FIRST THINGS

TORAH AND INCARNATION

TORAH LEARNING BRIDGES THE GAP BETWEEN MAN AND GOD

by
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October 2010

How can finite man commune with an infinite God? To both Christians and Jews, God himself has made that possible by irrupting into the temporal world. To Christians, God became man in the Incarnation; to Jews, the God that spoke out of the fire on Mount Sinai gave his Torah. Their ways of experiencing God follow from their respective accounts of God's irruption into the world—and these accounts are profoundly different and reveal profoundly different theological perspectives. To Catholic, Orthodox, and some Protestant Christians, communion involves partaking of the physical real presence of God in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. By contrast, the Torah draws the Jew into engagement with God's infinite mind. Torah learning is the definitive Jewish mode of communion with God. Although the Torah contains in potential all that God wants to teach us, all the generations of Israel labor together to make this manifest. Because the Torah is infinite and inexhaustible, learning Torah yields new insights—what the rabbis called hiddushim, or innovations. That is how the Torah sustains and renews Israel's love affair with God. A love nourished by the Torah may seem obscure to Christians, and perhaps even more obscure to loosely affiliated Jews. God loves Israel by sanctifying everyday life—waking, eating, and family relations, along with birth, marriage, and death. We bless God who "has sanctified us with his commandments" in all these actions. But God has made Israel his partner in sanctification by giving a Torah that requires the human mind to engage the mind of God.

Jews seek to cleave to the will of God as set forth in the Bible and, particularly, the Pentateuch, with its rabbinic commentaries, the Mishnah and Talmud. And although the five books of Moses contain history as

well as law, it is first of all the legal aspects of the Bible that constitute a bridge to the divine. A Jew's definitive devotional act is learning "the law." As the nineteenth psalm puts it: "The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul: The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes."

Judaism thus focuses on the commanded word of God, which stands in contrast to Christianity and its turn toward what the Gospel of John calls the "Word made flesh." Jews focus on the Torah, the embodiment of God's will; Christians, on an embodied God. At the heart of this distinction are two very different answers to the question faced by all faiths: How does finite, physical, fallible man relate to an infinite, immaterial, and almighty God?

God warns us that "man cannot see Me and live." But if we cannot envision God, how can we approach him? The human mind yearns for the infinite but is incommensurate with it. In his reflections on prayer, C. S. Lewis confided that he found it difficult to pray to a noncorporeal God: "I didn't mean that a 'bright blur' is my only idea of God. I meant that something of that sort tends to be there when I start praying, and would remain if I made no effort to do better. And 'bright blur' is not a very good description. In fact you can't have a good description of anything so vague. If the description became good it would become false."

For Christians, that gap is bridged through the Incarnation—through God becoming man. God thus accomplishes what man himself cannot, becoming finite so that finite man may commune with him. For Jews, incarnation seems not so much to bridge the gap as to abolish it. In the Jewish understanding, finitude is absolutely untrue to God's incorporeal, infinite nature. Indeed, recalling the Sinai revelation, God himself sternly warns, "Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of image on the day that the LORD spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire." God's presence dwells in the Temple and amidst the people of Israel, and the "glory of God" descends onto Sinai and leads Israel through the desert. In that sense, God may be considered to be present in the flesh of the Jewish people, as Michael Wyschogrod argues, but Hebrew Scripture never depicts the divine appearing before the Jewish people in human form.

Turning toward a God-man, an infinite Almighty in finite form, does not assist us in relating to God, because such an image of God ceases to be God. I must emphasize that Jews recognize the difference

between Christianity and pagan idolatry. Christians, like Jews, worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. At the same time, as I have explained previously in these pages ("No Friend in Jesus," First Things, December 2007), Jews believe that Christians, in the process of worshiping the God of Abraham, also worship a human being who was not God.

The Jewish rejection of incarnation, though, does not leave God at a distance, remote and inaccessible. Judaism approaches God through the observance of his commandments, the most important of which, equal to all the others combined, is Torah learning: the intellectual engagement with the divine author of the commandments. The liturgical dictum that the meta-commandment of Torah learning surpasses all other commandments makes clear that Jewish observance is not merely a matter of mechanical submission. Torah learning elicits a divine-human partnership, a continuing relationship of teacher and taught, of lover and beloved. It is not submission but communion, in which the engagement of the intellect is essential to approaching God.

This most characteristic aspect of Jewish practice escapes even some of Christianity's most acute thinkers. In his *Reflection on the Psalms*, for example, C. S. Lewis expresses astonishment at the psalmist's rapturous ode to the Torah in Psalm 19. "One can easily understand," Lewis assents, "how laws such as 'thou shalt not steal,' or 'thou shalt not commit adultery' are important to study, and even more important to obey." But "it is very hard to find how they could be, so to speak, delicious, how they exhilarate."

How, for instance, could anyone find the command against theft exhilarating? We must adhere to a moral code, of course, but Lewis insists that study of this code is "more aptly compared to the dentist's forceps or the front line than to anything enjoyable or sweet." He reports that he expressed his confusion to a Christian biblical scholar, who suggested that the psalmist is expressing delight in knowing that he had obeyed the law, in the "pleasures of a good conscience." Lewis, however, notes that "the psalmists never seem to me to mean anything very like this."

What, then, is to be made of the Jewish "delight" in the law? Lewis offers several conjectures. He notes that the corpus of Jewish law is vast and complex; one can delight in study in the way one enjoys his favorite subject, such as history, or physics, or archeology. Lewis further suggested that one's delight in mastering the complexities of divine legislation could be a manifestation of sinful, intellectual pride. Ultimately,

Lewis concludes his discussion with the suggestion that the biblical delight in the law must stem from the exultant knowledge that one's morality is superior to that of one's neighbors. The ancient Hebrews, Lewis notes, lived nowhere near a culture such as that of Greece, a center of wisdom and philosophy. Rather, their nearest neighbors were barbarians, Canaanites and Assyrians. Lewis imagines an ancient Jew contemplating that culture, reflecting that "when he thought of sacred prostitution, sacred sodomy, and the babies thrown in the fire for Moloch, his own 'Law' as he turned back to it must have shone with an extraordinary radiance."

That C. S. Lewis, a mind sensitive to religious questions, struggled to explain the psalmist's delight suggests that the source of Torah's surpassing sweetness is not intuitively obvious to Christians. Learning Torah proceeds from intense faith, but it is not merely a matter of faith. The encounter with the Divine takes place through lifelong intellectual engagement with God's infinite mind, which surpasses all praise and, by implication, all belief.

For hundreds of years, the discovery of *hiddushim*—new discoveries in the text, answers to conundrums and contradictions not previously discovered by earlier generations—has been a goal of Torah learning, perhaps the surpassing goal. One of the great authorities of twentieth-century Orthodox Judaism, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, refused while teaching to consult his own earlier interpretation of a Talmudic passage, lest it hinder him from discerning in the text something that he had missed. As his son-in-law, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, recounts:

> My brother-in-law, Rabbi Hayim [Soloveitchik], told me that as a young boy he studied Tractate Niddah with his father [Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik] . . . a certain point kept them from proceeding. The Rav, of blessed memory, considered the matter for a long time, and Hayim, in all innocence, said to him, "Papa, isn't this noted in the notebook in which you recorded the shi'urim [lectures] you gave last year in yeshiva? Let's look at it." This suggestion earned him a look in which wonderment and rebuke were mixed, as though he had suggested something indecent.

"Any insight," the Talmud states, "that a prodigious child will discover in the future, was already said to Moses at Sinai." Rabbi Lichtenstein notes that this does not mean that "the specific *hiddushim* were revealed

at Sinai" but rather "that, as latent possible developments and interpretations, they were, *in potentia*, present, only to be kinetically generated subsequently." The infinity of insights latent and awaiting human discovery moved the rabbis to marvel at the Torah's magnitude: A famous rabbinic passage reports, "If all seas were ink, all reeds quills, heaven and earth scrolls, and all men scribes, they would not suffice to write down the amount of Torah I have learned, even though I abstracted no more from it than a man might take by dipping a painting stick in the sea."

What, then, makes the Torah, as the psalmist says, "sweeter than honeycombs"? The answer lies in the joy of discovering God's mind. *Talmud Torah* demands intense engagement with God's will in order to bring to light new facets of the Divine Mind. To study Torah leads to new insights. And with every insight there emerges a deeper sense of the infinity of insights still hidden, waiting to be gleaned. Truly, as the infinite horizons of the Torah bring us to see, the mind of God is without limit.

The Torah was given as an invitation into the infinite expanses and depths of his mind, precisely because God refuses to present himself in finite form. The Torah is not God incarnate; it is not a finite embodiment of God; it is a bridge to divine infinity. God does not make himself finite through the Torah; he gives finite, fallible human beings the means to commune with his infinite mind. Through the nature of the law and its sanctifying regard for even the most minute of human actions, we can conceive of the loving nature of the Lawgiver; in the infinitude of the Torah we are given a glorious glimpse of the infinitude of the Almighty.

Because Torah learning is the definitive devotional act through which Israel relates to God, the search for *hiddushim* constantly renews Israel's relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. One who learns Torah comes to understand that Israel is loved by an infinite God and to rejoice in his infinity, which through study is made intimate without being made finite. On the contrary, because our capacity to engage God's will is depthless—we yet may discover facets of the Torah that our ancestors failed to see—we finite creatures participate in God's infinity.

This transcendence, however, is worldly rather than otherworldly. The more a Jew communes with the mind of God, the more he learns not only about God but also about himself. Judaism, Michael Wyschogrod argues, is a "religion of the body," in which the chosenness of Israel is realized through the sanctification of the body. God enlists his people as partners in achieving this sanctification. The study of

Torah endows every earthly action with holiness. As the sages of the Talmud admonish: "One ought not to begin words of prayer unless it follows the study of Torah." Every morning, prior to praying, religious Jews recite the rabbinic maxim that, while the reward for good deeds extends into the world to come, "The study of Torah is equivalent to them all." Torah study assumes a supreme role because it aligns our will with God's will. Another rabbinic maxim declares that Torah is studied *al menat la-asot*, in order to be obeyed and performed. The more one learns Torah, the better one knows God; and the better one knows God, the more one is aware of what this world, together with our actions in it, means to him.

In the world of Torah learning, communion with the mind of God is not Aquinas's beatific vision; it is a practical exercise. Its object is not a transcendent vision of perfection; instead, one seeks the specific shape of God's intent to sanctify our daily lives. The Neoplatonic tradition seeks the mind of God in the transcendent forms of things, of which our quotidian world seems a mere hint or shadow. In communion with the mind of the God of Israel, one seeks not the ideal forms but, rather, proper use of the pots and pans in a kosher kitchen, the candles and wine of the Sabbath table, and the laws governing Jewish birth, marriage, and death. Socrates spoke of philosophy as a way of escaping this world by way of a cognitive grasp of the transcendent perfection of the next. In contrast, the rabbis spoke of the afterlife as the "Heavenly Academy," whose divine Teacher and immortal pupils concern themselves with the here and now.

"When the righteous sit in the world to come," Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik writes, "they occupy themselves with the study of the Torah, which treats of bodily life in our lowly world . . . . They do not concern themselves with transcendence, with questions that are above space and time," he continues, "but with the problems of earthly life in all its details and particulars."

Religions influenced by Plato invariably maintain that the lower yearns for the higher, and the result is often an array of spiritual disciplines designed to lever the soul out of the body and into imagined realms of eternity distant from earthly life. In contrast, "halakhic man," writes Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik of the Torah-focused mode of Jewish life, "with his unique mode of understanding, declares: The higher longs and pines for the lower." As the ancient sages stated, God himself studies Torah in the age to come, concerning himself with minutiae of human life brought under the sanctifying purposes of his commandments.

This movement of the finite to the infinite—and the infinite to the finite—across the bridge of the Torah gives Jewish life a sensibility that interweaves the eternal splendor of God's commandments with the often arresting realities of earthly life. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik recalls an exemplary moment from his own childhood: "I remember how once, on the Day of Atonement, I went outside into the synagogue courtyard with my father [Rabbi Moses Soloveichik], just before the Ne'ilah service. It had been a fresh, clear day, one of the fine, almost delicate days of summer's end, filled with sunshine and light." His father turned to him and said, "This sunset differs from ordinary sunsets for with it forgiveness is bestowed upon us for our sins." As his knowledge of the Torah penetrated the young Rabbi Soloveitchik's experience of the sunset, he says, "The Day of Atonement and the forgiveness of sins merged and blended here with the splendor and beauty of the world and with the hidden lawfulness of the order of creation and the whole was transformed into one living, holy, cosmic phenomenon."

The Torah for Judaism, and the Eucharist for Christianity, recreates what each faith deems to be the central moment in human history. Torah reading reenters the Sinai revelation, *matan Torah*, the giving of the Torah, making the divinely saturated past part of the everyday present. The Torah reader proclaims the laws of God to the community, just as God proclaimed his will to the Jewish people millennia ago when he descended to Mount Sinai.

A comparison between the role of Torah learning in Judaism and that of the Eucharist in Christianity reveals a profound difference. Where Torah reading and study sanctify reality through God's commandments for the daily activity of life, for Christians, the Eucharist's bread and wine offer an encounter between physical man and physical God. Christians, to be sure, would insist that to reduce the Eucharist to a physical encounter would be a caricature, but many nevertheless insist that it is the "real presence" of God in the Eucharist that constitutes their communion with a God who is at once finite and infinite. For Christians, the gap between finite man and infinite God is thereby bridged; for Jews, Christians are succumbing to the temptation that Deuteronomy warns against: seeking to bridge the gap between man and God through finite means.

The two distinct practices, then, manifest radically different ways to bridge the gap between man and God. In a way that might surprise Christians whose reading of Paul trains them to label Jews as "carnal" and

Christians as "spiritual," the reverse seems to be true. Those who partake of the Eucharist enter into communion with what they believe to be God's physical body. Jews reject the notion that God might take bodily form and instead seek to commune with what they believe to be his infinite mind.

This sense of intimacy with God sustained the people of Israel through our long centuries of exile: Our oppressors bound our hands, but they could never enslave our intellects. In the millennia when we had neither power nor rights, we nonetheless walked with God in his kingdom through study.

Zog mir a shtickl Torah: The Yiddish phrase encapsulates the secret of Jewish survival. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the chief rabbi of Great Britain, notes, "In the shtetl, the small township of Eastern Europe, when Jews met, one would say to the other: '*Zog mir a shtickl Torah,* Tell me a little Torah.' Its words were their intimations of infinity, its letters the solid shapes of mysteries to be decoded." If there are in the Torah limitless insights waiting to be found, then Jewish survival is assured: For as long as there are *hiddushim* to be discovered, God will provide Jews to discover them. The Torah's infinity guarantees Jewish eternity.

Communion with the divine through Torah learning brings the Jew into God's eternal time. All the Jews who ever lived were present at Mount Sinai, the rabbis teach. Mount Sinai remains eternally present among us, always available to be studied and obeyed. All the generations of Israel, all its sages and teachers, assemble on the study benches of the Beit Midrash when Torah is learned.

"When I enter the classroom I am filled with despair and pessimism. I always ask myself: Can there be a dialogue between an old teacher and young students, between a rebbe in his Indian summer and boys enjoying the spring of their lives?" Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik asked. But the generations gather around the study table of Torah. "When I start a *shiur* [lesson]," adds Rabbi Soloveitchik, who is descended from influential Talmudists, "the door opens and another old man walks in and sits down. My students call me the Rav. He is older than the Rav. He is the grandfather of the Rav. His name is Reb Chaim Brisker."

The fellowship of Torah extends still further, transcending family connections and leaping over the centuries: "The door opens quietly again and another old man comes in. He is older than Reb Chaim because he lived in the seventeenth century. His name is Reb Shabbetai haKohen, the famous Shakh . . . . Then more visitors show up, some from the eleventh, twelfth, or thirteenth centuries . . . among them are

Rashi, Rabbeinu Tam, the Ravad and the Rashba. More and more keep on coming in."

The heat of disputation welds together the generations. As Rabbi Soloveitchik reports: "At times the Ravad utilizes harsh language against the Rambam. A boy jumps up to defend the Rambam against the Ravad. In his defense the student expresses himself rashly, too outspoken in his critique of the Ravad. Young boys are wont to speak in such a fashion. So I correct him and suggest more restrained tones. Another boy jumps up with a new idea." Centuries collapse into the eternity of Torah. The young speak in the voices of those long dead, citing the one against the other, wrestling with their solutions to the deep, puzzling questions of Torah. In this way, "A *mesorah* [tradition] collegiality is achieved. It is a friendship, a comradeship of young and old, spanning antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modern times."

Communion with the mind of God allows us to see history from God's perspective. Through Torah learning, Rabbi Soloveitchik concludes, "Not only the infinite past, but also the infinite future, the future in which there gleams the reflection of the image of eternity, also the splendor of the eschatological vision, arise out of the present moment, fleeting as a dream. Temporal life is adorned with the crown of everlasting life."

The human creature always feels the remoteness of God. As the prophet Isaiah reports: "And Zion said, 'God has left me.'" Yet we should not fear, for as Isaiah consoles, God has not forsaken us, he will redeem us: "For the Lord has comforted Zion, and made its desert into an Eden."

In most English translations, this verse from Isaiah promising redemption is rendered incorrectly, adopting the future tense in spite of the unmistakable past tense of the Hebrew. But the past tense is crucial, and it points to the central truth of a Torah-centered view of redemption. God gave the Torah to his people, planting eternal life among us. The desert is made into an Eden as Jews return to the Torah, making it present in action and study. Israel communes with God's infinite mind and lives in his eternity.

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