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JORGE LUIS BORGES' "LIFE OF MOSES": A REVIEW

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"The night I was bar mitzvah," the Mistakener Ilui often told his students, "an angel – or maybe a demon - came to me in a dream and offered me a choice of yeshivas. I could either go to a place where I already understood everything, or to a place where I would understand nothing. I chose the first; you chose the second. I envy you." None of the students understood what he was saying. But they wrote the story down anyway. I have read the story many times now, and sometimes I think I understand him.

A biography of my grandfather's rebbe, Rav Meir Shapiro ("the Lubliner"), contains a chapter titled "From Ilui to Gaon." I'm sure the author had no idea how devastating the Mistakener would find it. Most yeshiva prodigies happily carry the label "ilui" into old age without any sense that they could have become something more, and they are almost always correct. But the Mistakener was unhappy, and he was also correct.

I met him once, at a joyous occasion – his student's daughter was marrying my student. Of course I seized the opportunity to schmooze in learning with a famous ilui. The parshah was Ki Tisa, and like every other Modern Orthodox rabbi, I was preparing a shiur about the aggadeta on Menachot 29b, Moshe Rabbeinu time-travelling to Rabbi Akiva's classroom. So I asked him if he had any *chiddushim* about it. He said: "I have no chiddushim. But some of what I find obvious might be new to you, so I'm happy to schmooze." We talked for about fifteen minutes before he had to go. As soon as he left, I tried desperately to write everything down before it went out of my head. Here are some of my notes:

Said Rav Yehudah said Rav:

At the time that Moshe Rabbeinu went on High, he found the Holy Blessed One sitting tying crowns to the letters. He said to him: "Master of the universe, who is meakev al yadkha?"

The word *meakev* literally means to prevent, to delay. The phrase *meakev al yad* refers specifically to a restraint on someone else's legal authority, for example by enforcing the conditions of a lease. What does this have to do with tying crowns on letters? Let's look at two other places where the phrase appears with reference to Hashem.

Bava Basra 16a:

Said Rava: Iyov tried to exempt the entire universe from Judgment. He said before Him: Master of the universe, You created the ox with split hooves, and You created the donkey with sealed hooves; You created Gan Eden, and You created Gei Hinom; You created the righteous, and You created the wicked: who is meakev al yadkha?

Bereshis Rabba 49:

Said R Yehudah:

(Avraham Avinu said to Hashem): When You sought to judge Your world, You gave it into the hands of a duumvirate, as foreexample Remus and Romulus, that if one of them sought to do something the other would be meakev al yado; but You, because You (are "the judge of all the land" and therefore) have no one to be meakev al yadkha, will You not do justice?!

Iyov argues that Hashem's absolute power should enable Him to avoid doing justice, while Avraham argues that His absolute power should not enable Him to avoid doing justice. This seems like a blatant contradiction.

But it isn't a contradiction at all. Iyov and Avraham both try to stop Hashem from punishing in a way they see as substantively unjust. Iyov protests Hashem's use of procedural justice – the forms of law, due process – to accomplish substantive injustice, because really He can only blame Himself for the existence of wickedness. Avraham protests the substantive injustice of punishing the righteous together with the wicked.

Iyov and Avraham both fail as defense attorneys. Iyov fails because his friends correctly answer that human beings have free will: "Hashem created the Evil Inclination, and He created Torah as its remedy." We don't know for sure why Avraham fails, but Hashem destroys Sodom despite his objection.

Avraham's argument is really dangerous and astonishing. Does he *chas veshalom* really want Hashem to appoint a co-Master of the universe?! What he means is that Hashem should allow the Attributes of Justice/*Din* and Mercy to balance each other in His relationship with the universe, and he thought that Sodom was being judged by pure *Din*. (He was wrong; under pure *Din*, Lot and his unmarried daughters would not have survived.) Similarly, Iyov was wrong to argue for a world without *Din* at all.

So tying the crowns onto the letters must be a question of *din* and *ruchamim*.

Hashem replies to Moshe that the crowns are necessary because Rabbi Akiva will learn mounds of laws from them. He takes Moshe to Rabbi Akiva's *beis medrash*, where Moshe understands nothing, and grows depressed, until Rabbi Akiva answers a student's question about the source of one law by saying that it is a tradition received by Moshe from Sinai. Moshe then turns to Hashem and asks: "You have such a man, and You give the Torah through me =

al yadi? Hashem replies: “Be silent! So it arose in thought before Me.” Moshe asks to see Rabbi Akiva’s reward, and is shown his flayed flesh being weighed in the marketplace. He protests to Hashem: “This is Torah, and this is its reward?!” Hashem replies again: “Be silent! So it arose in thought before Me.”

The phrase “arose in thought” is famously cited by Rashi in his explanation of why the first narrative of Creation in Bereishis refers to Hashem as Elo-him, while the second narrative uses the compound Hashem E-lohim.

It initially arose in thought to create it with the attribute of Din exclusively. He saw that the universe would not last, so he prioritized the attribute of Din and partnered it with that of Mercy.

The Maharal in Gur Aryeh explains that according to Rashi, Hashem would still prefer a world of pure Din, if it could only last, and therefore “Fortunate is the person who can withstand the Attribute of Din, and has no need for Mercy.” Rav Dessler makes the connection to Rabbi Akiva: Indeed, the reward for his Torah was the opportunity to live, however briefly and painfully, in the world of pure Din.

Rabbi Akiva himself understood this. That’s why we read on Berakhot 61b that he greeted martyrdom as an opportunity to fulfill “*You must love Hashem with all heart, wealth, and nefesh* – meaning even if He takes your *nefesh*.” But we also read there that the angels reacted by asking Hashem: “This is Torah and this is its reward?!” The angels did not understand that the reality of punishment was an essential part of Rabbi Akiva’s reward.

The author of this aggadeta wants to make sure that we understand the connection. The dramatic climax of the story in Berakhot is Rabbi Akiva reciting the Shema while being tortured, and “his *neshamah* departed at the word *echad*.” Here, Hashem tells Moshe Rabbeinu here about Rabbi Akiva by saying “אדם אחד יש שעתיד להיות בסוף כמה דורות” “there is an *echad* person who will be after many generations.” Moreover, it seems that Moshe arrives in Rabbi Akiva’s classroom on the day that he teaches this topic.

כיון שהגיע לדבר אחד, אמרו לו תלמידיו: רבי, מנין לך?
אמר להן: הלכה למשה מסיני.

When he reached the matter of echad, his students said to him: Rebbe, what is your source for this?

He said to them: It is a tradition of Moshe from Sinai.

But Moshe Rabbeinu did not understand what Rabbi Akiva was talking about. He asks Hashem the same question as the angels: “This is Torah and this is its reward?” Moshe Rabbeinu did not understand that Rabbi Akiva was living and dying in fulfillment of his own interpretation of Torah.

It further seems that Hashem intends Moshe Rabbeinu to misunderstand, because Hashem shows him only the grotesquerie of Rabbi Akiva’s flesh being weighed in the marketplace, and not the scene of total faith and commitment that preceded it. But then why does Hashem answer Moshe Rabbeinu’s question at all?

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We need to realize that this conversation takes place **before** Hashem gives Moshe Rabbeinu the Torah – it seems that Hashem can’t give it until the crowns are tied on. We also need to realize that this *aggadeta* is based on Shemot 31:8:

ויתן אל משה ככלתו לדבר אתו בהר סיני שני לחת

He gave to Moshe when He finished speaking with him on Har Sinai two tablets

Hashem could not give Moshe the Torah **until He finished speaking with him**. The conversation is what tied the crowns on.

God tells Moshe that Rabbi Akiva will derive heaps of laws from the crowns. But that doesn’t mean that anyone else will understand how the crowns lead to the laws. As far as everyone else is concerned, Rabbi Akiva’s laws can only be justified as “a tradition of Moshe from Sinai.” Which they are – the Torah that Moshe receives and transmits has the crowns attached, and the crowns are real, and they mean what Rabbi Akiva says they do.

But the letters without the crowns would not mean the same thing. The Torah’s meaning changes when the conversation between Hashem and Moshe Rabbeinu ties the crowns on.

The Torah represents the universe. To understand the universe G-d created, we need to understand why G-d originally thought of creating a different universe, one with only Din. To receive the Torah, Moshe Rabbeinu needed to understand this *hava amina*. Torah makes no sense if mercy is always better than justice, if having to account to G-d for our lives is a bug rather than a feature. The crowns on the letters represent that *hava amina*.

Empathy with Hashem’s *hava amina* is dangerous. Torah leaders must never regard someone else’s suffering with equanimity, even if that suffering can be seen as an expression of justice. Rabbi Akiva would not have said Shema the same way at someone else’s martyrdom. To receive the Torah, Moshe Rabbeinu needed to maintain belief in the necessity of mercy, to the point of regarding a failure to show mercy as an injustice. “Shall the Judge of all the land not do justice?”

That’s what I have in my notes. The last thing he said to me I didn’t have to write down. It carried such emotional power that I could never forget it. He said that it was the experience of Rabbi Akiva’s classroom that turned Moshe Rabbeinu from an ilui into a gaon.

(Note: The Mistakener Ilui is a purely fictional character. Some of the connections and readings in this essay were drawn from or inspired by Rav Ari Kahn’s title essay in The Crowns on the Letters, a real book which I encourage you to read. Borges did not write a Life of Moses, although I discovered after titling this essay that the book had already been reviewed once.)