



OPENING CLASS

JUDAISM AS AN INTERPRETIVE TRADITION

Source 1



Tanna D'bei Eliyahu, Seder Eliyahu Zuta 2

פעם אחת מהלך הייתי בדרך ומצאני אדם אחד. ובא אלי בדרך מינות. ויש בו מקרא ואין בו משנה. אמר לי: מקרא ניתן לנו מהר סיני. ואמרתי לו: בני, והלא מקרא ומשנה מפי הגבורה נאמרו. ומה בין מקרא למשנה. משלו משל. למה הדבר דומה למלך בשר ודם שהיה לו שני עבדים. והיה אוהבן אהבה גמורה. ונתן לזה קב חיטין ולזה קב חיטין. לזה אגודה של פשתן ולזה אגודה של פשתן. הפקח שבהן מה עשה. נטל את הפשתן וארגו מפה. ונטל את החיטין ועשאן סולת. ביררה טחנה ולשה ואפה. וסדרה על גבי השולחן. ופרס עליה מפה. והניחה עד שלא בא המלך. והטיפש שבהן לא עשה ולא כלום. לימים בא המלך בתוך ביתו ואמר להן. בני הביאו לי מה שנתתן לכן. אחד הוציא את פת הסולת על השולחן ומפה פרוסה עליו. ואחד הוציא את החיטין בקופה. ואגודה של פשתן עליהן. אוי לה לאותה בושה. אוי לה לאותה כלימה. ...כשנתן הקב"ה תורה לישראל לא נתנה להן אלא כחיטין להוציא מהן סולת. וכפשתן להוציא ממנו בגד.

Elijah said: Once, as I was walking along a road, a man accosted me. He came at me aggressively with the sort of argument that leads to heresy. It turned out that the man had Scripture but no Mishnah. He asserted: Scripture was given to us from Mount Sinai, but not Mishnah. I replied: My son, were not both Scripture and Mishnah given by the Almighty? Does the fact that they are different from each other mean that both cannot have been given by God?

They offered a parable to elucidate this point. What is this like? Like a mortal king who had two servants, both of whom he loved completely. To one he gave a measure of wheat, and to the other he gave a measure of wheat; to one a bundle of flax, and to the other a bundle of flax. What did the clever one of the two do? He took the flax and wove it into a cloth. He took the wheat and made it into fine flour by sifting the grain and grinding it. Then he kneaded the dough and baked it, set the loaf of bread on the table, spread the cloth over the bread and left it to await the coming of the king.

But the foolish one of the two did not do anything at all.



After a time, the king came home and said to the two servants: “My sons, bring me what I gave you.” One brought out the loaf of bread baked of fine flour, and with the cloth spread over the bread. The other brought out his wheat in a basket with a bundle of flax over the wheat grains.

What a shame! What a disgrace!

So, too, when the Holy One gave the Torah to Israel, God gave it as wheat to be turned into fine flour and as flax to be turned into garments.

Source 2



Babylonian Talmud Menachot 29b

הודה אמר רב: בשעה שעלה משה למרום, מצאו להקב"ה שיושב וקושר כתרים לאותיות, אמר לפניו: רבש"ע, מי מעכב על ידך? אמר לו: אדם אחד יש שעתידי להיות בסוף כמה דורות ועקיבא בן יוסף שמו, שעתידי לדרוש על כל קוץ וקוץ תילין תילין של הלכות. אמר לפניו: רבש"ע, הראהו לי, אמר לו: חזור לאחורך. הלך וישב בסוף שמונה שורות, ולא היה יודע מה הן אומרים, תשש כחו כיון שהגיע לדבר אחד, אמרו לו תלמידיו: רבי, מנין לך? אמר להן: הלכה למשה מסיני, נתיישרה דעתו.

Rav Judah said in the name of Rav: “When Moses ascended on high, he found the Holy Blessed One, engaged in adding crowns to the letters [of the Torah]. Said Moses, ‘Lord of the Universe, who compels You to do that?’ God answered, ‘There will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Akiva ben Joseph by name, who will spin out of each tittle heaps and heaps of laws.’ ‘Lord of the Universe,’ said Moses, ‘permit me to see him.’ God replied, ‘Turn around.’ Moses went and sat down at the end of the eighth row [and listened to the discourses upon the law]. Not being able to follow their arguments, he was ill at ease, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master, ‘From where do you know this?’ and the latter replied, ‘It is a law given to Moses at Sinai,’ [Moses] was comforted.



Source 3



Devora Steinmetz, "Talmud Study as a Religious Practice"

The characters that fill the pages of rabbinic texts, like those that inhabit our biblical texts, constitute a mythic world. It is just such a world that the authors of the Zohar entered into and expanded when they chose to follow Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his troupe of disciples into the hills of Galilee in search of new understandings of ancient texts. *Dor dor vedorshav*—every generation has its seekers, and our search for meaning and for understanding becomes a shared search across place and time, a search shared with others whose names we know and whose struggles we share (as well as with others whose names have been forgotten but whose struggles were just as real), when we choose to enter the mythic world of our traditional teachers...Talmud study...invites us to participate in the thick mythic universe of those who are *doresh*, who bring the past to life, and who continue to live as future generations choose to join their life journeys with the journeys of those who came before.

Source 4



David Hartman, *A Heart of Many Rooms: Celebrating the Many Voices within Judaism* (1999), 21, 150

If your tradition is based on learning, interpretation, and disagreements among scholars, rather than on the absolute word of prophetic revelation, you cannot escape the haunting uncertainty of knowing that alternative ways are religiously viable and authentic... Become a religious person who can live with ambiguity, who can feel religious conviction and passion without the need for simplicity and absolute certainty.