

In the Beginning

We begin the yearly cycle of the Torah starting with Genesis and the Garden of Eden. Such an innocent idealized world before human beings started to mess things up. And yet out of the mess something good and spiritual emerges as humans struggle to answer the fundamental question of how to live an ethical and spiritual life.

I do not think all people have to think the same way as I do or understand the text in the way I do. Amazingly, and unlike other religious texts of its time, the Torah addresses everyone, man, woman, and child. It is a document for humanity, not just for priests or rabbis. But there are many ways of reading and understanding the text of the Torah. And by Torah, I mean here the First Five Books of the Bible, the Chumash, and the Five Books of Moses (though the word has other wider usages).

One can look at it as myth in the sense of a fairy story. But many myths usually carry important messages with them for society and the individual. One can look at the bible historically, critically, anthropologically, and comparatively. One can construct and deconstruct. Some argue one can look at it literally or at face value. Although I am not sure what that means. The mechanism of how it came about and was all written down is all theory or faith. But the text is our most ancient and sacred source.

All text needs amplification and interpretation. I understand a statement, a law that says "Do not kill" seems clear but there is still room to argue about the difference between murder as opposed to manslaughter, killing for revenge, or killing in self-defense. When it says that God speaks, does God speak using vocal cords? Is God's hand like our hand? Indeed, when we apply any human term to God, does this mean we are saying that God is human? Is God's anger like ours? Obviously not. That is why the rabbis of the Talmud keep on repeating that "The Torah speaks in human language" (*Brachot 31b, Makot 12a et al*).

As a person, I can respond to this ancient text in its original language as a magnificent document, perhaps the most important in human history. Composed of poetry, prose, legislation, documentation, and exhortation. Recorded speech and narratives that document human error and suffering, as well as the struggle to come to terms with forces beyond one's control. I might even detect different styles and usages.

As a Jew, I respond to it on another level as a religious document that is the basis of my ethical and experiential life. A document of an encounter with God and the constant struggle to establish contact and understand how to live a good life. The Torah speaks not as a history book or a science book though certain aspects of both might be derived from it. I look to it for inspiration and guidance, and sometimes I feel God speaking to me through it. There is something very special in the text that stimulates my spiritual senses, and its laws and rituals reinforce this relationship.

We choose the degree of commitment to it, and the evolutions of its laws and customs from the range of texts and customs that have accrued over time.

Particularly on the narrative side, there are so many options. The Talmud says (*Sanhedrin 34a*) the text has different meanings and (*Bamidbar Rabba 13:16*) that "there are seventy different facets to the Torah." Does this mean that all and any explanation is equally valid or legitimate? Not really. After all, Jews and Christians revere the same biblical text, if in different degrees and ways. But on many occasions, we read the same text and come to very different conclusions. As indeed do different rabbis and different traditions within mainstream Judaism. Each one of us who cares should make the effort in his or her own way to make sense of the text. And over the years this is what has happened. Different people, scholars, saints, and ordinary people have looked at the text, some rationally, some mystically, and some symbolically.

To appreciate it to its full, one needs to savor the words and detach oneself from certain modern notions of how we expect a text to be judged. Torah includes obvious poetry, such as the Song of the Sea or Moses' final farewell poem. The boundaries between what we might call poetry and prose are not always obvious. Ancient oral tribal narratives throughout the world used motifs and styles that need to be understood in their terms, not ours. When ancients used the word *Earth*, they could have meant a range of ideas, ground, soil, area, land, world, and universe. All we have is the text as it is. That is the certainty.

I only take issue with those who say these are primitive texts simply of use only as archaeological, anthropological texts, material to be used to be held up to ridicule.

I admit I have a position. I have inherited and affirm my loyalty to the rabbinic approach to Torah in its variety and complexity that allows for disagreement once certain essential positions are accepted. I use it as my primary ethical source (though not the only one). The Torah combined with the Talmud, Torah is the core and the foundation of our nation, our tradition, and our culture.