *Megillah* 10b and *Sanhedrin* 39b the text is as follows:

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מאי דכתיב (שמות י"ד) "ולא קרב זה אל זה כל הלילה?"

בקשו מלאכי השרת לומר שירה

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: 'מעשה ידי טובעין בים, ואתם אומרים שירה!'

What is meant by the verse "and they did not draw near one to the other all that night"?

At that time the Ministering Angels sought to say the Song before the Holy Blessed One.

The Holy Blessed One said to them: "The products of My hands are drowning in the sea, and you are saying the Song before Me!?"

Only the Egyptians were ever drowning in the sea. Furthermore, the Talmud in both contexts uses this statement to support the claim that G-d does not rejoice at the downfall of the wicked, although he allows those saved from the wicked to rejoice; thus Moshe and Israel sing, but the angels cannot. So clearly the Talmudic version cannot be read the way Kahane suggested.

But which version is correct?

The *Tanchuma* is almost certainly the original, because the proof-text – “they did not draw near one to the other” – discusses the night before the Jews even enter the sea, let alone before G-d drowns the Egyptians in it.

On the other hand, the *Tanchuma* cannot fit in the *Bavli* at all! So the “Modern Orthodox version” was accepted by the editors of the Talmud. In other words, if this version is a liberal invention, we can only conclude that the compilers of these *sugyot*, the *stammes d'gemara*, were liberals. The weakness of the exegetical argument strengthens the authority of its substance.

I would be very comfortable religiously if my universalism places me with the editors of the Talmud against Meir Kahane.

I want to suggest further that applying the phrase “products of My hands” to Gentiles is a Talmudic Modern Orthodox meme. Here is my evidence, from *Sanhedrin* 98b. The context is a discussion of why Joshua’s conquest of Israel was supported by miracles, whereas Ezra’s return was not:

"שאלו נא וראו אם ילד זכר - מדוע ראיתי כל גבר ידיו על חלציו כילודה,

ונהפכו כל פנים לירון" -

מאי "ראיתי כל גבר"?

אמר רבא בר יצחק אמר רב: מי שכל גבורה שלו;

ומאי "ונהפכו כל פנים לירון"?

אמר רבי יוחנן: פמליא של מעלה ופמליא של מטה, בשעה שאמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: 'הללו מעשה ידי והללו מעשה ידי, היאך אאבד אלו מפני אלו'?

(*Yirmiyah* 30:6) "Investigate please, and see, whether a male is giving birth – why do I see every man with his hands on his loins like a birthing woman, and all faces turned green?"

What is the referent of "I see every man"?

Said Rava bar Yitzchak said Rav: He to Whom all male virtue belongs;

And what is the referent of "and all faces turned green"?

Said Rabbi Yochanan: The familia above and the familia below, at the time when The Holy Blessed One said: 'These are the products of My hands, and these are the products of My hands – how can I destroy these for the sake of those?'

Rashi identifies the two *familias* as the angels and the Jews, and makes the contextual meaning clear:

"מי שכל הגבורה שלו" - הקדוש ברוך הוא מצטער בעצמו כילודה ואומר בשעה שמעביר העובדי כוכבים מפני ישראל: 'היאך אאבד אלו מפני אלו'?

"To Whom all male virtue belongs" – *The Holy Blessed One is Himself in pain like a birthing woman and says, at the time that he removes the idolaters for the sake of the Jews, "How can I destroy these for the sake of those?"*

Orthodox subcultures replicate successfully when their key ideas can be captured in viral rabbinic soundbites. Think “*bechadash assur min baTorah*,” or “*avira d'Eretz Yisrael makbikim*.” Each of these can be funny to sophisticates. After all, the Chatam Sofer’s use of the first phrase to oppose creativity was a creative pun, and contemporary Israel programs cite the second phrase to prove that true Torah learning can only take place in Israel, when the quote itself is taken from the Babylonian Talmud! But they are nonetheless the engines of cultural success.

The idea that G-d’s love of Jews does not exclude His regarding all humanity as His handiwork, and that He cries when forced to choose between them, is demonstrably the intent of *Chazal*, albeit not the intent of *Shemot* 16:20. One measure of a Modern Orthodox day school’s success should be whether every student knows the sentence מעשי ידי טובעים בים and its attendant *vort*.

I invite nominations for the other nine members of the top 10.

Shabbat Shalom!

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