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The Torah Can Be Made to Say Almost Anything

By Jay Michaelson

This Shabbat, like every Shabbat, rabbis around the world will share words of wisdom purportedly gleaned from the weekly Torah portion. This rabbi's advice? Take them all with a grain of salt.

Generations of rabbis have known that it is easy to make the Torah say almost anything we want it to say. Indeed, doing so is a sign of good homiletical technique. In the Talmud ([Sanhedrin 17a](#)), the sage Abba bar Ayvoh (known simply as Rav) says that to serve as a judge on the Sanhedrin court, a person must be able to declare a sheretz (a category of “creeping thing” that includes insects, rodents and reptiles) to be pure according to the Torah — in flat contradiction to the text of Leviticus and the Jewish legal tradition. And if that weren't enough, Rav then proceeds to provide such logic himself.

This same hermeneutical creativity inspired the legends of the [Midrash](#), the mystical speculations of the Kabbalah, and generations of Jewish polemicists, philosophers and even politicians. The [Zohar](#), for example, completely reinterprets the first four words of the Torah in theosophical symbolism, eventually rendering them into something like: “With Primordial Wisdom, the Womb of Divine Understanding created the [sefirot](#).” That's not what I learned in Sunday school.

There are some limits, I suppose. It would be hard to claim that the Torah supports worshipping Molech or murdering someone in cold blood, though the boundaries of the latter are subject to debate and archeologists doubt that the former even existed in the way the Bible depicts it. But the whole point of Rav's sophisticated demonstration is that a good legal scholar (or lawyer) can argue just about anything.

Indeed, no less an authority than Moses was said to be flummoxed by later rabbinic interpretations of the Torah. [Elsewhere in the Talmud](#), Rav tells a tale of when Moses ascended to heaven and saw God placing crowns on the letters of the Torah. Perplexed, Moses asked why God was doing this, and was told that generations later, [Rabbi Akiva](#) would derive Jewish legal rulings from the crowns. Moses then asks to sit in on Akiva's class and has no idea what Akiva is even saying in his name!

Today, the Bible is quoted to support Israel's actions and oppose Israel's actions, to support Trump and oppose Trump, to preserve the natural world and to exploit it. Who is right? In a way, everyone is right, because there are biblical sources to support almost any proposition or worldview. There are verses that warn the Israelites to be merciless, to seize the land of Israel by force, displace its inhabitants and annihilate the tribe of [Amalek](#). And there are verses that demand that Israelites treat strangers in their midst with justice and [conduct wars within strict rules of engagement](#).

Even the character of God is inconsistent, sometimes exacting revenge and sometimes (as in the Book of Jonah) demanding mercy. The late Rabbi Michael Lerner proposed that God has two metaphorical “hands,” one valuing strength and violence, the other lovingkindness and compassion.

I'm not arguing for relativism here. I have strong moral-religious commitments that I ground, in large part, in what I consider to be core values of Jewish ethical monotheism: that how we treat one another is of primary concern, that the sacred can and should be experienced in many ways and by everyone, that whatever “God” may mean it is closely related to truth, and that every human being is created in the Divine image. I know other people would articulate

different core values, but I'm prepared to defend my own and to act in accord with them.

What I am arguing for is a demystification of the d'var Torah. Just because someone cites a biblical verse or Jewish value does not mean their position is authoritative, or that the opposite view is not equally Jewish. Often, the verse doesn't determine the moral position; the moral position determines the choice of verse.

This sleight of hand is not without consequence. When an authority figure (especially one with an honorific like mine before their name) wraps their ethical teaching in the tallit of What the Torah Teaches, it makes it harder to find common ground or have a reasoned conversation. Religion has the power to evoke strong emotions in the context of theology, ethics, observance and politics. We can feel personally attacked when someone utilizes religious sources to criticize something or someone we hold dear. We see this all the time in our communities today.

The last thing I want is to diminish the beauty of the Torah and the value of engaging with in it — or, for that matter, to minimize its deeply problematic aspects. But the tendency we Jewish scholars have to make the Torah say whatever we want it to say, to simplify its many voices into the one that happens to confirm our priors, and to claim the mantle of authority in doing so — this is where we go off the rails.

The Torah is not an answer key — it is a question key. Its myths, laws and teachings enable us to ask and debate important questions, even as it accommodates contradictory answers to them. As the talmudic rabbis also said, there is always an opposing point of view. And it, too, is the word of the living God.

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It's Shabbat...

Ease up.