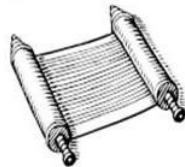


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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

Unless otherwise noted, all pieces are by Rabbi Klapper and published on the CMTL website or blog.

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Sukkah Mats

September 29, 2010

This week's dvar Torah began as an investigation of the economics of psak. Specifically, I wanted to discuss whether, in an affluent society, chumrot (stringencies) function as a regressive tax on the poor, who for reasons of social conformity or insufficient knowledge are compelled to purchase hekhshered goods rather than cheaper, unhekhshered but equally kosher, goods. I hoped to use the burgeoning skhakh mat industry as a case in point.

It turned out, however, that a leading makhshir of such mats is the Star K, under Rav Moshe Heinemann, and as R. Meir Sendor properly reminded me, Star K has been a leader in transparency on this issue. Here is their list of products not requiring hashgachah; it certainly seems far from comprehensive, and compare here, but it is a genuine move toward transparency. (Perhaps it is only a list of products that they certify that don't require certification.)

I was privileged, through the good offices of Rav Sendor, to discuss this with Rav Heinemann, who agreed with the principle that the public must be told when a particular hekhsher is not halakhically necessary. Furthermore, the Star K rabbinic staff was very helpful and open in trying to figure out the basis of their position regarding the mats, and then Rav Heinemann himself discussed the issues with me at some length. I will accordingly devote this week's devar Torah instead to an exposition of those discussions, as I understand them, and return to the broader issue in some other context.

My thanks to the friends, including Rabbi Michael Broyde, Rabbi Shlomo Brody, and Rabbi Sendor, who read and commented on drafts of the original piece. My thanks also to Rabbi Zvi Goldberg of Star K, who began the conversation with me, and Rabbi Mordechai Frankel, with whom it still continues.

The opening premise of the discussion is that skhakh must be made from something grown from the ground that is not mekabel tum'ah (susceptible to ritual impurity). The classic example of such is "peshutei keli eitz", wooden objects that have no beis kibbul (depression in which they can contain things). The twigs in matchstick blinds certainly meet these criteria.

However, the twigs must be held together by something, and it is there that issues are raised. There are two basic issues, of which the first is:

1. Must the skhakh be held up by something that could itself be kosher skhakh?

Rav Ovadiah Yosef explicitly rejects this position in principle in Yechaveh Daat 164¹, but the OK adopts it, at least lekhatilah (see the articles at www.kosherspirit.org). The OK therefore requires Sukkah mats to be tied with cotton string, rather than with nylon, and verifying this is a major component of their hekhsher.

The Star K accepts the OK's position in principle, but rejects it in practice on the ground that "held together" is not the same as "held up". They do encourage mats to be placed flat on top of the sukkah so that the string is not in fact "holding up" the skhakh. This is hard for me to understand – the real issue should, I think, be whether the string is necessary to keep the slats on top of the roof, not whether they raise it an additional fraction of an inch over the roof.

Accordingly, it seems to me that, if one is genuinely concerned for the OK's position but uses mats tied with non-natural string, one must ensure that each individual slat would be supported sufficiently if the string were removed. Perhaps one must also ensure that each individual slat would remain on the roof in

¹ Along the way, Rav Ovadiah raises the possibility that cotton string would be forbidden miderabbanan because, like processed flaxstalks (anitzei pishtan), they can be used to stuff cushions, and other reasons. As he rejects these, and no one else raises them, I will not discuss them here.

an ordinary wind even if it were not tied to its fellows. I suspect that these conditions are rarely if ever met by sukkahs covered with sukkah mats, and therefore it seems to me that in practice Star K reject this position in toto.

Star K then raise an issue with directly opposite implications. Based on Igrot Moshe OC 1:177, they suggest that if the string holding the mat together is mekabel tum'ah, the entire mat would become mekabel tum'ah, and therefore invalid as skhakh even mideoraita. Accordingly, they will only hekhsher mats held together with nylon string.

However, Star K actually went further, requiring specifically monofilament nylon string. Here some background is necessary.

String of any material is generally not considered mekabel tum'ah; thus OK uses cotton string. However, Rashi to Shabbat 64a suggests that string which can be used as jewelry is mekabel tum'ah. Star K's website apparently took the position that Rashi refers to any string composed of more than one strand.

Reading the website, it seemed clear to me that the two requirements, nylon and monofilament, were contradictory. Nylon, so far as I knew, is not mekabel tum'ah; why then should it matter whether it was monofilament? Requiring monofilament meant that a multistrand string would be mekabel tum'ah, but that could not be true of nylon!

The Star K rabbinic staff initially suggested that R. Heineman held that nylon can be mekabel tum'ah – such positions do exist, although I contend that they do so only with regard to actual garments of nylon – but R. Heineman confirmed that he holds the standard position that nylon is not. What, then, justified requiring monofilament? To understand this position, we must return to Igrot Moshe cited above.

Igrot Moshe appears to be addressing² whether one can use wooden slats from a disassembled venetian blind as skhakh. He first suggests that peshutei klei eitz can in fact be mekabel tum'ah rabbinically, and therefore that the slats are intrinsically invalid. However, he concedes that this is a difficult position to sustain³. Furthermore, it seems likely to me that even Rav Moshe applied this only to reshaped peshutei keli eitz, such as venetian blind slats, but not to wood left in its natural condition, such as in matchstick blinds.

Igrot Moshe then says, however, that the slats were held in the blind by a woven material (likely cloth tape). He cites a variety of sources to suggest that peshutei klei eitz can be mekabel tum'ah when they are combined with something woven (arig), and that they remain invalid skhakh even when removed from the combination.

R. Heineman suggested that R. Moshe's position applied even if the cloth tape were made of nylon, in other words even if the cloth tape itself was not mekabel tum'ah. This struck me as a remarkable chiddush, but lacking any familiarity with that area of halakhah, I had no evidence on the issue. In correspondence with Star K rabbinic staff, they have confirmed my sense that this would be a highly original position, and brought evidence for their sense. I look forward to hearing and conveying the result of their subsequent conversation with Rav Heineman.

So by combining the position of Rashi that string which can be used as jewelry is mekabel tum'ah with an understanding of Rav Moshe as saying that peshutei klei eitz cannot be used as skhakh if they are in combination with woven material even if that material is not mekabel tum'ah, it seems possible to require specifically nylon, to avoid the problem of the string being mekabel tum'ah, and monofilament, to avoid the problem of wovenness.

² The teshuvah is apparently written in continuation of a telephone conversation to which we are not privy

³ Laaniyut da'ati, it seems to be founded on a forced reading of Beit Yosef as having a forced reading of Rambam

However, even if one grants that we need to account for Rashi and that Rav Moshe should be thus interpreted, we still do not reach the result of requiring nylon monofilament.

Rashi actually states that string which is both spun and braided (kalua) can be mekabel tum'ah, and on Shabbat 57a he explains that kalua means "made of chains, hollows and rounds". However, it seems to me that (and Deborah Klapper confirms – I owe this insight to her overall) that just about all string (as opposed to rope) in the United States is twisted (shazur – see Rambam Hilkhoh Keilim 1:12) rather than braided (kalua). When I raised this point with Rav Heineman, he agreed that Rashi would not view twisted string as mekabel tum'ah and therefore that even multifilament twisted nylon string would be valid. It seems to me further that by this logic twisted cotton thread would actually be preferable, as it is not mekabel tum'ah and valid skhakh, and thus does not raise an issue of "holding up". Either way, the twisted strings, cotton or nylon, in matchstick blinds should pose no halakhic barrier to their use as skhakh⁴.

There remain two possible halakhic issues with storebought blinds. The first is that mats intended or used for sleeping or sitting on are mekabel tum'ah. For this reason the OK tries to make its mats as uncomfortable as possible, and puts signs on the walls of its Chinese factory declaring that these mats are not intended for sitting. The last element seems comic – imagine the workers' conversations about the eccentric buyer once the mashgiach leaves! – and ineffectual to me, as workers' kavvanah cannot and generally should not be determined by their employers. But this seems beside the point, as no one used matchstick mats for seating – woven mats perhaps, but not these. Mats are also invalid if their like are used for roofing yearround, which OK claims invalidates sukkah mats in Kenya. I note only that this problem is far more likely to create issues for sukkah mats than for regular blinds.

The last issue is the question of hanging hardware; it's not clear to me what percentage of blinds are sold with and what without. One might argue that hanging hardware, or at least metal hanging hardware, is the equivalent of the cloth tape – it is certainly mekabel tum'ah - and thus according to Rav Moshe would invalidate the wood. However, Rambam Keilim 4:5-10 makes clear that the conjunction of peshutei keli eitz with something mekabel tum'ah only invalidates if the mekabel tum'ah is the primary element (ikkar) and the wood secondary (tafel). For example, a wooden key with metal teeth is mekabel tum'ah, whereas a metal key with wooden teeth is not. It seems to me difficult to view hanging hardware as more essential relative to the actual blind than the key blank is to the teeth.

I would go further and suggest that on the same ground even a matchstick blind with internal strings that are mekabel tum'ah would be valid according to Rav Mosheh, who dealt with a venetian blind where the cloth was an integral part of the mechanism regulating light entrance.

For all the above reasons it seems to me that store-bought all-wood matchstick blinds are perfectly valid skhakh. However, I look forward to reporting on my ongoing dialogue with Star K and others on this issue.

⁴ I look forward to hearing Star K's conclusion on the reality, and therefore the halakhah.

Sukkah Hiddur

September 30, 2009

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף קלג עמוד ב
תניא: "זה א-לי ואנוהו" - התנאה לפניו במצות; עשה לפניו סוכה נאה, ולולב נאה, ושופר נאה; ציצית נאה, ספר תורה נאה; וכתוב בו לשמו בדיו נאה, בקולמוס נאה, בלבלר אומן, וכורכו בשיראין נאין. אבא שאול אומר: "ואנוהו" - היו דומה לו; מה הוא חנון ורחום, אף אתה היה חנון ורחום.

A beraita:

"Zeh E-li v'aneveihu" – hitnaeh before Him bemitzvot.

Make before Him a naeh Sukkah, and a naeh lulav, and a naeh shofar;

Naeh tzitzit, and a naeh Torah scroll;

And write in it lishmo with naeh ink, and a naeh quill, with a skilled scribe, and wrap it in naeh cloths.

Abba Shaul says: "v'aneveihu" – be similar to Him;

Just as He is gracious and merciful, so too you must be gracious and merciful.

The driving force behind the anonymous position in this beraita seems to be anti-corporealism; the literal translation "and I will adorn Him" is rejected because G-d has no physical form that can be adorned. However, rather than seeing v'aneveihu as coming from a root other than naeh, as per Abba Shaul and many others, this tanna interprets it as reflexive; "and I will be an adornment to him" rather than "and I will make an adornment for him".

Or at least that would seem to be the meaning of hitnaeh, a construction which so far as I can tell makes no other appearance in rabbinic literature. But the tanna does not go on to say "therefore do as many mitzvot as you can, so as to make yourself an adornment to Him", but rather creates an imperative to make beautiful mitzvah-objects⁵. He then extends this imperative with regard to a Torah scroll⁶ by requiring the tools with which it is made to be naeh, and finally requires the wrapping for the (finished) scroll to be naeh as well. On Shabbat 133b, Rabbi Yehudah is cited as using the same ground to invalidate (according to most opinions) a Torah scroll in which a Divine Name was written accidentally but then overwritten lishmoh.

The focus on mitzvah-objects, rather than on modes of performance, seems to indicate that the actual translation here is a displacement – since one cannot adorn Him, therefore adorn His commandments. But this not only fails to account for hitnaeh, it also fails to explain lefanav b'mitzvot - in this understanding it should read instead either hitnaeh oto al y'dei hamitzvot or hitnaeh mitzvotav lefanav.

Rashi Sukkah 29b cites v'aneveihu as the reason a dried out lulav is invalid on Sukkot. Tosafot challenge on the ground that v'aneveihu can only set up a lekhatchilah requirement. Rashi's position is easily defended if one reads Shabbat 133b as invalidating a Torah scroll. However, there are other instances in which v'aneveihu clearly sets up only a lekhatchilah requirement, for example the position of the Rabbanan (Sukkah 11b, 33a) that the lulav, hadas and aravah should be bound together. Why then, according to Rashi, is v'aneveihu sometimes a lekhatchilah and sometimes only a bediavad requirement? Chatam Sofer, as cited by Encyclopedia Talmudit, suggests that the central requirement – perhaps the Biblical requirement, with everything else being a rabbinic extension – is to beautify the Name specifically, i.e. the Name as it is written in a Torah scroll. The verse would then be read "This is (the Name of) my G-d, and I will adorn it", and follow the standard rabbinic understanding that "zeh" implies that the object is there to be pointed at. This would also explain well the beraita's listing of so many cases related to a Torah scroll, and the requirement to beautify the scroll's cover (and raises an interesting question lehalakhah as to

⁵ I deliberately avoid using the Brisker term *cheftzah shel mitzvah* here because it is not clear, for example, that a shofar fits that category technically; it may simply be a *machshir* once we hold that the mitzvah is listening rather than blowing.

⁶ tzarikh iyyun whether the extension is an explanation of, or rather an addendum to, "*sefer Torah naeh*" –

whether using a beautiful etrog case, or lulav carrier, is a fulfillment of v'anveihu). But while this connects one of the cases in our beraita to the verse, it too fails to explain the phrase hitnaeh lefanav bamitzvot.

We should note here as well that on Nazir 2b the beraita reads "anaeh lefanav" (in Ms. "ei naeh") which fits better with "v'anveihu", but I think this is most likely an attempt to fit the context (a discussion of the meaning of an oath to be naeh) rather than an alternate text.

I don't have a compelling solution. Perhaps this is just an example of an otherwise unknown idiomatic form. But possibly something valuable is at stake here. Hiddur mitzvah, generally derived from v'anveihu, is the most obvious window into the halakhic significance of beauty. If we were to develop a reading which emphasized lefanav more than bamitzvot – for example, if we were to read the beraita as saying that the way to "adorn G-d" is to create beauty in His presence (with mitzvah-objects useful, but not comprehensive, examples of when He is present – note that, contrary to my translation above, the beraita encourages the making of beautiful things, not their use), we would have found a basis for halakhically valuing art, or at least art aimed at creating beauty) in its own terms. This is I think a major desideratum.

One final note – above I have sometimes avoided translating naeh, and sometimes translated it as adornment. This is not intended as a theological psak; it may well be that naeh, or naveh, or naaveh, refer e.g. to a sense of fitness that is not the same as beauty.

The Virtue of Beauty

by Matt Lubin (WBM 2016)

October 4, 2017

“All mitzvot are to supposed to be done in the most beautiful manner as possible: with a beautiful *tallit*, a beautiful *Sefer Torah*, etc. (*Shabbat* 133b)” Hazal learn this from the verse זָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֵנִי מְבָרְכֵהוּ, “this is my God, and I will beautify [myself before] Him” – with/in mitzvot. Yet while this is a principle regarding all mitzvot, it becomes a central theme specifically with regard to the Four Species on Sukkot. The Torah identifies the etrog as פְּרִי עֵץ הָדָר, the beautiful fruit of a tree. While regarding other mitzvot beauty is an ideal, an etrog which is not beautiful is invalid.⁷ Why is this mitzvah so connected to beauty?

The halakhah that mitzvot are supposed to be performed in a beautiful manner appears in the middle of the song that Moshe and the Jewish people sang at *keriyat Yam Suf*, the Song of the Sea. The Gemara (*Shabbat* 133b) also uses this verse as the source for the legal concept that man is supposed to follow God’s ways of lovingkindness and graciousness, for example by visiting the sick and burying the dead. In the Mekhilta, these two interpretations are presented as originating from different rabbis, and thus are two mutually exclusive ways to understand the verse. However, the Gemara clearly accepts both readings. How can two different laws be derived from the same phrase?

There is another, perhaps more esoteric connection between the “Song at the Sea” and the holiday of Sukkot. Each day of the holiday in the Temple, when the kohanim would circle the altar, they would recite the phrase אֲנִי וְהוֹ, הוֹשִׁיעַ נָא, “Ani ve-Ho, save us now,” referring to God as אֲנִי וְהוֹ (Gemara *Sukkah* 45a). Rashi there explains that this is a reference to God’s 42-letter name, which can be derived from the verses in the “Song at the Sea”. Other commentators, however, (such as Rabbeinu Bachaye to Ex. 15:2) point out the similarity between אֲנִי וְהוֹ and זָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ – both appear to refer to some kind of parallel between God and ourselves.

R. Yitzhak Hutner, in a discourse on Pesach, explains how the Talmud can derive two distinct laws from the same scriptural source זָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֵנִי מְבָרְכֵהוּ. The context of that verse was a moment in which Israel saw God through a deliberate grand show of His strength and presence. Israel saw the clearest picture of God’s grandeur when He was intentionally painting that picture to be seen. This explains how the same phrase can be used to teach us that we are to act in God’s ways, as well as to beautify mitzvot: Aesthetic beauty is something that is outward-focused; it is a something done for others to see. This was how God was manifest at that moment, and so imitating Him (“just as He, so too you”) in this case obligates one to perform mitzvot in a way meant to be seen and noticed by onlookers.

Religious grandstanding can hardly be considered a virtue, and one might rightfully shirk from such halakhically-sanctioned (and even obligated) mitzvah exhibitionism. Viewed from the perspective of the Israel-God relationship as it was expressed during the Exodus, however, this ‘beautification of mitzvot’ as understood by R. Hutner becomes perfectly understandable. At the splitting of the Sea, God was not bragging, nor was it purely an instance of showing His own might by turning the laws of nature upside down: God was performing an act of love towards His now chosen people. The splitting of the sea caused the nations to tremble not just in fear of God, but they were silenced עַד יַעֲבֹר עִמָּךְ הָיָה, in recognition of the relationship between God and His people.

Sukkot is, beyond the celebration and recognition of God having chosen us as a people (which is the focus of Pesach and Shavuot), a rejoicing in God’s continued love and guidance, as symbolized by the Sukkah that is a commemoration of God bringing Israel through the desert. It is thus the most appropriate time of year to similarly express, through the concept of *Hiddur Mitzvah* (beautification of mitzvot) our own love of God. The obligation of *Hiddur Mitzvah* is not merely an obligation to obtain an aesthetically pleasing *tallis* or *Sefer Torah*, but it is an expression of our cherishing of those mitzvot. Thus, starving oneself on the eve of Pesach in order to eat matzah with greater gusto is a fulfillment of *Hiddur Mitzvah* (Rashi to

⁷ Whether as a direct result of that verse, or rather because the general principle is intensified in this case. See Tosafot, Rashi and Meiri to *Sukkah* 29b

Pesahim 99b) because that too is an expression of enthusiasm for the performance of God's command.⁸ In doing so, while holding those beautiful plants, we have a right to demand *אני והו, הושיע נא*, reminding God of the love for us that He demonstrated so dramatically at the splitting of the Sea.

R. Hutner's understanding of *Hiddur Mitzvah* as being an outward-focused obligation appears to be directly opposed the trend towards the privatization of religious beliefs and practices. We may sometimes chafe against overly public displays of religiosity; peddling one's religious beliefs to passers-by in the streets seems to not only smack of sanctimonious arrogance, but also to can appear to cheapen the religious experience itself. However, halakha demands more than just cognitive belief in God and fealty to His commandments, but a genuine love of God—and with it, an enthusiasm for His commands that cannot be kept to oneself. As Maimonides writes of the command to love God (*Sefer Hamitzvot, Aseh 3*) “this mitzvah includes that we call to all of humanity to serve Him and believe in Him.” While religious arrogance and showboating is hardly virtuous, a genuine show of love is not only praiseworthy—it is godly.

Matt Lubin (Winter Beit Midrash 2016) in a biology research assistant in Yeshiva University, and student in RIETS Semicha.

⁸ As explained to me by my teacher Rabbi Mendel Blachman (However, it should be noted that R. Blachman does not believe that there is any aesthetic component whatsoever to the qualifications of the four species to be taken on Sukkot)

The Second Party

By Yehuda Gale (SBM 2011-2014, 2016, 2018)
October 22, 2016

Why do we bring many fewer sacrifices on Shemini Atzeret than on Sukkot? Midrash Tanchuma offers this explanation:

והקרבתם עולה [אשה ריח ניחוח לה'] פר אחד איל אחד (במדבר כט לו).
משל למלך שעשה סעודה שבעה ימים,
וזימן כל בני המדינה בשבעת ימי המשתה,
כיון שעברו שבעת ימי המשתה,
אמר לאוהבו:
כבר יצאנו ידי בני המדינה,
נגלגל אני ואתה במה שתמצא:
ליטרא בישרא או דג או ירק,
כך אמר הקב"ה לישראל:
כל קרבנות שהקרבתם בשבעת ימי החג – על אומות העולם הייתם מקריבים,
אבל "ביום השמיני – עצרת תהיה לכם",
גלגלו במה שאתם מוצאים, בפר אחד ואיל אחד.

but ye shall present a burnt-offering, an offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the LORD: one bullock, one ram

*This is like a King who makes his feast for 7 days
And he invites all the people of the district for the seven days of the feast
Once the seven days of the feast were over,*

*He said to his beloved friend:
We have already fulfilled our obligation to the people of the district,
You and I will celebrate with what you find:
a litra of meat or fish or greens*

*So too The Holy One Blessed be He says to Israel:
All the sacrifices that you brought on the seven days of Chag were for the nations of the world,
but "on the eighth day, an extension will be for you"
Celebrate with what you find, one bullock and one ram*

When I learned this Midrash with Tzipporah Machlah Klapper, she pointed out that the parable sounds a lot like the Purim story:

בשנת שלוש, למלכו, עשה משתה, לכל שריו ועבדיו: חיל פרס ומדי, הפרתמים ושרי המדינות – לפניו.
בהראתו, את עשר כבוד מלכותו, ואת יקר, תפארת גדולתו; ימים רבים, שמונים ומאת יום.
ובמלואת הימים האלה, עשה המלך לכל העם הנמצאים בשושן הבירה למגדול ועד-קטן משתה – שבעת ימים: בחצר, גנת ביתן
המלך.

*In the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the army of Persia
and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him;
When he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty, many days,
even a hundred and eighty days.*

*And when these days were fulfilled, the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in
Shushan the castle, both great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace;*

Here too the King makes two parties, one for those close to him and one for everyone. Here too the first one is large, lasting a full 180 days, while the second party, while still respectable, is a fraction of the length.

But there is one key difference: Achashverosh throws the larger party for those closer to him, while God throws the smaller party for his friends.

The difference here is the relationship between the King and His different subjects.

Achashverosh is friendly to his princes and servants because he wants them to love and serve him. He therefore tries to endear himself to them with gifts and lavish parties. Achashverosh's two feasts have the same purpose, to engender loyalty from different groups of people to a greater or lesser degree.

God's two "feasts" have two different purposes. One is to bring the nations closer to God; that is why we bring sacrifices to God on their behalf. The other is to celebrate the existing love between God and His people. As God tells Yirmiyahu: "I remember for thee the affection of thy youth, the love of thine espousals; how thou wentest after Me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown."

Yehuda Gale (SBM 2011-2014, 2016) is a PhD student at Rutgers studying computer science.

Ralbag on Vezot HaBrachah

October 11, 2009

דברים פרק לד

(י) ולא קם נביא עוד בישראל כמשה אשר ידעו יקוק פנים אל פנים: (יא) לכל האותות והמופתים אשר שלחו יקוק לעשות בארץ מצרים לפרעה ולכל עבדיו ולכל ארצו: (יב) ולכל היד החזקה ולכל המורא הגדול אשר עשה משה לעיני כל ישראל:

פירוש הרלב"ג

התועלת התשע עשרה – הוא מה שהעידה התורה באמרה "ולא קם נביא עוד בישראל כמשה" שכבר יקום אחר כמשה כאלו הדברים אשר זכר, אך לא יהיה נביא בישראל לבד, אבל בישראל ושאר אומות, והוא יחדש רבוי האותות והמופתים כמשה במקום רחב מאד ולעם רב ויתמיד להראות יד הש"י החזקה והמורא הגדול לעם רב. ולפי שלא היה נביא כזה עדיין בשום מקום לאלו הדברים, ידענו שזה יהיה משיח בן דוד אשר ירום ונשא וגבה? מאד ויתחדשו על ידו המופתים הנפלאים להפוך אל עמים שפה ברורה לקרא כלם בשם ה' ולעבדו שכם אחד, ואז יהיה שלום בעולם מפני שלא תהיינה שם אמונות מתחלפות, ולזה וכתנו חרבותם לאתים וחניתותיהם למזמרות ולא ישאו גוי אל גוי חרב ולא ילמדו עוד מלחמה . . .

Devarim 32:10-12

And no other prophet arose in Israel like Mosheh, whom G-d knew face-to-face, with regard to all the signs and wonders which Hashem sent him to do in Egypt to Par'oh and all his servants and all his land, and with regard to all the powerful arm and all the great terror which Moshe did before the eyes of all Israel.

Ralbag on Chumash

The nineteenth useful lesson (that emerges from this section) – is that to which the Torah testified when it said "And no other prophet arose in Israel like Mosheh", that another one like Mosheh would arise with regards to the things it mentioned, but that he would not be a prophet in Israel alone, rather in Israel and the other nations, and he will originate numerous signs and wonders like Mosheh in a very expansive space and for a numerous crowd, and he will consistently show the powerful hand of the Blessed Hashem and the great awe to a numerous crowd. But because there had not yet been a prophet like this in any place for these matters, we know that this will be Moshiaich ben David, who will be very exalted and through him there will be originated the astounding wonders to transform the nations via pellucid speech so that they will all call the Name of Hashem and serve him shoulder to shoulder, and then there will be peace in the world, because there will not be differing faiths, and therefore they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks and no nation will lift a sword against another and they will no longer learn war . . .

There's always something disconcerting about reading a text that disagrees with one of Rambam's 13 Ikkarim, even if one presumably should remember it from Marc Shapiro's *The Limits of Orthodox Theology* (I'm travelling and didn't bring my copy). And the principle of the uniqueness of Mosaic prophecy really carries a significant load in terms of the authority of Torah, if one accepts Rambam's understanding that only Mosaic-level prophecy is capable of transforming the Divine Will into legislation; I recall a Daniel Lasker article years ago arguing that Rambam had convinced the Karaites of this point, so they ceased deriving halakhah from Nakh.

Ralbag above does not seem to care very much about this. It might be possible to argue that he sees the Messianic King as greater than Mosheh in some ways but not all, and thus preserve Mosheh's uniqueness with regard to law, but it would be a stretch. More straightforwardly he simply is not bothered by the issue.

For Rambam, Mosaic uniqueness is one basis for the eternally binding nature of Torah law – the other is that G-d cannot change His mind. R. Yosef Albo dismisses this quite compellingly by pointing out that a change of legislation can reflect a change of circumstance rather than a change of mind, as witness that the Torah itself became binding on the Jews at Sinai, and was not before. Rambam's argument is based on his very interesting conception of Torah laws as eternal in the same way as natural laws, which I have

addressed at length in “Should Poskim be Doctors of the Soul?” and will not cover here. R. Albo concludes that Rambam is correct that the Torah is eternal, but that it was G-d’s choice to give an eternal Torah rather than one that was binding until further instruction. If Ralbag shared Albo’s critique, he would be less bound to Mosaic uniqueness.

But what interests me most about this passage is its matter-of-fact universalism. The Messianic King is not just the prophet of Israel, but rather of all humanity, and Ralbag makes no effort to qualify this statement. He does not, for example, say that the Messiah will be Israel’s primarily and the Gentiles’ secondarily. Furthermore, he attributes the Messianic peace (a universal piece, not one in which Efraim and Yehudah “together will despoil the Sons of the East”) not to a pax Yisraelus but rather to the absence of religious disagreement stemming from the universal acceptance of the Messiah.

Again, none of this tells us specifically what the relative position of Jews and Gentiles will be in the Messianic era, and if this were said self-consciously, it would probably mean very little. But it seems to be said ‘lefi tumo’, without any sense that it is groundbreaking or in tension with the Masoret, and yet it is central enough to be the way he ends his commentary. In other words, it seems to be Ralbag’s starting point, and in that case we can legitimately claim to be following Ralbag’s masoret if we interpret traditional texts in light of it.