

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



## OUR FAITH AND OUR FACTS Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Does existence matter? To non-philosophers the answer is almost certainly yes. But Kant famously undid the ontological argument, or at least some versions of it, by arguing that “existence is not a predicate” and changes nothing essential about the object of discussion, and therefore a perfect being need not exist to be perfect. The Rav (following Plato) at some points makes a similar argument about halakhic objects such as the rebellious son (*ben sorer umoreh*). It seems a small leap to argue that the same is true of stories, and that we should therefore be indifferent to the historicity of Tanakh.

This has been one common response to Joshua Berman’s recent article in *Mosaic* arguing for the historicity of the Exodus narrative in the Torah.

Now it is a pleasant luxury to have this discussion when the relevant evidence supports rather than opposes historicity, and for this alone Rabbi Dr. Berman deserves our gratitude. At the very least, those who profess to disdain his work on principle can later use that disdain as evidence that their indifference to negative evidence is not mere camouflage for an overeager intellectual surrender.

But I think their response is fundamentally mistaken. Here’s why:

A story may be no less meaningful if it is the product of imagination rather than recollection, if it results from genesis rather than from an effort at mimesis. But very often it will not have the same meaning.

Let’s take the case of the rebellious son (*ben sorer umoreh*) as an analogy. Halakhic Man endorses the Tannaic position that the rebellious son “has not been and will never be,” and

contends that the meaningfulness of studying its laws is not thereby impaired. But should we learn it the same way once we accept that position?

I think there must be changes. First, with regard to “factual” laws we have an obligation to read the text and decide the law in ways that make it practicable, physically and emotionally. For example, we cannot decide that only unicorn horns are kosher *shofarot*, and we cannot require people to fast consecutive days for Yom Kippur because of calendar doubt. But there are no such limitations with regard to the rebellious son if we accept the “nonfactual” position.

Second, the morals we derive from the law may change radically. As a pure hypothetical, we read it as hyperbole, which opens up the opportunity to understand the relevant sin as addiction rather than breach of filial duty, for example. Once we genuinely consider the possibility of executing someone for this crime, we have to make the crime at least conceivably fit the punishment.

I suggest that it is further vital to distinguish here between two kinds of fiction, the imaginary and the symbolic.

Imaginary fictions have no direct relationship to our reality; they educate about our reality by contrast. Some wonderful example are the alternatives to relativistic time in Alan Lightman’s *Einstein’s Dreams*.

Symbolic fictions, by contrast, are nonliteral descriptions of our reality.

Rashi to *Genesis* 1:1 cites a *midrash* in which G-d initially plans to create the world with justice alone, but realizing that it would not survive, He partners mercy to justice and creates. This explains the shift in Divine Names between the first and

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second creation stories. But it also contends that the first creation story is an imaginary fiction; it describes the world the way it would have been had G-d not allowed mercy to play a role in creation. The second creation story, by contrast, is a symbolic fiction. It describes human existence as we know it, even if one chooses not to believe that snakes once talked or had legs.

Imaginary fictions are often intended to inspire revolution. Tales of utopia instill in us the urge to make our world more like them; they challenge us to transform “is” into “ought.” This can be particularly dangerous if the “ought” they inspire us toward is not only imaginary but impossible.

Symbolic fictions are often aimed at education, at making us recognize truths and patterns we have missed in our reality.

For example, the *mishkan* is a microcosmos, or a symbolic representation of all Creation. This is based *inter alia* on the allusions to *Genesis* 1:3 in the *parshiyot* dealing with the construction of the *mishkan*, especially the frequent use of את המלאכה ויכל משה/ויכל א-להים ביום מלאכה in both, the parallel השביעי מלאכתו. But which Creation does the *mishkan* represent: the imaginary Creation of the first story, or the very real Creation of the second?

A natural corollary of the *mishkan* as microcosm is that it should reach its apogee on Shabbat, and indeed, when Moshe gathers the people to do the work, he speaks about Shabbat. But here Chazal display a peculiar ambivalence. Construction of the *mishkan* must be halted on Shabbat, but the service must continue. Why?

Rishonim famously debate whether G-d originally commissioned the *mishkan* before or after the Golden Calf. Nachmanides holds before, but acknowledges that the meaning of the *mishkan* was transformed by that sin.

I suggest that the transformation is best understood in light of *Genesis*. The *mishkan* was originally intended to represent the first creation narrative, but after the Golden Calf it shifted to represent the second.

One difference between the two creation narratives is Shabbat. The first story begins with chaos and ends in perfection=Shabbat; the second story begins in perfection and never makes it back to Shabbat. I suggest that *Halakhab* marks and honors this shift by having the construction of the *mishkan* parallel the Six Days of Creation, but having the ritual of the *mishkan* parallel the task of human beings in the Garden of Eden – לעבדה ולשמרה. Thus the construction of the *mishkan* ceases on Shabbat, to honor the Creator of the first creation story, whereas the ritual continues on Shabbat, to symbolize the human responsibility set forth by the second creation story.

Thus the *mishkan* symbolizes both an imaginary world and our own, and these worlds differ greatly from each other.

By the same token, I contend, it should matter very much whether the overall Exodus narrative in *Chumash* is historical record or rather a symbolic representation of history. For starters, was there an actual tribe named Amalek whom we were commanded to exterminate? Note that there is a third possibility, which is that the story symbolizes a counter-historical Creation, along the lines of the first Creation story.

More generally, I think that it is a good idea to make one's faith depend on the truth of as few “facts” as possible. But that should not preclude us from having a religious rooting interest in the confirmation of some “facts” and the disproof of others. Among my rooting interests is for the Exodus narrative to be a historical demonstration of Divine compassion for the oppressed rather than an illustration of a hypothetical counter-history. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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