

Temple Beth Sholom Torah Study August 1, 2015;
Va'etchanan; Deuteronomy 3:23 – 7:11
Led by Mike Rubin

- 1) Moses continues his speeches to the Israelites camped on the east side of the Jordan River, shortly before the Israelite people cross over into the promised land without him. Moses speech within this parashah include, among other things:
 - a) A slightly different version of the Ten Commandments (Deut 5:6 – 5:18) than was provided in Exodus.
 - b) The Sh'ma (Deut 6:4 – 6:9). "Hear, O Israel: *Adonai* is our God, *Adonai* is One." or alternatively, "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." [JSB version]
- 2) Readings:
 - a) Deut 4:1 - 2
 - b) Deut 5:1 – 5:19
 - c) Deut 6:4 – 6:9
 - d) Deut 6: 20 – 25
 - e) Deut 7:1 – 5 [Note: Deut 7: 3-4 Rashi posits these verses as the proof text in the Torah for matrilineal descent: "You shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughter to his son, and you shall not take his daughter for your son, for **he** will cause your child to turn away from Me, and they will worship the gods of others"
 - i) The argument being that the word "he" implies that the non-Jewish father will cause the child to turn away for Judaism, hence the child of a Jewish mother is a Jew, but there is nothing to worry about the child of a non-Jewish mother, because God does not consider the child Jewish. It appears that Rashi worked overtime to discern this implication from the text.
- 3) Would you strike items from the Ten Commandments if you had your way?
 - a) See handout with possible "minor" editing of the Ten Commandments.
- 4) If you were to write your own Ten Commandments, what would you write, assuming you do not repeat anything in the existing Ten Commandments?
 - a) Break into multiple small groups and come up with three such **new** commandments that you might offer for consideration.
 - b) See handout of Rubin's draft Fourteen Commandments.
- 5) Is it blasphemous, wrong, or simply a bad idea for us today to consider creating and following a different Ten Commandments?
 - a) See Deut: 4:1–2, "You shall not add anything to what I command you or take anything away from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I enjoin upon you."
 - b) See handout excerpt from *Torah: A Modern Commentary* pages 1345- 1347)
- 6) Is it our duty to create our own set of commandments, whether through interpretation, selective adoption, or reconstruction?
 - a) See excerpt from *Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation* by Michael Lerner, pages 99-101.
- 7) Parting quotes:
 - a) Relevant to the Sh'ma:
 - i) "the basis for our need to love lies in the experience of separateness and the resulting need to overcome the anxiety of separateness by the experience of union. The religious form of love, that which is called the love of God, is, psychologically

speaking, not different. It springs from the need to overcome separateness and to achieve union.” by Erich Fromm (psychologist), in *The Art of Loving*.

b) Relevant to why we study Torah: substitute the word philosophy with the word Torah in the excerpt:

- i) “Thus, to sum up our discussion of the value of philosophy [Torah], philosophy [Torah] is to be studied not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can as a rule be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves. It is these questions that enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination, and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation. But above all because through the greatness of the universe which philosophy [Torah] contemplates, the mind also is rendered great, and becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good.” by Bertrand Russell, in *The Problems of Philosophy*.

דברים ז

ואתחנן

וְאַתֶּם הַדְּבָקִים בִּיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם חַיִּים כָּלְכֶם הַיּוֹם:
רְאֵה לְמִדַּתִּי אֶתְכֶם חֻקִּים וּמִשְׁפָּטִים כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוִּי
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי לַעֲשׂוֹת בֶּן בְּקָרֵב הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם
בָּאִים שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ: וְשִׁמְרָתָם וַעֲשִׂיתָם כִּי הוּא
חֻכְמַתְכֶם וּבִינְתְּכֶם לְעֵינֵי הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁמְעוּן
אֵת כָּל־הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה וְאָמְרוּ רַק עַם־חֶכְמָם וְנִבּוֹן
הַגּוֹי הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה: כִּי מִיָּגוּל גָּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ אֱלֹהִים
קְרֹבִים אֵלָיו כִּי־הוּא אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּכָל־קִרְבָּנוֹ אֵלָיו:

וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁמַע אֱלֹהֵי־חֻקִּים וְאֱלֹהֵי־מִשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר
אֲנִי מְלַמֵּד אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת לְמַעַן תַּחְיוּ וּבִאֲתֶם
וִירִשְׁתֶּם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵיכֶם נָתַן
לָכֶם: לֹא תִסְפוּ עַל־הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מִצְוֶה אֶתְכֶם
וְלֹא תִגְרְעוּ מִמֶּנּוּ לְשֹׁמֵר אֶת־מִצְוֹת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם
אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מִצְוֶה אֶתְכֶם: עֵינֵיכֶם הִרְאוּ אֵת אֲשֶׁר־
עָשָׂה יְהוָה בְּבָעַל פְּעֹר כִּי כָל־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הִלֵּךְ
אַחֲרָי בְּעַל־פְּעֹר הִשְׁמִידוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךְ מִקְרָבָךְ:

1] And now, O Israel, give heed to the laws and rules which I am instructing you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the god of your fathers, is giving you. 2] You shall not add anything to what I command you or take anything away from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I enjoin upon you. 3] You saw with your own eyes what the LORD did in the matter of Baal-peor, that the LORD your God wiped out from among you every person who followed Baal-peor; 4] while you, who held fast to the LORD your God, are all alive today.

5] See, I have imparted to you laws and rules, as the LORD my God has commanded me, for you to abide by in the land which you are about to invade and occupy. 6] Observe them faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who on hearing of all these laws will say, "Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people." 7] For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as is the LORD our

4:1] *Laws and rules.* The Torah frequently places *chukim* and *mishpatim* next to each other, but the distinction between them is not fully established. A number of theories have been developed: (1) that *chukim* deal with the basic relationship of man to God, the world, and himself, and *mishpatim* with man's relation to his fellow man, as expressed in civil and criminal law; (2) that the reasons for *mishpatim* are clear, whereas those for *chukim* are hidden (for instance, why the consumption of pork is prohibited [2]); (3) that *chukim* are those laws that restrict our sensual life and aim at creating a people of personal purity (for instance, laws of *kashrut* or those defining sexual transgressions [3]); (4) and, most likely, that *mishpatim* represents case law and *chukim* apodictic law, "engraved" for all time. See further our commentary on Exod. 21:1.

So that you may live. The offer of rewards is an important aspect of the covenant model and there-

fore a normal accompaniment of the law, though doing God's will for His sake rather than for reward is a higher form of human response.

3] *The matter of Baal-peor.* Baal-peor, a local Moabite deity whom many Israelites worshiped in a moment of weakness (Num. 25:1-5). The sinful practices may have been sexual orgies.

4] *You . . . held fast.* This phrase was taken into the liturgy and is recited in traditional services before the blessings over the Torah.

6] *Observe them faithfully.* Literally, "observe and do them," a juxtaposition which has led tradition to identify "observe" as the duty to study, which complements the duty to "do" [4].

7] *A god so close at hand.* אֱלֹהִים is constructed with the plural קְרִיבִים suggesting that one should understand "god(s)" and not "God." But this conclusion is not compelling; for in Gen. 20:13 the same construction occurs, but clearly God (and not any god) is meant [5].

THE TORAH—A MODERN COMMENTARY GUNTHER PLANT, et. al

Neither Add Nor Detract

One of the laws which in time assumed crucial significance reads: "You shall not add anything to what I command you or take anything away from it..." (4:2). It is possible that such an injunction was at first directed to the scribes, warning them to keep the text exactly as they found it, with its apparent contradictions, mistakes in spelling, duplications, and incomprehensible passages. A similar rule was already in effect in ancient Egypt, a thousand years prior to the Exodus, and is also reflected in the Akkadian Epic of Erra. There it is said of the poet who had been taught a poem that "he left nothing out nor did he add a single line" [16]. In Jeremiah's vision the prophet was cautioned not to leave out a single word when he transmitted divine instruction; and a proverb, in exalting God's teaching, said, "Add not to His words." Two other passages clearly established the rule as applying to the essence of God's work and word: Koheleth proclaimed that whatever God did was "for ever," and another passage in Deuteronomy enjoined the Israelites to be careful and observe only what they had been taught, neither more nor less.¹

In later centuries, both 4:2 and 13:1 became proof texts for limiting changes in and interpretations of the Torah laws. Special note was taken of the fact that 4:2 is phrased in the plural while 13:1 is couched in the singular. Thus the former was understood to be addressed to the leaders of the community who were warned not to pass off their injunctions as equivalent to the Torah itself and to let the people know at all times what was of rabbinic and what of pentateuchal origin (מִדְּבַר יְהוָה and מִדְּבַר בְּנֵי אָדָם) [17]. On the other hand, 13:1 was seen to address itself

to each individual, exhorting him to complete and meticulous observance [18]. But rabbinic law was not in itself seen as innovative, it only made the intent of the Torah "clearer" (though often it did so innovatively).

Another reading of the two verses became even more important, for it understood 4:2 as prohibiting changes in the number of the commandments—there were according to tradition 613 mitzvot in the Torah—so that there should not be 612 or 614; and 13:1 was seen to mean that each individual mitzvah was to be carried out as specified and was not to be tampered with.² Thus, since an authoritative interpretation of the laws of phylacteries had arrived at four paragraphs that were to be inscribed on the parchment, this was to remain an unalterable rule, as were four double threads in the ritual fringes [19]. Moreover, the general rule was declared applicable both in Eretz Yisrael and in the Diaspora.

The Course of Jewish Law

To be sure, no community could survive and grow without an organic development of its laws. Halachah—the body of written and oral law—became the instrument by which the Jewish people ordered their lives. While the Written Torah remained unchanged and unchangeable, the Oral Torah interpreted it, thereby expanding and contracting it in accordance with the needs of new times. The Rabbis created a set of guidelines that spelled out the possibilities of such interpretation; for instance, they determined how analogies were to be used, how legal inferences were to be made, or how the repetition of certain laws affected their content. At first, out of deference to the strict injunc-

¹ Jer. 26:2; Prov. 30:6; Eccles. 3:14; Deut. 13:1.

² This became particularly important because the Christian church had declared these and similar pro-

visions of the Torah as no longer binding, for in its view the "Old Covenant" (at Sinai) had been set aside by the "New Covenant" (through Jesus).

tions of Deut. 4:2 and 13:1, none of these rabbinic rules and their conclusions was permitted to be written down, but by the year 200 C.E. this restriction was abandoned and the basic code of Jewish life was committed to writing. The result was the Mishnah, which combined into its six sections³ every aspect of Jewish living, from the regulation of the liturgy to civil and criminal law to family purity. Now the Mishnah became the foundation for legal discussions in the academies and for decisions in the courts, and after three more centuries two bodies of recorded debates and decisions were assembled: one in Palestine (the Palestinian or Jerusalem Talmud—"talmud" meaning study or learning) and the other in Babylon (the Babylonian Talmud). The latter became the commanding, fundamental document for all subsequent ages. It is a vast-ranging commentary on the Mishnah, but it does not usually adhere strictly to the subject at hand and instead covers every conceivable area of human knowledge, Jewish law, popular custom, theological and moral considerations—all arranged rather loosely, reflecting the unstructured discussions of the Sages rather than the rigorous systematizing of an editor.

The Talmud now was the edifice in which Jewish life dwelt; and at once it itself became the object of study, comment, and argument. Scholars wrote legal opinions (*responsa*) and composed commentaries, and in time abstracts appeared that attempted to summarize all previous contributions to talmudic knowledge and to set down clearly what laws a Jew ought to observe. Of these attempts the code of Maimonides (twelfth century) achieved the greatest authority and deeply influenced Jewish practice during the following centuries, until the appearance

of Joseph Karo's *Shulchan Aruch* (sixteenth century). From then on the latter was universally considered the authoritative handbook of Jewish law and life. After its appearance it quickly became the object of scholarly commentary; it was considered extensively in *responsa* and continues in this capacity until today. Most of the *halachah* it contains is represented in both its biblical and its rabbinic provisions as binding, for it is taken to be the will of God.

This system was by nature highly conservative, since the Torah, being considered divine, was in principle unamendable, and even the most ingenious interpretation could not alter a rule beyond a certain point. Moreover, the Oral Torah, too, shared in the divine nature of the law and therefore in its resistance to change. Still, the process worked well enough as long as Jews lived in a basically conservative and frequently restricted environment, where faith and custom provided the framework of existence. But with the beginning of Enlightenment, at the end of the eighteenth century, Western Jewry left its traditional habitat, both physically and culturally, and this placed enormous strains on the *halachah*. Its guardians were highly defensive and refused to find legal justifications for even the most minor changes. In consequence, an increasing number of Jews looked for means of adjusting the law to an emerging modern industrial society. The result was the development of Reform Judaism, which amended the law while assuring the preservation of its spirit. The new movement saw its greatest advance in North America, where at the beginning of the twentieth century its members discarded many of the 613 *mitzvot*, even when they were explicitly stated in or founded on the Written Torah. For them,

³ *Zeraim* (Seeds), *Mo-ed* (Feasts), *Nashim* (Women), *Nezikin* (Damages), *Kodashim* (Hallowed Things), *Tohorot* (Cleanness).

the provisions of Deut. 4:2 and 13:1 had ceased to be operative, especially—though not exclusively—in the area of ritual practice.⁴ Their emphasis was on the moral component of Judaism, which they found championed by the biblical prophets.

Reform Judaism thus largely separated itself from halachic Judaism, which has continued to be vigorously represented by Orthodoxy. Conservatism occupies a middle ground; it stands with Reform in recognizing the human and therefore changeable aspect

of the law, while it tries to effect these changes within the framework of the halachah. There has also been a turn toward a greater incorporation of halachic principles within the Reform movement, albeit on a basis that allows for individual decision within the framework of a mitzvah system [20]. The rules laid down by the Deuteronomist have thus experienced a long and varied development, and they continue to be at issue in contemporary Judaism.⁵

⁴ Such as the careful observance of dietary laws, the wearing of fringes, or rules pertaining to the descendants of priestly families.

⁵ In fact, the nature of mitzvah and its theological

foundations are a serious problem to Reform Judaism and have been the subject of varying interpretations [21].

GLEANNINGS

Never Closed

It says (verse 7) that God is close at hand whenever Israel does call on Him. To "call" on God means to pray, which teaches that the gates of prayer are never closed.

MIDRASH [22]

The Uniqueness of Torah (verse 8)

When other nations follow their laws they are merely law-abiding; when Israel observes the Torah it is at the same time engaged in the praise of God.

CHASIDIC [23]

But Take Utmost Care (verse 9)

Moses warns Israel, the very people who were vouchsafed great miracles, against idolatry. From this you may learn that however pious a person is he is always in potential danger of idolatry and should never fully trust himself.

Literally, verse 9 reads, "Only watch yourself and watch your soul scrupulously."⁶ Why the dual warning to both "watch yourself" and "watch your soul scrupulously"? The word "yourself" refers to your body to which you need give only ordinary attention, and there is little doubt that you will do so. But, when it comes to your soul, you are likely to neglect it, hence "watch your soul scrupulously."

CHASIDIC [24]

The Chain of Generations

Torah is to be taught to children and children's children (verse 9). He who teaches his child Torah is considered as if he taught Torah not only to his child but to his child's children and their children, to the end of time.

A grandchild taught by his grandfather is considered as if he had received the Torah at Sinai.

TALMUD [25]

⁶ The word *נפש* is a Hebrew idiom for "your self," but it is here interpreted literally as if it meant "your soul."

THE TORAH: A MODERN COMMENTARY (PLAUT, et al.)

6] I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: 7] You shall have no other gods beside Me.

8] ~~You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters below the earth.~~ 9] You shall not bow down to ^{idols} ~~them~~ or serve them. For I the LORD your God am an impassioned God, ~~visiting the guilt of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me,~~ 10] ~~but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.~~

11] You shall not swear falsely by the name of the LORD your God; ~~for the LORD will not clear one who swears falsely by His name.~~

12] Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. 13] Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 14] but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, ~~your male or female slave,~~ your ox or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the stranger in your settlements, ~~so that your male and female slave may rest as you do.~~ 15] Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the LORD your God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the sabbath day ~~and to enslave nobody.~~

16] Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, ~~that you may long endure, and that you may fare well, in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.~~ *for the good they do, but do not honor or emulate their abuses.*

17] You shall not murder. / You shall not commit adultery. / You shall not steal. / You shall not bear false witness ~~against your neighbor.~~

18] You shall not covet ~~your neighbor's wife.~~ *Another's spouse.* You shall not crave your neighbor's house, or *Another's*

Another's.
~~his field, or his male or female slave, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.~~

19] The LORD spoke those words—those and no more—to your whole congregation at the mountain, with a mighty voice out of the fire and the dense clouds. He inscribed them on two tablets of stone, which He gave to me.

~~and the mountain.~~

6] I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: 7] You shall have no other gods beside Me.

8] You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters below the earth. 9] You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the LORD your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, 10] but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

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16] Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may long endure, and that you may fare well, in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

17] You shall not murder. / You shall not commit adultery. / You shall not steal. / You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

18] You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. You shall not crave your neighbor's house, or

his field, or his male or female slave, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.

19] The LORD spoke those words—those and no more—to your whole congregation at the mountain, with a mighty voice out of the fire and the dense clouds. He inscribed them on two tablets of stone, which He gave to me.

While the mountain

Temple Beth Sholom Torah Study August 1, 2015;
Va'etchanan; Deuteronomy 3:23 – 7:11
Led by Mike Rubin

ALTERNATIVE FOURTEEN COMMANDMENTS

- 1. You shall not obey the quiet voice that whispers into your ear and commands you to do things your conscience tells you are despicable.**
- 2. You shall be tolerant of people who seem to follow (worship) other gods than you worship.**
- 3. You shall not act like you know the only Truth, for there are many Truths, and you have much to learn.**
- 4. You shall not be punished for your father's or mother's sins, nor shall you be elevated for their virtues, but you shall be judged by your own actions.**
- 5. You shall create beautiful works with the talents and intelligence that I have bestowed upon you, but you shall not be so idle as to worship your works.**
- 6. You shall strive to be as God, co-creators with Me in the project of repairing and perfecting the world, as I have made you in My image.**
- 7. You shall treat your fellow man and woman as precious as angels, for all men and women were made in My image and likeness; but know that even angels must be rebuked and restrained when they become wild and dangerous.**
- 8. You shall know that I the Lord am One with you and you are One with Me.**

9. You shall treat every day as precious, whether it be a Sabbath day of rest or a day when you sustain the world through your good work.

10. You shall be mindful of the blessings I have bestowed upon you by practicing gratitude and by seeking joy and pleasure in the wonders and miracles that are everywhere you care to look.

11. You shall treat as holy your bonds with your soul mates, for souls that connect also connect with Me, and illuminate the world with My Presence.

12. You shall not be dishonest, unjust or cruel to others, and You shall repent and attempt to make amends when you fall short; and You shall forgive those who repent and make amends when they fall short in their actions with you.

13. Those things that I have not expressly commanded, I reserve to your judgment, for I have created you with wisdom and discernment so that you may seek the knowledge of good and evil.

14. You shall not let My commandments be a yoke of servitude upon you, for I have redeemed you from slavery, and I tolerate no slavery; but you shall use the free will, wisdom and discernment that I have bestowed upon you, to interpret My commandments and laws to liberate your body, mind and spirit so that you may live with joy and in harmony with the Me and with the rest of My Divine creation.

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Theological Seminary of America

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JEWISH RENEWAL

A PATH TO HEALING AND TRANSFORMATION

MICHAEL LERNER



Harper Perennial
A Division of HarperCollins Publishers

a verse of the Torah about the Torah—it is not in heaven, but very close to us. And that very closeness permits for distortion.

But if there is distortion built into the Torah, then aren't we better off relying on our own intuitions and not basing ourselves on a tradition that encompasses the voice of pain and cruelty?

Any liberatory tradition will necessarily incorporate the distortions and limitations of its period. There is no Archimedean point from which one can build a solidly healthy and transformative vision: every vision is necessarily partial and partially distorted. Consider some other liberatory traditions, such as psychoanalysis, Marxism, and feminism, to name a few that have been recent contenders. When one looks at each of these closely, one will find a set of distortions in some of the founding literature, based in part on the historically conditioned limitations of the people who were the initial theorists and founders. Moreover, each tradition has been used at various points as an instrument to repress rather than liberate by at least some of its practitioners.

Our Torah documents the history of human efforts at transcendence, and records the interaction between those attempts and the distortions that emerged in their midst. We may not yet have a total vision of the good, but we do have a vision of what has been bad, and we do have some solid intuitions that have been gleaned through the history of the human race and have contributed to the emergence of a liberatory perspective. We as a human race know that it is wrong to create needless suffering, and though we do not fully agree on what is needless at any particular historical moment, we nevertheless feel confident that there is some substantial content to this insight.

What the Torah also gives us is not a single criterion for determining what is God's word, but a sense of how people heard that word in the past, and evokes in us the confidence to criticize the Torah in the name of Torah. And that, in fact, has been precisely what three thousand years of Jewish commentary has been about—the critique of the Torah from the perspective of Torah, but done in the form of commentary.

DOES THIS ACCOUNT GIVE HUMANS TOO MUCH AUTHORITY?

If we say that two voices are contending in Torah, don't we ultimately leave the whole matter up to human beings to determine what is the voice of God and what is the voice of accumulated evil?

Yes. But that is not a new situation. We always have had to rely on human beings when understanding the Torah. We had to rely on human beings to determine where God wanted the Temple, and when an action is killing and not murder, and which are the real prophets and which the false. We had to rely on human beings to tell us that when the Temple was destroyed what God really wanted was prayer instead of sacrifice, in defiance of the plain meaning of the words of the text. The rabbis of the talmudic period understood what they were doing, and they spent a great deal of their time trying to find "prooftexts," however stretched the interpretations of them, upon which they could hang their own particular approach. Yet they understood that what they were doing was giving *their* interpretation, not *the* interpretation. When they changed the laws requiring sacrifices into the basis for a requirement of prayer, they knew that this didn't appear in the text. Perhaps they might have been tempted to claim that they were prophets, hearing a new revelation. But they made no such claim. They were changing the plain meaning of the text based on their best ability to understand, in light of their own intellects and spiritual intuition, what would be the best way to keep the enterprise of Torah alive in their own circumstances. Hundreds of years later, those who followed these talmudic rabbis attributed to them and their work a holiness that at least many of the talmudic rabbis would have dismissed as silly, pretentious, or idolatrous. In imagining that these rabbis were on some higher plane, later generations could excuse themselves of the responsibility of opening their own ears to the call of God and to the need to reunderstand the text. Yet that attribution of a higher status to previous generations, and the selective process of choosing *which* of the interpreters of the past will be the ones we choose to respond to, is an act of interpretation every bit as subjective as the talmudic rabbis'.

We are always interpreting what God really wants, selecting which interpreters and which texts of the past to find decisive, and no set of written words is ever going to explain itself. So the notion of relying on fallible human beings is a shock only to those who have hid from themselves the degree to which even the most orthodox of the Orthodox rely on a long set of interpretations that seem to go directly counter to the obvious meaning of the texts.

And this is why the objection to the enterprise that says, "You are merely reading your own set of values into the text rather than really responding to what is there," is always either a deep misunderstanding

or bad faith. The moment one chooses a rabbi, a *yeshiva*, a *posek*, a theory of literary interpretation, a hermeneutic style, one is already approaching texts from a particular discourse or framework. Read the Midrash and its frequent attempts to prove that the patriarchs were really observing Torah laws before they were given to Moses (e.g., that Abraham's serving butter and lamb together to the visiting three angels wasn't really a violation of *kashrut*) and you get a dramatic demonstration of how very ancient is this process of rereading texts.

Coming to the text with one's own set of conceptions, questions, language, and needs is inevitable. Attention is always and necessarily selective. All that exist are the Torah scrolls, scribbles on the page, and then interpretations of those scribbles into words, and interpretations of those words into meanings. The *ta'amei hamikrah*, the symbols that taught us how to sing a sentence and where that sentence actually ends (because the text has no punctuation, no commas or periods or question marks), was the first interpretive venture, and ever since there has always been selective attention in constructing the meaning of the text. Biblical scholars often imagine themselves as merely detached and objective readers unpacking the nuances, complexities, and contradictory elements of the text. Yet this style of reading is itself a political choice. All too often, the enterprise of Bible scholarship becomes the enterprise of taming the Bible so that it no longer sizzles with revolutionary power. The ability of one group of interpreters to portray its reading as objective scholarship, apolitical, and a rejection of "selective attention," is a fact about power, not about Torah.

Every position is inevitably shaped by interests and cultural baggage—but that doesn't preclude serious grappling with the text. I've often found myself astounded by what I've discovered as I've tried to uncover the complexities and nuances of a particular formulation—the clever wordplays, the economy of language, the playfulness, the hidden meaning in poetry, the layers of meaning—and this is part of the joy of studying the Torah. There is much pleasure and excitement in studying the texts—and though one always brings one's self, no matter how pious or Orthodox a self it is, one can find within the text formulations and insights that challenge and argue with that self.

Just as the answer to the question "Who is to say what we are to do when the Temple gets destroyed?" must be answered, "*We are*," so too a similar answer for the question "Who is to decide which is the voice of cruelty and which the voice of God?" *We*, the people who accept the

Torah, who hear in it the voice of God; who feel ourselves commanded by Torah, and who accept the responsibility for preserving, observing, and passing on the tradition to the next generation; we, who in this process become the current historical embodiments of the people of Israel, are the ones to say which is the voice of cruelty and which is the voice of God, using our best efforts to understand the tradition, ourselves, our distortions, our historical epoch and its distortions.

Could we be mistaken? Sure. But when you attune your ear carefully and open your heart appropriately, it doesn't seem so very hard to discover which texts seem to speak to the most loving and other-affirming places in your being, and which texts seem to speak to the angriest, hurt or hurtful, vengeful, and oppressive parts of your being. The more profoundly we become aware of the ways that our own past, our own inner distortions, and our own loyalties to past ways of thinking and feeling are currently shaping us, the more we are able to distinguish between the parts of what we hear when we listen for God's voice that are shaped by our own personal legacy, and the parts that seem actually to represent a voice of love, caring, compassion, and holiness. The value of what we have learned through psychoanalytic thought, Marxist thought, feminist thought, critical theory, music, art, poetry, and meditation is that these methodologies assist us in detaching ourselves from our conditioned psychological inheritance, distancing ourselves from the chains of anger and cruelty that are passed from generation to generation.

So here is how we listen to the voice of God: using every intellectual and emotional and spiritual tool at our disposal; refracting what we think we are hearing through the community of others similarly committed to hearing God's voice, constantly engaged in prayer and meditation to help us recognize new forms of self-deception; reminding ourselves in humility that no matter how hard we try, we are self-deceptive in the way we apprehend reality, asking for God's guidance, aware of the ways that others who have honestly asked for this guidance have nevertheless been shaped by their own inner legacies of anger and cruelty; and doing our best to stay true to what we hear or what we get as we open ourselves to God's presence in the universe. Using those intellectual and spiritual tools, and retaining the deep humility of knowing that what we hear is likely to be only a partial getting of what God wants us to get, we then approach the texts to listen to where we hear the voice of God and where we do not. If not everyone agrees with

what we have gotten or the way we've identified God's voice in the text, that doesn't make us any worse off than anyone else who has ever approached these texts and this tradition.

"No, you *are* worse off, because your Jewish renewal is saying that some parts of Torah are not the voice of God, whereas in the past the founders of Rabbinic Judaism did not say that any part of the tradition wasn't really God's word; they only changed the interpretation or meaning of God's word." A reasonable objection, but it doesn't hold. Because what they were doing, in effect, was saying that they had gotten a new revelation of God's word that gave them the right to change the original meaning to their own meaning. And that was at least as dangerous an assumption as saying, as I do, that the original voice was not the voice of God, but only the way God's voice was heard by somewhat limited human beings, and that we, another group of very limited human beings, must try to hear God's voice as best we can—and that will entail, in part, determining for ourselves where in Torah we really think we are hearing the voice of God.

This is not to deny the holiness of the text. The Torah is holy precisely because it so strikingly preserves for us both voices, shows us the contrast, forces us to choose. In the very process of coming to grips with the voice of God and the voice of cruelty, we become sensitized to the fact that this same struggle is going on inside us at all times, and that at every moment we are forced to make choices about which part of our being we are going to give priority. Choosing how to read the Torah, and where in it to find the word of God, becomes a central part of our own inner *tikkun*.

Ultimately there is no escaping this obligation to put our full selves into the process. If we think we've escaped this by trusting some *rebbe* or authoritative teacher or *posek*, we've merely deceived ourselves, because in making the choice of *which rebbe* or authoritative teacher or *posek* to pay attention to, we have made the same intuitive choice.

Maybe we are distinguishing the voice of God from the voice of pain on the basis of our contemporary Western values: democracy, egalitarianism, feminism, etc., and hence simply picking and choosing on a contemporary Western value-basis what we like and dislike in the Torah. If that's true, it doesn't distinguish our actions from those in any other moment in Jewish history. What people heard at previous moments as the voice of God was based on the contemporary values of *those* times as well. What else were the rabbis doing, for example, when they decided to

modify the elimination of loans during the sabbatical year? When they used their own understanding of what the Torah was trying to accomplish, and decided that their methods were better than those described in the Torah itself, they could just as easily have been accused of substituting the values of *their* contemporary society for the values of Torah. They thought they knew what would be best, and they read the Torah to conform to their judgment. Doing just this, using one's best possible judgment, is *the tradition*. It is obvious from reading the Talmud that they selected texts to justify the interpretive choices they had already made—choices that in their own minds were totally consistent with Torah—but choices that were not articulated in the Torah itself.

How do we decide which is the voice of God? This is a many-sided process. In part, this judgment emerges from our intuition or our ability to tune in to the reverberations of Sinai that remain available to us. But it is not intuition or listening alone. God created us with rational capacities and as part of a community of rational communicators, and so whatever we intuit must be subject to challenge, argument, and doubt. And we must do our best to overcome those factors that might distract or modify our choices. As Rabbi Israel Salanter and a wide variety of Hasidic teachers have insisted, we have to be aware that our own egos may distort our perceptions. We have to overcome what Jewish tradition calls *negiah*, the way that our own interests may touch on a matter in ways that make us unable to see it clearly. We can go through therapy to clear up the ways in which we may still be dominated by the legacy of cruelty from our own past. We can study with those who seem to us to have made progress in their own inner struggles against accumulated pain and anger. We can study the long history of Jewish interpreters and look for the ways in which they tried to interpret texts to highlight what they thought was God's voice and what they thought was the voice of distortion. We can engage in acts of kindness and compassion to deepen our own sensitivity to the pains of others. We can put forward tentative assessments of what we hear in the text that we think is holy and what we hear that we think is not so holy, and then compare them with the assessments of others. We can decide to join with others in an interpretive community and abide by the judgments of that community (but first we have to make the decision about which community to join or *which* people share enough of our sense of spiritual sensitivity to God to want to build such a community with them).