

Parashat Behaalotecha, 5773, 2013:

*Seventy Approaches to Torah Analysis*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Our holy Torah is composed of both halachic (legal) and narrative portions. While there is usually nearly universal consensus that a particular law exists, halachic passages are often the focus of diverse interpretations regarding their pragmatic application. Thus, an entire genre of Jewish literature has arisen whose sole purpose is to determine the practical ramifications of both Torah and Rabbinic laws. In many ways, the creation of this unique and dynamic body of literature has continued unabated since, at the moment of the Sinaitic Revelation, our forebears declared “*Naaseh v’nishmah*” (“We will do and we will accept,” *Sefer Shemot* 24:7).

In an attempt to apprehend the supernal wisdom of our Creator, narrative passages of the Torah have also been the focal point of intense exegetical and interpretive scrutiny. In contrast to the juridical sections of the Torah, *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) gave themselves license for wide-ranging and often radically divergent interpretations of this material. Beginning with the *Zohar*, this idea has become known as “*shivim panim l’Torah*” (“the 70 facets of Torah interpretation”). One of the clearest presentations of this notion is found in the anonymous 13<sup>th</sup> Century work entitled “*Sefer Hachinuch*.” In Mitzvah 95, the author states:

It is a known and widely recognized tenet among us, the people who accept the *mitzvot*, that there are seventy facets to the Torah; for each one of them there are great and manifold roots, and every root has branches, each of which bears a great cluster of desirable fruit to make hearts wise. Every day they produce blossoms for those who attend them diligently – blossoms of wisdom and good intelligence, bringing light to all eyes. The depth of its wisdom widens and winds about until a man has not the power to grasp its ultimate sense. As the wise king [Solomon] avowed, *I said, "I will get wisdom"; but it was far from me* (Ecclesiastes 7:23). With all that, however, the hands of anyone who occupies himself with it should not be slackened. For if he eats a little or much of it, it is all sweet. (Translation, Charles Wengrov)

Our *parasha* contains a prime example of a *pasuk* (verse) that is highly illustrative of *shivim panim l'Torah*. *Sefer Bamidbar* 10:33 reads the following: "They [the Jewish people] traveled a distance of three days from the mountain of the L-rd, and the Ark of the L-rd's covenant traveled three days ahead of them to seek for them a place to settle." Tosafot on *Talmud Bavli Shabbat* 116a quotes the now lost *Midrash Vayachulu* (attributed therein to *Midrash Yelamdainu*) in the following fashion:

*Vayisu* and they traveled – they traveled away from Mt. Sinai in the manner of a journey of three days – just like a young child who runs away from school [at day's end] – that he flees and travels away. So, too, did the Jewish people run away from Mt. Sinai in the manner of a journey of three days because they had learned a great deal of Torah at Mt. Sinai.

The emphasis in this Midrash is unmistakable: Our ancestors failed to live up to their potential to achieve further spiritual greatness. Instead of embracing the opportunity to learn more Torah, in the very place where it was given, they squandered this precious moment. Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (1550–1619) *zatzal*, known as the Kli Yakar after the title of his most famous and beloved work, elaborates upon this Midrash. He suggests that *b'nai Yisrael* ran away "out of fear that perhaps [G-d] would add even more Mitzvot to them." Instead of rejoicing in the words of Hashem and His commandments, they rebelled against Him. Like young and immature *cheder* students,

they attempted to flee responsibility. In sum, a more negative portrait of the *Dor Hamidbar* (Generation of the Desert) could hardly be painted.

Rabbeinu Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) adopted a completely different approach in his analysis of our *pasuk*. In stark contrast to the Midrash, Tosafot, and Kli Yakar, for whom our verse represents consummate failure and rebellion, Rav Hirsch discovered an understated moment of human drama and existential anxiety. In his view, G-d, via His divine beneficence, assuaged our forebears' fears with His unbounded kindness and mercy:

As it does not say “they traveled three days,” but [rather] “a way of three days,” it probably wishes to express the hardship and strain caused by such a three days journey. But “the Ark of the Covenant of G-d went before them for three days journey” [i.e.,] they had the Ark of G-d’s covenant before their eyes during the whole of the three days trek looking out for a suitable place for them to rest, and this constant view could well keep them in the fresh and cheerful mood of knowing that G-d was leading them, as well as the “cloud of G-d” which remained constantly with them and made them feel assured on all their wanderings that they had G-d’s Protection accompanying them. (Translation, Isaac Levy, brackets my own)

Aristotle created the principle of logic known as the Law of the Excluded Middle, which maintains that every statement is either true or false, and there is nothing in between. In stark contrast, Judaism embraces a wide-open universe of legitimate Torah interpretation. Consequently, we frequently encounter contradictory analyses of narrative Torah passages that coexist in harmony with one another. *Chazal* coined the phrase “*elu v’elu divrei Elokim chaim*” (“these and those are the words of the living G-d”) to depict the authenticity of this pluralistic approach to Torah exposition. In my view, it is precisely this principle that has kept the Torah vibrant, relevant, and responsive to our people’s ever-changing needs and requirements. Moreover, it may well be the underlying rationale

as to why the Jewish people continue to exist and thrive, instead of having become one more nation relegated to the dustbin of history.

May we be *zocheh* (merit) to always have “the Ark of the Covenant of G-d” and His holy clouds go before us on all of our journeys. May G-d’s divine protection ever assure us of His love and concern for our people as we move closer and closer to the coming of *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (our Righteous Messiah). May this time come soon and in our days.

*V’chane yihi ratzon*

Shabbat Shalom

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\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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