

The Torah and Truth

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 bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Chazal (our Sages of blessed memory) established the yearly calendar in such a manner as to ensure that the public reading of our *parasha* would invariably precede the Festival of Shavuot. In their divinely-inspired wisdom, they perceived an inextricable link between Parashat Bamidbar and Shavuot. Since Shavuot is known as *zman matan Toratenu* (the time of the Giving of our Torah), it would appear that the Parashat Bamidbar – Shavuot time-nexus is the perfect moment to think about the Torah and some of its most essential ideas. As such, I would like to briefly examine the Torah's concept of *emet* (truth).

The following famous Talmudic passage was generated as a result of a highly technical *machloket* (dispute) regarding ritual purity and impurity. It is one of the most famous sources in all of Rabbinic literature that discusses the relationship between G-d, man, Torah and truth:

On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. Said he to them: "If the *halachah* agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!" Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place — others affirm, four hundred cubits. "No proof can be brought from a carob-tree," they retorted. Again he said to them: "If the *halachah* agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!" Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards — "No proof can be brought from a stream of water," they rejoined. Again he urged: "If the *halachah* agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it," whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But R. Joshua rebuked them, saying: "When scholars are engaged in a halachic dispute, what have you

to interfere?” Hence they did not fall, in honor of R. Joshua, nor did they resume the upright position, in honor of R. Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined. Again he said to them: “If the *halachah* agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!” Whereupon a Heavenly Voice (*bat kol*) cried out: “Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the *halachah* agrees with him!” But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: “It is not in heaven.” (“*lo bashamayim he*,” *Sefer Devarim* 30:12) What did he mean by this? — Said R. Jeremiah: “That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because You have long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai (*Sefer Shemot* 23:2), ‘After the majority must one incline.’” (*Talmud Bavli, Baba Metziah* 59b, translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my emendations)

The Talmud’s words are remarkable, to say the least. They demonstrate that imperfect human reason and the principle of majority rule are the determinants in any halachic dispute – even when one of the disputants is a *bat kol*!

HaRav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1820-1892), known as “the *Beit HaLevi*,” after the name of his works by this title, builds upon our Talmudic passage in his explication of the Torah’s role in our lives. (Commentary to *Sefer Shemot* 19:5) He explains that the Torah was given to the Jewish people in its ideal heavenly form (*Torah sh'bichtav*), in conjunction with our obligation to interpret it and arrive at practical solutions to the problems of daily living (*halacha l'ma'aseh*). He further notes that these conclusions are our “Truth,” since our Sages were tasked with the explication and application of the Torah (i.e. *Torah shel ba'al peh*). In addition, based upon Rabbi Yehoshua’s utilization of the verse, “the Torah is no longer in Heaven,” (“*lo bashamayim he*,” *Sefer Devarim* 30:12), Rav Soloveitchik concludes that its earthly truth can only be apprehended through man’s intense study and analysis. This is the case, since, *lo nitnah haTorah l'malachei hashareit* (the Torah was not given to the Ministering Angels), but rather to the Jewish people at the moment we encountered *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He) at Mount Sinai.

Rabbi Asher Weiss *shlita*, in his introduction to *Sheilot u'Teshuvot Minchat Asher*, volume I, expands upon Rav Soloveitchik's analysis. In his thought-provoking essay entitled, "*Din Emet l'Amito*" ("True Law According to its Truth"), Rav Weiss asks, "Is there such a concept of a truth that is not according to its truth, and [if so,] what is truth that is not according to its truth?" (Brackets my own) In his answer to these two questions, Rav Weiss examines the essence of Torah and Jewish Law:

It appears that we can explain the following: When the Holy One Blessed be He gave the Torah to the Jewish people, He did not give them wisdom alone. Instead, He gave them the ability and strength to **rule over** the Torah ("*lishlot ba'Torah*") and render an absolute decision even if this decision, so to speak, is against the opinion of Hashem ("*da'at elyon*"). For this is the path of the Torah and the nature of Halacha: The Torah Sages are those to whom the Torah was passed down to reveal its mysteries, to decrypt its underlying principles, to decide the cases in doubtful matters and to render conclusive judgments regarding its laws. Their decision, in consonance with the wisdom of the Torah that man's Creator gave to them, are the essence of the Torah itself. (Translation and bolding my own)

Rabbi Weiss continues his response and elucidates the differences that obtain between "*din emet*" ("a true law") and "*din l'amito*" ("a law according to its truth"):

There is [a concept we call] "*din emet*." It is the determination of the law by the great Torah Sages who, by their pure efforts, plumb the depths of Halacha in order to arrive at the truth of the Torah. We call this, "[G-d] **has given us the true Torah** ('*asher natan lanu Torat emet*')." In addition, there is [a concept we call] "*emet l'amito*" ("truth according to its truth"). This is achieved when we [i.e. the Sages] are additionally able to discern the ideal or Ultimate Truth (*din elyonah*) – in consonance with the Truth that is in the Heavens. At that point, the Heavens and earth "kiss one another," and the highest heights rejoice while the lower regions exult. When the Torah Sages of this world join in harmony with the highest Unity – then they are able to apprehend the decision of the most High (*da'at elyon*) and adjudicate the law on the level of ***emet l'amito***. (Translation, parentheses and brackets my own)

With Hashem's help, may we ever be the stewards and protectors of His Torah. May we be *zocheh* (merit), as well, to discern the *din emet* and to rejoice with the Almighty when our holy Sages discover the *emet l'amito*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** 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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