

*In honor of Shavuot, we present a guest dvar Torah by Deborah Klapper*

## The Boundaries of Torah Study

Shavuot is all about "Torah". The Kadosh baruch Hu gave us the Torah today, to tell us who He is and what He wants. But what do we mean by "Torah"? "Torah" has a wide range of definitions. At its most narrow, it refers specifically to the 5 books of the Torah (Braishit, Shmot, Vayikra, Bamidbar and Devarim) and at its most broad it can refer to almost any endeavor designed to understand God, what he wants from us, and how best to carry out His will. In the gemara, for example, Rabbi Yehuda haNasi asks Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karcha, "How did you live so long?" When Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karcha responds with "Why, are you tired of me being alive?" Rabbi answers "תורה היא וללמוד אני צריך". There are three other instances of this phrase, all of which involve inappropriate invasion of privacy in order to learn how great people conduct their private lives, but the specifics do not really belong in a "family dvar Torah".

Somewhere in the middle is the meaning we most often intend when we speak of "learning Torah". We mean to include all of Rabbinic tradition, and any new thoughts we might be inspired with while reading Rabbinic or Tanachic books, but not science, history or philosophy books, however much they may affect our understanding of how best to live. This middle position is a convenient way of distinguishing "our" learning from the learning we share with the rest of the world, which is very important – our relationship with God is built on yetzi'at mitzrayim and matan Torah, which are particularistic events. We are special precisely because we have experiences and information the rest of the world does not have. That is what happens in this morning's laining – we become God's people because we receive God's message.

But does this distinction between "Torah" and shared or secular knowledge actually work? Six years ago, in daf yomi, I learned through several pages of astronomy in masechet Pesachim. I remember complaining to my husband that my time would be better spent reading a "real" physics or astronomy textbook. Why, I asked, should learning ancient Greek astronomy count as Talmud Torah? Could it be, as someone suggested to me, that it is because it is printed in Hebrew letters in an official-looking book?!

Perhaps the distinction I made a moment ago doesn't work; maybe we should be prepared to include learning about God from other sources in our definition of learning Torah. If learning these pages of gemara is Talmud Torah because it is meant to teach us about the universe that God created, then shouldn't modern astronomy, which we think is true, be Talmud Torah by kal vachomer? The same could be said for the many times that math, medicine, physics, and other information or misinformation about the physical world is included in the Talmud and other rabbinic texts.

Let's look further at the value Torah and Judaism place on learning about the world around us. The Torah commands us, as we recite every day in kriyat shma, to "love" Hashem. In the second chapter of hilchot Yesodei Hatorah, the Rambam tell us that the proper path to love of God is knowledge of his creations. The theory is that knowing what God has created fills one with awe and love of the Creator. The Rambam even goes so far as to include a fair amount of physics and metaphysics, as they were known in his time, to facilitate this knowledge.

Rav Yitzchak Twersky, zichron tzadik l'vrachah used to say that for the Rambam, there were 2 sources of truth: The Torah and Aristotle. We would have to substitute modern science for Aristotle, but I suspect that given that substitution most of our community would feel the same. If reality is a coherent whole, and we are to be whole people, we must, as Rav Twersky said the Rambam did, integrate these sources of truth into one coherent understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

Claiming that Aristotle and the Torah are on par with each other as sources of truth seems, at first glance, religiously problematic. However, I think if we look at it from the right perspective, it works perfectly. The Kadosh baruch Hu gave us the Torah, and that tells us a lot about who He is and what He wants, but it also gives us clues as to other places in which that information might be located. The Torah tells us the He created the world. Presumably, insofar as a human can understand God or his motives and behavior, God expressed his personality and values (keveyachol) in His creations. Kal vachomer in his creation of people, who are supposed to resemble God in some ineffable fashion. That is why so many ancient and medieval rabbis studied physics and metaphysics – they were seen as windows into the mind of God Himself. I see no reason that modernity should change the basic truth that reality is a source for information about God.

Perhaps my argument only applies to the sciences, and not to the humanities? I think not. Since the Torah tells us that people are created in the image of God, it follows that the study of human nature can also tell us about God. There are countless places in midrash and Talmud where some action of God is explained by telling a story about a flesh and blood person, usually a king, who found himself in a similar situation. That process should be reversible – that is, the study of what real people have actually done and wanted and thought should tell us something about their Creator.

For much of Jewish history, higher-level study of any topic was restricted to the privileged few. And so the mitzvot of Talmud Torah and Ahavat Hashem were fulfilled by most people only in a limited way. In our time and place, though, things have changed. For the first time ever, we have a religious school system that is teaching almost all of our children science, math, history, and other subjects at a sophisticated level. Our children are some of the best educated laypeople in the history of the Jewish people, and they are being educated in a Jewish environment that we can control. This seems like a perfect opportunity to imbue all of our children's learning with religious meaning by putting all of this information into religious context. We have the best opportunity ever seen by the Jewish people to engage in true ahavat Hashem as a community.

In our classrooms full of Modern Orthodox children, we could ask students to contemplate the religious meaning of each thing they learn. This would, of course, have to be done according to the age and sophistication of the students and the specific content being taught. We could train our students in a habit of mind – to treat each event in life and each learned fact as an opportunity to connect to Judaism and God. That is, the purpose of asking a student to consider the religious meaning of what they learn is for them to understand their education as one coherent and religious whole and for them to develop a relationship with God. The specific meanings they derive are secondary.

Let me offer a couple of examples that I find personally meaningful. My examples are the meaning I find, obviously, not an authoritative treatise on theology. First, in honor of the Rambam, an example from astronomy. We see that moons revolve around planets, planets around stars, solar systems around the centers of galaxies, etc. It seems to me that God might be demonstrating through this that whatever appears to be at the “center” of a particular system is still just a small detail in yet another system. I take this as a great lesson in humility – I may be the center of authority in my classroom or my home (at least I wish I were), but in the grand scheme of things I am a relative nobody. Likewise with the people who hold authority over me. The only exception to this rule is God Himself.

Whenever he hears an evolutionary biology theory of why a species has a particular feature, my husband likes to say that maybe that species has that feature because Hashem finds it cute, nothing more or less. He may intend this comment as a joke, but I think there is actually a great insight here – what survives in this universe is what Hashem likes and approves of, and we should be able to learn from that. This sort of understanding would stand in contrast to the reactionary response to evolution sometimes found in the Orthodox Jewish community. Just last week, someone told me of a school (not a Modern Orthodox one) that tears out the evolution chapter from the biology textbook before distributing it to students. It seems to me that this is *kfira* – they deny students scientific knowledge because they think Torah isn’t compatible with it, and if Torah isn’t compatible with reality, then Torah is false. That aside, the study of how species come to be should be able to tell us a great deal about what God likes and does not like. For example, it seems that God has an esthetic sensibility -- acts that are pointless except as a sort of decoration are common in many species. Yes, I know the theory about demonstrating fitness by using energy for something pointless, but the two are not incompatible.

A midrash in Sanhedrin 38b tells us that before creating people, God asked the angels their advice. They advised against creating people, predicting that people would not behave well. God has to destroy two sets of angels before the third set finally sees that what God really wants is to be told that He’s in charge and can do as He pleases. It may be that this midrash indicates that God himself engages in artistic but inefficient endeavors. Which is to say that we can learn from the species God created, including ourselves, that there is purpose and beauty even (or maybe especially) in that which is not useful.

In addition to reflecting on our theology, knowledge of the world can also directly impact our understanding of the written Torah. The Torah tells us what Hashem thinks about events, but it doesn’t actually tell us what happened. I like to think of it as the op-ed page or blog. The problem with such things is that they only have their complete meanings when the history is also known. To some extent, we have preserved this information in Torah She’be’al Peh. To the extent that we have lost this information, though, archeology is vital. Of course, since archeology is very much a work in progress, it is wise to refrain from making any hasty conclusions, but nonetheless one can look for information and meaning.

When we study literature, we can also find new meaning that reflects back on our study of Torah. I did not really understand why we needed 40 years in the desert until I read *BeLoved*, by Toni Morrison. It was very clear to me that her characters were not ready for independent existence, and they could really have used a generation or two of specialized care in the isolation of the desert before they tried to

cope on their own. When I tried to explain this to my very secular public school English teacher, I was met with blank stares, but I hope that in a Modern Orthodox day school the response would be different.

Likewise, I find I can no longer read or teach the story of Moshe Rabbeinu's infancy without using what I have learned reading the Harry Potter series. It is, in many ways, a meditation on what it means to grow up with other people knowing that you are the savior, even though you do not. Rashi indicates both at Moshe's birth and at the moment when he is pulled from the Nile that his appearance is unusual and miraculous. Is this to indicate that Yocheved and Bat Paro know what he is and what he will do while he is still a baby? How did this impact on his upbringing? For me, anyway, I really only understood these questions after seeing J K Rowling's fictional treatment of a savior character being manipulated by his adults, so that he will be in exactly the right places, with exactly the right tools, feelings, and beliefs, at exactly the right moment. In that light, I now wonder, when Moshe went out to his brothers, who made sure that he went out at that moment, in that place, and saw those people? What preparation had he received for that moment? Was it divine providence? Human interference? Chance?

I hope that we have designed our Modern Orthodox day schools to facilitate this sort of thinking and learning. I am concerned, though, that our schools teach children that some subjects are "secular" and others are "holy". Also, at some schools many "secular studies" teachers do not share our religious beliefs and values, and many Torah teachers are unsure of the value of learning secular subjects. I fear that sometimes we may give our students the impression that it is best to leave their souls at the door when they enter a science classroom and to leave their scientific minds at the door when they enter the beit midrash.

I have been asked, doesn't the school system you're asking for require all of our teachers to be modern Orthodox? Wouldn't that be impractical? Are there enough modern Orthodox teachers? I answer with some questions of my own: if we have to ask if it is a good idea for the people raising our children to share our values, in what sense are they our values? If we do not educate our children to be the best Jews they can be, then who are we? The Kadosh baruch Hu gave us the Torah. Now it is our role to find out who He is and what He wants.

Shabbat Shalom veChag Sameach

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