

## TALMUD TORAH AS THE SHARED SPIRITUAL LANGUAGE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

This week klal yisroel mourned the death of Rabbi David Hartman and celebrated the inaugural Knesset speech of Dr. Ruth Calderon<sup>1</sup>. The connection between these events is direct, in that Dr. Calderon describes Rabbi Hartman as her mentor. But even more so, her speech represented a partial fulfillment of one of Rabbi Hartman's dreams, that Talmud Torah could function as the "shared spiritual language of the Jewish people"<sup>2</sup>. This is a dream that continues to inform and challenge much of what I teach, and it is appropriate here to acknowledge again that my understanding of Religious Zionism is deeply indebted to Rabbi Hartman's "Joy and Responsibility". Yehi zikhro barukh.

Among Rabbi Hartman's arguments (as I understand and/or extend it) for the possibility that halakhic conversation could cross the boundaries of observance or legal commitment was the following: If one recognizes that Halakhah is one particular human concretization of the values expressed in Revelation, one can recognize that other people's nonhalakhic norms and behaviors might well be other such hypothetically possible concretizations, in the same way that we recognize rejected halakhic positions as nonetheless having the status of Torah, or "divrei Elokim chayyim". Differing behavior thus may not mean that our understandings of Revelation are incompatible, and certainly does not mean that conversation about how to understand Revelation is impossible.

This argument depends on the assumption that there is no impassable chasm between an understanding of Revelation as a source of Law and an understanding of Revelation as a source of values. This to me is not obviously true or false, and so I spend a lot of time in my classes at Gann Academy testing it. I thought today it might be appropriate to consider the text taught by Dr. Calderon in light of this question.

כי הא דרב רחומי  
הוה שכיח קמיה דרבא במחוזא  
הוה רגיל דהוה אתי לביתיה כל מעלי יומא דכיפורי  
יומא חד - משכתייה שמעתא.  
הוה מסכיא דביתהו: 'השתא אתי, השתא אתי'.  
לא אתא.  
חלש דעתה - אחית דמעטא מעינה.

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<sup>1</sup> An English translation of the speech, by SBM alum Rabbi Elli Fischer, is [here](#). The video of the original speech is [here](#).

<sup>2</sup>Rabbi Hartman's relevant essay is titled "Halakhah as a Ground for Creating a Shared Spiritual Language" ([Tradition 16:1](#)),. While the title refers to Halakhah specifically, I think it is at least as compatible with a form of Jewish discourse that integrates other modalities with the Halakhic, or that integrates them into the Halakhic.

הוה יתיב באיגרא - אפחית איגרא מתותיה, ונח נפשיה.

In the manner of the following story about Rav Rechumai,  
who was commonly found before Rava in Mechoza.

He regularly came to his house every Erev Yom Kippur.

One day – he was drawn in by his learning.

His wife was waiting: ‘Now he comes, now he comes’.

He did not come.

She was depressed – a tear fell from here eye.

He was sitting on the roof – the roof collapsed under him, and he died.

Dr. Calderon makes a number of beautiful and insightful interpretive comments, but I want to focus on the remarkable conclusions she drew.

- a) One must not indulge one’s devotion to Torah at the expense of sensitivity to human beings.
- b) In Talmudic disagreements, one must assume that both sides have some aspect of truth. So Rav Rechumai must also be justified partially. The underlying point is that both those who see themselves as maintaining the nation practically (the wife, and the chilonim) and those who maintain the nation culturally/religiously/intellectually (Rav Rechumai, the charedim) see themselves as maintaining it alone while the others are gamboling on Tel Aviv beaches or living on the public dole. A call for שווי בנטל, equality of burden-bearing, must go both ways, i.e. those who want the charedim to work for the state must recognize their own responsibility for the continuity of Torah, and devote significant resources to Torah study.

The first of these seems a highly plausible reading, and the second at least possible, if perhaps a little generous.

Both of these readings, however, rest on abstracting values from the story. Here I want to put the story in its Talmudic context.

The sugya begins with a Mishnah that states

– התלמידים יוצאין לתלמוד תורה שלא ברשות –

שלשים יום

Students (of Torah) may leave (their homes) for the study of Torah without permission (from their wives)

– for thirty days.

The Mishnah continues by stating that laborers may leave only for a week, and then provides a list of professions (including laborer) and the period defining the sexual obligations of each type of worker. It concludes by stating that some or all of the above represent the position of Rabbi Eliezer.

In the Talmud, Rav Ada bar Ahavah reports a tradition that the first line was the position of Rabbi Eliezer, whereas the Sages held that students of Torah may leave even for years without permission. Rava comments:

סמכו רבנן אדרב אדא בר אהבה ועבדי עובדא בנפשייהו

The rabbis relied on Rav Ada bar Ahavah and acted thus in practice *benafshaihu*.

The story of Rav Rechumai is offered as an illustration of the behavior described by Rava.

A normative reader of this story might relate to Dr. Calderon's points as follows:

- a) The issue is not how to balance devotion to Torah with human sensitivity, but rather how one balances devotion to Torah study with practical halakhic obligations, or at least with practical halakhic obligations toward other human beings – in this case the husband's obligation of *onah*. My preference is for Dr. Calderon's reading because the purely halakhic reading does not properly account for the wife's tear causing the death. But a fuller analysis would require us to decide whether Rav Rechumai came home specifically on Yom Kippur because on that day marital intimacy is forbidden (in which case the story cannot be about his halakhic obligation).
- b) While it is often true that "These and those are the words of the living G-d", this does not relieve us of the burden of deciding which position may be followed in practice. Here, if Rashi is convincing when he translates "benafshaihu" as "at the cost of their lives" rather than as "themselves" (cf. Yebamot 64b and Ketubot 22b), the whole thrust of the sugya is to reject the position of the students who leave for years, and Rav Rechumai is introduced as an example of someone who will die for his misdeed.

Dr. Calderon here tries to realize Rabbi Hartman's vision from the opposite side – by presenting her vision through a (very generous) Talmudic parallel, she hopes to engage the charedi community in a real conversation about the extent to which the secular community can be expected to economically support their current social arrangements. Ironically, I think it is precisely the parts of her reading which are most generous to them – the identification of their society with the Torah-passionate Rav Rechumai, and the presumption that Rav Rechumai's position carries practical weight – that may seem most alien to them.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that the effort more than deserves a sustained response. Perhaps, if we cannot quite achieve a fully shared language, we can at least develop reliable translation protocols that enable serious conversation. The key responsibility will then fall on those of us who can speak both dialects well – I think we should welcome it.