

דבר בעתו

TIMELY WORDS: Holiday Insights Throughout the Year

Timely Words offers insights into many of the religious and secular occasions throughout the year that mark the modern American Jewish calendar, starting with the fall (incorporating Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur) and moving, consecutively, through the winter (Thanksgiving, Chanukah, and Tu BiShevat), spring (Purim, Pesach, Yom HaAtzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim), and summer (Shavuot and Tish' a BeAv).

The insights are drawn from a wide variety of classical, medieval, and modern sources and address subjects that are both traditional and unconventional. For example, the opening fall section includes an extensive study of Jewish angelology (“Angels Dancing on a Silicon Chip”) to address whether God now uses a computer to record our merits and debits, and the concluding summer section explores the question of the rebuilding of the Temple and reinstitution of sacrifices according to three significant modern Jewish personalities: Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook, Rabbi Hayyim Hirschensohn, and Theodore Herzl.

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In addition, he has been teaching a weekly Shabbat class in parashat hashavua at Lincoln Square Synagogue in Manhattan for the past 37 years, incorporating modern literary readings of the Torah texts as well as those of medieval and modern exegetes, and including the insights of historians, philologists, and archaeologists. Among his earlier books are *Studies in the Weekly Parashah, based on the lessons of Nehama Leibowitz* (Urim, 2008); *TANAKH: An Owner’s Manual* (Ktav, 2015); *Reading the Rav* (Kodesh, 2018), and *In the Company of Prophets* (Kodesh, 2021). He is an active member of Hatzalah Volunteer Ambulance Corps, with which he has served for over 35 years.



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The World in Suspended Animation

Matan Torah in Aggadah

Preface

A characteristic theme struck by the Aggadah is that the entire universe was created solely for the Torah. This manifests itself in such well-known statements as “God looked into the Torah and created the world” (Zohar, *Terumah*) or in the homily that interprets the Torah’s first word, *Bereishit*, as “for the sake of Torah, which is called *reishit*” (*Lekach Tov, Bereishit* 1). The converse, as we shall see, is also true: Without Torah, existence is endangered.

Existence Depends on Torah

According to several *aggadot*, if the observance of Torah were to cease, the world would return to the chaotic state whence it originally emerged.

1. The Talmud (*Shabbat* 88a) states:

God stipulated a condition with the outcomes of creation:
If Israel accepts the Torah, you will be sustained. If not, I shall restore you to chaos and void.

2. And elsewhere (*Pesachim* 68b), we find:

“Thus said the Lord. If not for my covenant, day and night, I would not have established the limits of heaven and earth” (*Jeremiah* 33:25). If not for Torah, heaven and earth would not be sustained.

This idea is also reflected in the classic commentary of Rashi in the very first chapter of the Torah:

3. On Genesis 1:31: “There was sunset and sunrise: The sixth day” (*va-y’hi ’erev va-y’hi boker, yom ha-shishi*), Rashi stipulated:

[The Torah] added the [definite article] *heih* to the sixth day¹ at the conclusion of the act of creation, to indicate that [God] imposed a condition on it: [namely] that Israel accepts the five books of the Torah.²

4. Rashi then adds an alternative explanation of *ha-shishi*:

All [creation] was kept in suspension (*teluyim ve’om’dim*) until the sixth day of Sivan, which was prepared for the delivery of the Torah.

According to this alternate interpretation, “the sixth” is an allusion to the calendar date of Shavuot, the traditional anniversary of the giving of the Torah (*matan Torah*).

Nature Awaited Torah Expectantly

An outgrowth of the previous idea is conveyed in several beautiful *aggadot* that depict elements of nature participating in the drama of the giving of the Torah, as though they recognized that their own existence depended upon it.

1. *Exodus Rabbah* (29:9): A rivalry developed among the mountains as to where *matan Torah* should occur.

When God came to deliver the Torah at Sinai, Mount Tabor and Mount Carmel began running about and arguing with one another. One said: “The Torah will be delivered on

1. The five previous days are grammatically indefinite (*echad, sheini, shelishi*, etc.) while it is “the” sixth day, using the definite article.

2. The alpha-numerical value of the letter *heih* is five.

me,” while the other said: “The Torah will be delivered on me.”

As we know, the Torah was delivered on neither of those two mountains (arguably, the most prominent mountains in the Land of Israel), but upon Mt. Sinai, a mountain so inconspicuous³ that its very location is uncertain.

2. Also in *Exodus Rabbah* (29:9):

When God delivered the Torah, birds neither chirped nor flew, oxen did not bellow, the sea was tranquil, and people did not speak. The entire world waited in silence until the voice [*kol*] was heard saying: “I am the Lord your God.”

The sense of anticipation fraught with anxiety is almost palpable in these depictions.

Har KeGigit: Giving Torah by Force?

The aggadic narrative of *matan Torah* contains a problematic passage whose interpretation has long divided sages and scholars. *Shabbat* 88a (the *locus classicus* of this subject), which we have cited above, states:

“They stood at the bottom of the mountain” (Exodus 19:17): R. Avdimi ben Hasa said: This teaches us that God overturned the mountain above them as though it were a barrel, saying to them: If you accept the Torah, well and good, but if not, there you shall be buried.

The normative interpretation of this passage follows the subsequent remarks of R. Aha bar Yaakov: “This clearly constitutes grounds for the denial of responsibility for the Torah” (*moda’a rabbah le’oraita’*). As

3. Later sources portray Mt. Sinai as a paragon of humility. Cf. R. Isaiah Horowitz: *Sh’nei Luchot ha-B’rit* (*Sha’ar ha-Otiyot: Anavah*).

explained by Rashi: “If God were to sue Israel for breach of promise, they could reply: We received the Torah under duress.” Indeed, the Talmud, in the continuation, argues that the binding legal force of Torah observance is not due to its original forcible acceptance at Sinai, as much as its subsequent voluntary acceptance at the time of Purim. At that time, despite the incentive to renounce their distinctive laws and practices, the Jews chose to “uphold and cherish” their traditions (Esther 9:27), in perpetuity.

An Alternate Reading

Yitzhak Heinemann, one of the foremost modern interpreters of Aggadah, offered an alternate scenario. He suggested that R. Aha, with a Babylonian’s typical preoccupation with juridical affairs, may have grossly misunderstood the intent of the Palestinian R. Avdimi, who was speaking in the highly symbolic aggadic mode, more typical of the Land of Israel.

In light of the preceding sources surrounding the equation between Torah and sustained existence, we may understand Avdimi to have meant that since the world was dependent on the acceptance of the Torah, God was advising Israel that its rejection of the Torah would mean the end of the world: “There you shall be buried” because everything would revert to utter nihility (*tohu va-vohu*).

Indeed, Heinemann’s interpretation is consistent with yet another legend surrounding *matan Torah*, namely that God offered the Torah to other nations – who declined it.

First of all, God approached the descendants of Esau⁴ and said to them: “Will you accept the Torah?” They replied: “Master of

4. In talmudic lore, this is a standard designation first for Romans and, later, for Christians. See Moshe Sokolow: “Esav; From Edom to Rome,” in Daniel Z. Feldman, Stuart W. Halperin (eds.): *Mitokh Ha-Ohel; Essays on the Weekly Haftarah Reading from the Rabbis and Professors of Yeshiva University* (NY: Yeshiva University Press, 2011), 65–77.

the Universe; what is written in it?” He said: “Do not murder.” They replied: “Our entire essence is based upon bloodshed [*cherev*], as our ancestor [Isaac] promised [his son Esau]: ‘You shall live by the sword’ (Genesis 27:40). We cannot accept the Torah.”

He went next to the descendants of Ishmael⁵ and said: “Will you accept the Torah?” They replied . . . (*Pesikta Rabbati* 21).

Because God had already been turned down by the other nations of the world, Israel was the last resort. If they, too, had declined to accept the Torah, the word would have lost its *raison d’être* and everything – not Israel alone – would have reverted to chaos and void.

Halakhah and Aggadah: Creative Tension

The tension between jurisprudence and folklore hinted at in Heine-
mann’s explanation of the misunderstanding between R. Aha and R.
Avdimi, and the common preference for the latter over the former is
captured by the following Aggadah:

R. Abbahu and R. Hiyya b. Abba once came to a place. R. Abbahu expounded Aggadah and R. Hiyya b. Abba expounded legal matters (*shema’ata*).⁶ All the people left R. Hiyya b. Abba and went to hear R. Abbahu, so that the former was upset.

[R. Abbahu] said to him: “I will give you a parable. To what is the matter like? To two men, one of whom was selling precious stones and the other various kinds of small ware. To whom will the people hurry? Is it not to the seller of various kinds of small ware?” (*Sotah* 40a).

5. Arabs; later Muslims. The redaction of *Pesikta Rabbati* is generally dated to the ninth century.

6. Literally: “something heard.” It is an allusion to the originally oral nature of the Jewish legal tradition and is a meaningful counterpart to the term *aggadah* (or *haggadah*), which literally means something told over.

Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934), who studied at the Volozhin yeshiva as a young man, captured the essence of this tension in an essay entitled “Halakhah and Aggadah,” that often appears as the prologue to *Sefer ha-Aggadah*, an anthology he published. His précis is:

The face of *halakhah* is stern, while that of *aggadah* is merry. The former is exacting, strict and tough as nails; the attribute of justice (*middat ha-din*). The latter is forgiving, lenient, as soothing as oil; the attribute of compassion (*middat ha-rachamim*).

Rabbi A.I. Kook (1865–1935), likewise an alumnus of Volozhin, proposed the following reconciliation:

We must stress the joining of these two forces in a proper form, so that each will give added strength to the content of the other, help clarify its particulars and shed more light on its general concepts, on the depth of its logic and its far-reaching significance.

The *halakhah* must be made more appealing through association with the *aggadah*, in an appropriate manner, and the *aggadah*, likewise, needs to be assessed in its relationship to the clearly defined fixed laws and the particularized delimiting logic represented in the established structure of the *halakhah*. Thereby will the vitality and fruitfulness of both be doubled.⁷

7. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook: “The Unification of Halakhah and Aggadah,” *The Lights of Holiness* I, 25–28.