

A LESSON FROM THE PARASHA

Not A Work of Prose



RABBI
DOVID
SPETNER

What we call the Torah makes a difference. It helps define the significance we give it and our personal relationship to it. Dovid HaMelech was punished for referring to the Torah as *zemiros* – as a song (Sota 35a). The *meforshim* explain that although Dovid was describing that he enjoyed Torah the way people enjoy music, it still displayed too casual an attitude about the Torah.

However, can Dovid really be blamed for calling the Torah a song? Doesn't Hashem Himself refer to the Torah as a song in this week's *parasha*? Regarding the 613th, and final, mitzvah it is written "V'atem kisvu lachem es hashira hazos – Write this song for yourselves." The Gemara in Nedarim (38a) makes clear that this *passuk* is not referring to the *shira* of Ha'azinu, but rather it a command to each of us to write a *sefer* Torah. An even more fundamental question is – in what way is the Torah like a song? Is the *trop* that the *baal korei* uses really a *tune*?

The *Netziv* addresses the comparison to *shira* in his preface to his commentary on *Chumash*. From his comments it is clear that he would not translate *shira* as song, but rather as poetry.

He points out that there are two primary elements in poetry that are not found in prose. When writing prose, you share the story in a direct fashion, giving the readers all of the information they need to understand the story. In poetry, however, the writer alludes to ideas that the reader may or may not be familiar with. Take for example Emma Lazarus' famous poem at the Statue of Liberty. If we did not know the context to be discussing immigrants, would we understand what she meant by, "your huddled masses yearning to be free"? Or imagine how meaningless it is

when listening to the *gramin* of a group of people you don't know at all.

The Torah is like poetry in that it doesn't always share the background information truly necessary to understand what is being said even in the simple level of *p'shat*. However, when we become familiar with the perspective of Chazal on the topic, then we begin to grasp the meaning of the passage at hand. That is why without Rashi's sharing key statements of Chazal, *Chumash* would be a closed book. We would, *chalila* (G-d forbid), do what many secular scholars do to the Torah, imputing ideas that were never intended. (I've seen this done to secular books as well!) The reason for the Torah to have this quality is because it gives the Torah the flexibility to have multiple meanings learned from a single statement.

The second way the Torah is like poetry, explains the *Netziv*, is that poetry allows the writer to insert other ideas into the text that have nothing directly to do with the subject under discussion. An example of this is how in *piyut* (same word as poetry!) and Shabbos *zemiros* the author will sometimes insert his name using the first letter of each line or stanza. This will often cause the author to choose a word that otherwise might not be his first choice, but it creates the desired acrostic.

This, explains the *Netziv*, is how Hashem hid the *Sisrei Torah* – the deep and mystical ideas that fill the Torah below the surface. That is why the Torah will use words that don't seem to be the best fit. This is because Hashem, as the Author of the Torah, has a greater agenda than just the simple meaning.

These are the reasons why, although the Torah appears to be written as prose (with exceptions like Ha'azinu), it is really *Shira*/Poetry of the highest form. 🕊

THE RABBI WAS ASKED ON THE PARASHA

THIS WEEK WITH
RABBI DOVID SPETNER

This week's *parasha*:

Q) I learned in the *mishna* in *Sota* that when the Jews would gather for the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel*, the king would be the one to read from the Torah. Looking at the *mitzvah* in this week's *parasha*, I see no mention of the king.

A) The *meforshim* have different suggestions. The *Minchas Chinuch* suggests that perhaps it's a *halacha* L'Moshe MiSinai, and without a legitimate king one could not perform the *mitzvah*. Or perhaps the *mishna* was only preferring the king since he has the highest office, but if he is not available then the *kohein gadol* or the head of the Sanhedrin would read. The *Ha'amek Davar* points out that on the one hand the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel* is introduced by "And Moshe commanded **them**," referring back to the *kohanim* of the previous *passuk*. However, it goes on to say "**he** shall read," seeming to refer to Yehoshua, who had the legal status of a king. This dichotomy indicates that there is a preference for the king, but if he is not available then it defaults to the *kohanim* or some other leader. 🕊

Something always bugged you about the upcoming *parasha* (or last week's)? Ask! If you would like to submit a question on the *parasha*, please email it to parasha@cincynollel.org. Questions will be selected to address at the discretion of the Rabbi who is answering that week. Questions may be edited for brevity/clarity.

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A SHINING EXAMPLE


It was a regular Friday evening in Jerusalem, and following the *Mincha* and *Kabbolas Shabbos* prayers, Rabbi Green got up to speak. In the middle of Rabbi Green's talk, an elderly gentleman abruptly stood up and walked to a bookcase, took out a *sefer*, and began leafing through it until he seemed to find what he was looking for. For those who had been distracted by this movement while the Rabbi was talking, most everyone's eyes wandered back to the rabbi. But if someone would have kept his gaze on the elderly gentleman, he would have seen another interesting sight. The elderly man now had tears running down from his eyes as he slowly closed the *sefer*. Once again, many eyes were trained on him as he made his way back to his seat until, once again, they settled on the rabbi as he finished his talk. After the *Maariv* prayers were over and the line of congregants snaked its way past Rabbi Green, the elderly man who caught

many people's attention made his way forward as well. Reaching Rabbi Green, the elderly man began, "Good Shabbos, Rabbi, I want to apologize for interrupting your talk but I could not restrain myself. Let me explain." With that the man went into a short narrative of his life. "I was raised in Communist Russia, but my parents were brave and they sent me to learn Torah from a man who gave Torah classes in his house in our town. I was a very good student and I often would ask good questions. One day I asked a question and the rebbi immediately exclaimed, 'What a good question!' but no sooner were the words out of his mouth when the door was thrown open and the Soviet police stormed into the room, handcuffed the rebbi and began taking him from the room. All of us children were shocked and were frozen in our places when the rebbi began saying in a loud voice as he was being taken away, 'Leibel! Look in *Yoma daf mem-beis* (page 42)! That is where you'll find your answer! Leibel listen! *Daf mem-beis* in *Yoma*! In the midst of being taken to who knows where and his very life at risk, my rebbi had the presence of mind to tell me where to look for the answer to my question. I will never forget his words, but I never was able to look up the Gemara. In fact, I was never able to even see another Gemara. There was no one else in the town who could teach me,



A BA'AL HATURIM FOR YOU

The first *passuk* of our *parasha* are the words "*Vayeilech Moshe vayedabair* – and Moshe went and spoke." The last *passuk* of the last *parasha* mentions the oath of G-d to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, that he would give the land of Israel to their descendants. Ba'al Haturim explains the juxtaposition of the words "Moshe went and spoke" to the *passuk* beforehand as a hint to the charge that the Midrash says G-d gave Moshe. Namely, that upon his death, Moshe should go inform Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, that the G-d had fulfilled his promise to them and had delivered the land to the Jewish people. 

so as a young boy I was drawn to other things and eventually I became a mathematician. When the iron curtain fell, I made my way out of Russia and I am here visiting Israel. I don't know what exactly drew me in here, as I have been living a secular life for a very long time but somehow, I came in and sat down and as you began talking the memory of my rebbi struck me. Now I could finally see where he pointed me! I just had to see right away. So please excuse me, rabbi, if I caused any disturbance, it has been sixty-five years. I couldn't bear having to wait any longer. 

THE FALSE MESSIAHS OF JEWISH HISTORY

RABBI NOSSON WIGGINS

THE FRANKISTS (PART VII)

The dreadful blood libels which were commonplace in the 12th-15th centuries in the Christian lands of Western European (the first case was the murder of William of Norwich in 1144 in the United Kingdom) shifted eastward in the 16th and 17th centuries. By the mid-18th century there were horrific accounts of blood libel trials nearly every decade: Lwow (1728), Poznan (1736), Zaslav (1747), and Dunajogrod (1748). The chilling reports of the Zytomierz and Jampol blood libel trials of the 1750s were perhaps the worst of the century. In the Zytomierz trial of 1753, dozens of Jews, many of them prosperous landlords, were murdered and another dozen were baptized after the body of the three-and-a-half-year-old Catholic child, Stefan Studzienski, was found. The trial in Zytomierz was headed by the notorious Bishop Kajetan Soltyk. A similar fate befell the Jews of Jampol in the Luck diocese just three years later.

The Frankists sought to prove once and for all that the Jews were in fact guilty of murdering Christian children because Christian blood was needed for Jewish rituals. The accusation clearly underlined that the blood libels were reflective of Jewish belief and Talmudic teaching, and not simply the impulsive acts of zealous individuals. The general disputation, which began July 17, 1759, presented the issue of the blood libel in the eleventh session on August 6. The rabbis, led by the chief rabbi of Lwow Rabbi Chaim Cohen Rappaport, managed to postpone the debate until September 10.

The Frankists' opening claim in the debate was a distortion of the *Shulchan Aruch* in the Laws of Pesach (O.C. 472: 11) which states that one should use red wine to fulfill the *mitzvah* of The Four Cups. Instead of reading *yayin adom* (red wine) the Frankists read it *yayin edom* (wine of the Edomites) which they claimed was hinting to the "wine," i.e., the blood, of the Christians. This and other misinterpretations of Talmudic and *halachic* passages contributed to the case of the Frankists. Ultimately, in December, 1759, the Frankists were declared victorious in the Lwow disputation with the exception of the most important issue at hand: the blood libel accusation. This issue was placed on hold, as neither side could prove with enough supporting evidence that their claim was the reality. 