

As If

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Over Shavuot we have been thinking about how the Torah was given on Sinai. It is one of the fundamentals of our religion that we often take for granted. But what actually happened on Sinai is not at all clear. Even the Torah itself gives different descriptions in Exodus 19 and 24. And the rabbis in the Talmud and Midrash give differing opinions too. Nevertheless, Torah as we have it is the foundation of Judaism.

One of the most significant divides in religious communities is between the literalists and the figurativists—those who feel bound to take holy narratives literally, at face value, as opposed to those who put much greater emphasis on the idea, the significance, and the symbolism beneath the surface. The latter do not necessarily deny the historical background or that miraculous or amazing events took place, but see the text as a spiritual and behavioral guide, rather than a scientific textbook.

The Talmud, the Midrash, disagrees as to exactly what was transmitted on Sinai and when it was written down. But there is now a general assumption not only that the Torah comes from God but that all the Written and the Oral Law was given at one moment in time. To many Jews, even some Orthodox ones, this seems a trifle fanciful especially if one thinks that God told Moses on Sinai about Purim, Chanuka, two sets of crockery, the eiruv, or indeed how to use a time switch for Shabat.

The question, then, is whether one can remain within tradition and still find room and significance for those ideas that rationally one struggles with? What I have to say will not even be considered by the fundamentalist school of Jewish theology. But I am writing for those who do, indeed, try to reconcile rationalism with faith.

There is a solution in the idea first put forward by a German thinker, Hans Vaihinger (1852–1933). Dealing with “reality” and whether what we see and experience is “true”, he argued that human beings cannot really know the reality of the world. For example, the way a table looks to the human eye is very different to the way it looks through a powerful magnifying glass. Which is “real”? We behave “as if” the world matches what we think we see.

George Kelly (1905–1967), an American psychologist, also encouraged people to try different ways of looking at events to see what might happen when they act “as if” these alternative ways might work; in this way they might learn to change their ways of behaving.

So what matters is not if something really IS the way we see it, but how we respond to it and act. A wall may not be “solid” through a microscope, but I do not try walking through it. Would you rather someone who believed in being good but was not, or someone who questioned what it meant to “be good” but behaved completely and consistently according to the highest standards?

I am not convinced we are expected to adopt unquestioningly those ideas we have intellectual doubts about. I believe the rabbis of Talmud accept this when they say that what they cannot accept is the person who denies, rejects, as opposed to those who are still in the process of clarifying how to understand certain ideas. Only a "kofer" (a denier) is excoriated. Not the honest questioner.

As for how the rabbis want us to understand what they mean when they say something, the great medieval commentator Rashi, himself, says that Chazal often use language in an exaggerated way to attract the attention of the simple folk (Shabat 30b Mutav Techabeh). One of the most common hyperbolic forms of language used in Midrashic and Talmudic Judaism is the Hebrew word "keilu" which does actually translate "as if".

We are familiar with the phrase in the Hagadah, "In every generation one is obliged to see oneself as if one has actually come out of Egypt"(Pesachim 116b). Obviously this means "imagine" and is clearly not literal. But here are some other examples from the hundreds to be found in the Talmud:

"He who eats and drinks on Tisha B'Av [a rabbinic fast] it is as if he eats and drinks on [the stricter Biblical] Yom Kipur." (Taanit 30b)

"Whoever tells Lashon Hara [gossip] it is as if he denies the existence God." (Arachin 15b)

"Whoever studies Torah one day in the year it is as if he has studied all year round." (Chagigah 5b)

"Keilu" is important. But it is not a halachic fact. It is an essential idea. What matters is what one does. One can behave in a way that indicates devotion to God and the Torah, or in a way that in practice ignores or denies God and Torah. What the rabbis wanted was for us to treat Jewish law as if we personally have heard it from God. As if God were speaking to us now. That is why we adhere to Jewish traditions.

The theological ideas of our tradition, as opposed to the behavioral ones, are there to help us avoid thinking of the world we inhabit only as material, but try to imagine a spiritual world and spiritual values as well. If one wishes to be part of the mainstream of tradition, one needs to treat all the theological imperatives of Judaism with respect and a serious desire to understand what they mean. But ultimately we must try to hear God speaking to us through them and to understand what the real message is, not just the superficial meaning of the words. Remember they chose a way of speaking that had to allow for the simple man as well as the intellectual giant.

To adapt the idea to current politics, one may disagree with the vast majority of Jews either because one is not as right-wing or as left-wing as one's neighbor. But what matters is how much one is doing to perpetuate the Jewish tradition and keep it alive.