

LATE NIGHT SHAVUOS LEARNING
HAR K'GIGIS: THE FORCE OF LOVE
The Sixteenth Street Synagogue – May 22, 2007
Gavriel Bellino

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף פח/א

אמר רבי אלעזר בשעה שהקדימו ישראל נעשה לנשמע יצתה בת קול ואמרה להן מי גילה לבני רז זה שמלאכי השרת משתמשין בו דכתיב ברכו ה' מלאכיו גבורי כח עושי דברו לשמוע בקול דברו ברישא עשי והדר לשמע אמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא מאי דכתיב כתפוח בעצי היער וגו' למה נמשלו ישראל לתפוח לומר לך מה תפוח זה פריו קודם לעליו אף ישראל הקדימו נעשה לנשמע

R. Eleazar said: When the Israelites gave precedence to 'we will do' over 'we will hearken,' a Heavenly Voice went forth and exclaimed to them, Who revealed to My children this secret, which is employed by the Ministering Angels, as it is written, Bless the Lord, ye angels of his. Ye mighty in strength, that fulfil his word, That hearken unto the voice of his word: first they fulfil and then they hearken? R. Hama son of R. Hanina said: What is meant by, As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, [So is my beloved among the sons]: why were the Israelites compared to an apple tree? To teach you: just as the fruit of the apple tree precedes its leaves, so did the Israelites give precedence to 'we will do' over 'we will hearken'.

ספר שמות פרק יט

(יז) וַיּוֹצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת הָעָם לְקִרְאֵת הָאֵלִיּוֹת מִן הַמִּצְפָּה וַיִּתְיַצְבוּ בְּתַחֲתֵית הַהָר:

17 And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount.

רש"י על שמות פרק יט פסוק יז

לקראת האלקים - (מכילתא) מגיד שהשכינה יצאה לקראתם כחתן היוצא לקראת כלה וזהו שנא' (דברים לג) ה' מסיני בא ולא נאמר לסיני בא:

TO MEET GOD – This teaches that the Shekhinah went out to greet them like a groom who leaves to greet his bride, and this is as it says “God from Sinai comes” and not “to Sinai comes.”

מכילתא פרשת בחדש פרשה ג

ויוצא משה את העם. אמר ר' יוסי יהודה היה דורש דברים ל"ג ויאמר ה' מסיני בא אל תקרא כן אלא לסיני בא ליתן תורה לישראל. או אינו אומר כן אלא ה' מסיני בא לקבל את ישראל כחתן זה שהוא יולצא לקראת כלה:

And Moses Brought Forth the People Out of the Camp to Meet God. Said R. Jose: Judah used to expound: “The Lord came from Sinai” (Deut. 33.2). Do not read it thus, but read: “The Lord came to Sinai,” to give the Torah to Israel. I, however, do not interpret it thus, but: “The Lord came from Sinai,” to receive Israel as a bridegroom comes forth to meet the bride.

מדרש תנחומא כי תשא פרק טז

ד"א ככלותו ככלתו

Another teaching: *Ke-khalloto* (when He finished speaking with him) [is understood homiletically as] *ke-kallato* (his bride).

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף פח/א

ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר - אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית ואמר להם אם אתם מקבלים התורה מוטב ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם AND THEY STOOD AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN - R. Abdimi b. Hama b. Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them, 'If ye accept the Torah, 'tis well; if not, there shall be your burial.'

אמר רב אחא בר יעקב מכאן מודעא רבה לאורייתא אמר רבא אף על פי כן הדור קבלוה בימי אחשוורוש דכתיב קימו וקבלו היהודים קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר R. Aha b. Jacob observed: This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah. Said Raba, Yet even so, they re-accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written, [the Jews] confirmed, and took upon them [etc.]: [i.e.,] they confirmed what they had accepted long before.

ספר אסתר פרק ט

(כז) קימו וקבלו\ {נקבלו} היהודים עליהם ועל זרעם ועל כל הנלוים עליהם ול' א יעבור להיות ע' שים את שני הימים האלה ככתבם וכזמנם בכל שנה ושנה:

27 the Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them, so as it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to the writing thereof, and according to the appointed time thereof, every year;

רש"י על שמות פרק יט פסוק יז

בתחתית ההר - לפי פשוטו ברגלי ההר ומדרשו שנתלש ההר מקומו ונכפה עליהם כגיגית (שבת פח): AT THE NETHER PART OF THE MOUNTAIN – according to the simple meaning, at the foot of the mountain. And the aggadic interpretation is that the mountain was that the mountain was detached from its place and was placed over them like a cask.

מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל, מסכתא דבחדש, יתרו פרשה ג (מהדורת הורוביץ-רבין, עמ' 214

ויתיצבו – נצפפו. מלמד שהיו ישראל מתיראין מפני הזיקין מפני הזועות מפני הרעמים מפני הברקים הבאים. בתחתית ההר - מלמד שנתלש ההר ממקומו, וקרבו ועמדו תחת ההר, שנאמר (דברים ד, יא) ותקרבו ותעמדו תחת ההר.

AND THEY STOOD – They were huddled together. This teaches that they were afraid of the winds, of the earthquakes, of the thunders and lightnings that came on. BELOW THE MOUNT – Scripture indicates that the mount was pulled up from its place and the people came near and stood under it, as it is said; "And ye came near and stood under the mountain" (Deut. 4:11).

תלמוד בבלי מסכת עבודה זרה דף ב/ב

אומרים לפניו רבונו של עולם כלום נתת לנו ולא קיבלנוה ומי מצי למימר הכי והכתיב ויאמר ה' מסיני בא וזרה משעיר למו וכתוב אלוה מתימן יבוא וגו' מאי בעי בשעיר ומאי בעי בפארן אמר רבי יוחנן מלמד שהחזירה הקדוש ברוך הוא על כל אומה ולשון ולא קבלוה עד שבא אצל ישראל וקבלוה אלא הכי אמרי כלום קיבלנוה ולא קיימנוה ועל דא תברתהון אמאי לא קבלתוה אלא כך אומרים לפניו רבונו של עולם כלום כפית עלינו הר כגיגית ולא קבלנוה כמו שעשית לישראל דכתיב ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר ואמר רב דימי בר חמא מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא הר כגיגית על ישראל ואמר להם אם אתם מקבלין את התורה מוטב ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם

The nations will then contend: “Lord of the Universe, hast Thou given us the Torah, and have we declined to accept it?” But how can they argue thus, seeing that it is written, “The Lord came from Sinai and rose from Seir unto them, He shined forth from Mount Paran?” And it is also written, “God cometh from Teman.” What did He seek in Seir, and what did He seek in Mount Paran? — R. Johanan says: This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, offered the Torah to every nation and every tongue, but none accepted it, until He came to Israel who received it. How, then, can they say that the Torah was not offered to them? Their contention will be this: “Did we accept it and fail to observe it?” But surely the obvious rejoinder to this their plea would be: “Then why did you not accept it?” — This, then, will be their contention: “Lord of the Universe, didst Thou suspend the mountain over us like a vault as Thou hast done unto Israel and did we still decline to accept it?” For in commenting on the verse: And they stood at the netherpart of the mountain.” R. Dimi b. Hama said: This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, suspended the mountain over Israel like a vault, and said unto them: “If ye accept the Torah, it will be well with you, but if not, there will ye find your grave.”

רש"י שבת דף פח/א

תחתית ההר - תחת ההר ממש:

AT THE NETHER PART OF THE MOUNTAIN – Under the mountain, actually.

גיגית - קובא שמטילין בה שכר:

A CASK – A barrel in which they place beer.

מודעא רבה - שאם יזמינם לדין למה לא קיימתם מה שקבלתם עליכם יש להם תשובה, שקבלוה באונס:

A STRONG PROTEST – If God will call them to judgment and ask, “Why did you not establish that which you accepted?” then they have an answer; namely, that they accepted it under duress.

בימי אחשורוש - מאהבת הנס שנעשה להם:

IN THE DAYS OF AHASUERUS – Out of love for the miracle that was done on their behalf.

תוספות שבת דף פח/א

כפה עליהן הר כגיגית - ואף על פי שכבר הקדימו נעשה לנשמע שמא יהיו חוזרים כשיראו האש הגדולה שיצאתה נשמתן ...

OVERTURNED THE MOUNTAIN UPON THEM LIKE A CASK – Even though they already preceded “We will do” with “We will listen,” lest they return when they would see the great fire and that their souls departed...

תוספות שבת דף פח/א

מודעא רבה לאורייתא - והא דאמר בנדרים (דף כה.) שכרת משה ברית עם ישראל על התורה והמצות והשביעם על כל ובפ' אלו נאמרין (סוטה לז:) שקבלו את כל התורה בהר גרזים ובהר עיבל אור"ת דע"פ הדיבור היה והרי כבעל כרחם אבל בימי אחשורוש קבלו מדעתם מאהבת הנס ומה שכרת עמהן ברית יהושע לעבוד את ה' התם לא קבלו אלא שלא לעבוד ע"ז כדכתיב (יהושע כד) חלילה לנו מעזוב את ה' וכן משמע כוליה עניינא:

A STRONG PROTEST TO THE TORAH – It says in Nedarim that Moses established a covenant with Israel on the Torah and Mitzvot and made them swear to everything. And in Sota it says that they accepted the entire Torah on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Eval. Rabbainu Tam says this was accepted prophetically and so was against their will. But in the days of Ahasuerus they accepted with intention and love of the miracle. And that which they had accepted as covenant with Joshua to serve God, there they only accepted not practicing idolatry, as it says, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD, to serve other gods;” and this seems to be the whole issue.

ואמרו חז"ל לא כתב הקב"ה בתורה למען הדברים האלה ולא בעבור הדברים האלה ולא בגלל הדברים אלא ע"פ הדברים וזו היא תורה שבע"פ שהיא קשה ללמוד ויש בה צער גדול שהוא משולה לחשך שנאמר העם ההולכים בחשך ראו אור גדול (ישעיה ט) אלו בעלי התלמוד שראו אור גדול שהקב"ה מאיר עיניהם באיסור והיתר בטמא ובטהור ולעתיד לבא ואוהביו כצאת השמש בגבורתו (שופטים ה)

And the Sages, of blessed memory, said: The Holy One blessed be He did not write in the Torah "For these words (Devarim)" and not "For the sake of these words," and not "For the reason of these words" but rather "Al pi (by mouth) these words." And this is the Oral Torah that is very hard to learn and has great pain for it is compared to darkness, as it says "The nation that was walking in darkness saw a great light." These are the masters of teaching who saw the great light that God shined to their eyes in forbidden and allowed (substances), in profane and pure. And in the future, "and His beloved ones like the appearance of the sun in his might."

ולא קבלו ישראל את התורה עד שכפה עליהם הקב"ה את ההר כגיגית שנאמר ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר (שמות י"ט) ואמר רב דימי בר חמא א"ל הקב"ה לישראל אם מקבלים אתם את התורה מוטב ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם

And they did not accept the Torah until the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, as it says "and they assembled at the foot of the mountain." And Rav Dimi bar Chama said: The Holy One, blessed be He daid to Israel, 'If ye accept the Torah, 'tis well; if not, there shall be your burial.'

ואם תאמר על התורה שבכתב כפה עליהם את ההר והלא משעה שאמר להן מקבלין אתם את התורה ענו כלם ואמרו נעשה ונשמע מפני שאין בה יגיעה וצער והיא מעט אלא אמר להן על התורה שבע"פ שיש בה דקדוקי מצות קלות והמורות והיא עזה כמות וקשה...

And if you say it was with regard to the Oral Torah that He overturned the mountain; so from the time He told them "you are receiving this Torah" they all answered "We will do and we will listen" because there is not toil and pain in it. And it is minimal. Rather he said to them, the Oral Torah has many specific Mitsvot – severe and extreme – and it is very strong, numerous, and hard...

חדושי הרמב"ן על מסכת שבת דף פח/א

והא דאמרינן בענין אגדה הא מודעא רבא לאורייתא ומתרץ כבר קבלוה בימי אחשורוש. קשה לי וכי מה קבלה זו עושה מסופו של עולם לתחלתו, אם קודם אחשורוש לא היו מצווים למה נענשו ואם נאמר מפני שעברו על גזירת מלכם א"כ בטלת מודעא זו, ועוד למה הצריכם לקבלה וברית, ונ"ל לומר דמתחלה אע"פ שהיה להם מודעא מ"מ לא נתן להם הארץ אלא כדי שיקיימו התורה כמו שמפורש בתורה בכמה פרשיות, וכתיב (תהלים ק"ה) ייתן להם ארצות גוים ועמל לאומים ירשו בעבור ישמרו חוקיו ותורותיו ינצורו, והם עצמן מתחלה לא עכבו בדבר כלל ולא אמרו במודעא כלום אלא ברצון נפשם מעצמם אמרו כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה ונשמע, לפיכך כשעברו על התורה עמד והגלם מן הארץ, משגלו מסרו מודעא על הדבר מדכתיב (יחזקאל כ') והעולה על רוחכם היה לא תהיה אשר אתם אומרים נהיה כגוים וכמשפחות האדמה לשרת עץ ואבן, וכדאמרינן באגדה (סנהדרין ק"ה א') רבינו יחזקאל עבד שמכרו רבו כלום יש לו עליו וכו', לפיכך כשבאו לארץ בביאה שניה בימי עזרא עמדו מעצמם וקבלוה ברצון שלא יטענו עוד שום תרעומות, והיינו בימי אחשורוש שהוציאם ממות לחיים והיה זה חביב עליהם מגאולה של מצרים:

And regarding that which is said by way of Aggadah, there is a strong protest to the torah, but this protest is resolved since it was accepted at the time of Ahaseurus. This is difficult for me, for what does this acceptance effect from the end of the world to the start?! If from before Ahasuerus they were not commanded, then why were they punished? And if you say that it's because they violated the decree of their King, then there is no protest. Let us grant that the acceptance of the Torah at, or rather under, Mt. Sinai was coerced and consequently possessed no validity. As long as the Israelites were living in the land of Israel the fact that their acceptance of the Torah was invalid was profoundly irrelevant to its binding authority. True, the Israelites did not have to observe the Torah as a result of their having accepted it, since that acceptance lacked legal validity; but they did have to observe the Torah simply as a result of their living in the land of Israel, because observing the Torah was a sine qua non for their continued existence in the land. If you are a guest in someone's house, you have to observe the host's house rules.

Similarly, if you are living in the land of Israel you must by virtue of that fact alone observe the Torah.... This is the significance of the renewed acceptance of the Torah in the time of Ahasuerus, namely, that the Israelites freely agreed to observe the Torah even in exile.

ספר גור אריה על שמות - פרק יט פסוק יז

ובמדרש מצאתי כיון שבא הקב"ה ליתן התורה לישראל, כפה עליהם הר כגיגית, עד שהיו אנוסים לקבל בריתו של הקב"ה, וכתוב אצל אונס (ר' דברים כב, כט) "ולו תהיה לאשה לא יוכל לשלחה כל ימיו", ובזה שהיה הקב"ה מאנס אותם, נשארו להקב"ה עד שלא יוכל לשלח אותם לעולם.

... I found in the midrash: Since the Holy One held the mountain over them like a cask, when He came to give them the Torah, they were forced ("anusim") to receive the Covenant. Now the Torah says with regard to a case of rape ("ones"), "She shall be his wife, he may never send her away" (Devarim 22:29). Thus, the Holy One "raped" them, and thereby they remain His forever and cannot be sent away.

ספר גור אריה על שמות - פרק יט פסוק יז

ואפילו הכי קאמר רבא שם (שבת פח.) 'מכאן מודעה רבה לאורייתא', פירוש שהיה מכריח אותם לקבל התורה, אף על גב דלפי זה לא חזרו מן "נעשה ונשמע", סוף סוף בשעה שקבלו התורה היו מוכרחים, וכיון שהיתה קבלתם בהכרח, יש כאן מודעה רבה לאורייתא:

As for R. Acha's saying that "notice was served on the Torah," he means that since the receipt of the Torah was under compulsion, it wasn't a perfect receiving, for Torah ought to be received willingly.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף פח/א

אמר חזקיה מאי דכתיב משמים השמעת דין ארץ יראה ושקטה אם יראה למה שקטה ואם שקטה למה יראה אלא בתחילה יראה ולבסוף שקטה ולמה יראה כדריש לקיש דאמר ריש לקיש מאי דכתיב ויהי ערב ויהי בקר יום הששי ה"א יתירה למה לי מלמד שהתנה הקדוש ברוך הוא עם מעשה בראשית ואמר להם אם ישראל מקבלים התורה אתם מתקיימין ואם לאו אני מחזיר אתכם לתוהו ובוהו:

Hezekiah said: What is meant by, Thou didst cause sentence to be heard from Heaven; The earth feared, and was tranquil: if it feared, why was it tranquil, and if it was tranquil, why did it fear? But at first it feared, yet subsequently it was tranquil. And why did it fear? — Even in accordance with Resh Lakish. For Resh Lakish said: Why is it written, And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day; What is the purpose of the additional 'the'? This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, stipulated with the Works of Creation and said thereto. "If Israel accepts the Torah, ye shall exist; but if not, I will turn you back into emptiness and formlessness."

Emmanuel Levinas in Nine Talmudic Readings

Israel is placed *below* the mountain, if we translate the text literally. The mountain is thus changed into an upside-down bucket. It threatens to crush the tribes of Israel if they refuse the gift of the Law. What wonderful circumstances in which to exercise one's free will - a sword of Damocles! The Israelites coming out of Egypt are about to receive the Torah. The negative freedom of those set free is about to transform itself into the freedom of the Law, engraved in stone, into a freedom of responsibilities. Is one already responsible when one chooses responsibility? This is the problem suggested by Ray Abdimi. Does he think, then, that the choice for responsibility is made under threat and that the Torah would not have been chosen freely?

The choice of the Jewish way of being, of the difficult freedom of being Jewish, would have been a choice between this way and death. Already *eyn berera!* "the Torah or death ... the truth or death," would not be a dilemma that man gives himself. This dilemma would be imposed by force or by the logic of things. The teaching, which the Torah is, cannot come to the human being as a result of a choice. That which must be received in order to make freedom of choice possible cannot have been chosen, unless after the fact.

In the beginning was violence. But we may be dealing here with a consent other than the one given after inspection. Perhaps death threatens a betrayal. Reason would rest either on violence or on a mode of consent

that cannot be reduced to the alternative liberty-violence and whose betrayal would be threatened by violence. Wouldn't Revelation be precisely a reminder of this consent prior to freedom and non-freedom? Therefore it would not simply be a source of knowledge parallel to those which come from natural insight. Adherence to it would not coexist *side by side* with the internal adherence which works through evidence. The first, Revelation, would condition the second, Reason. The Torah, received without violence, as it is commonly understood, would be precisely that which precedes freedom of thought. Thus, the Torah would play a role of the first importance in the theory of knowledge itself. The content of the received Torah would be able to be expressed in its inner coherence, just as all the philosophies inspired by it or denying it. But this coherence of a system must not be taken for the prior experience of the Torah itself.

...

But to justify the Torah by choosing in the course of Jewish history the day after a dangerous adventure, experienced because of unfaithfulness to this Torah (for that is how the unexpected events of the Megillah are to be explained for the Talmud), is perhaps to insinuate that the link between the giving of the Torah and the threat of death has a meaning different from that of a truth imposed through violence. The Torah itself is exposed to danger because being in itself is nothing but violence, and nothing can be more exposed to violence than the Torah, which says no to it. The Law essentially dwells in the fragile human conscience, which protects it badly and where it runs every risk. Those who accept this Law also go from one danger to the next. The story of Haman irritated by Mordecai attests to this danger. But the irresistible weight of being can be shaken only by this incautious conscience. Being receives a challenge from the Torah, which jeopardizes its pretention of keeping itself above or beyond good and evil. In challenging the absurd "that's the way it is" claimed by the Power of the powerful, the man of the Torah transforms being into human history. Meaningful movement jolts the Real. **If you do not accept the Torah, you** will not leave this place of desolation and death, this desert which lays to waste all the splendors of the earth. You will not be able to begin history, to break the block of being stupidly sufficient unto itself, like Haman drinking with King Ahasuerus. You will not be able to exorcise fatality, the coherence of determined events. Only the Torah, a seemingly utopian knowledge, assures man of a place.

Let us summarize the result reached up to this point: Freedom begins in what has all the appearance of a constraint due to threat. The text might be teaching us this pedagogy of liberation. But is it a pedagogy? Is it a method for children? Without being less pure than the freedom that would arise from freedom (in the non-engagement of the one who is tempted and who tries his luck), the freedom taught by the Jewish text starts in a non-freedom which, far from being slavery or childhood, is a beyond-freedom.

And why did the earth become afraid? The answer is provided by the doctrine of Resh Lakish: For Resh Lakish taught: What does the verse (Genesis 1:31) mean: "Evening came, then morning, it was the sixth day"? The definite article is not necessary. Answer: God had established a covenant with the works of the Beginning (with the Real called to come forth): If Israel accepts the Torah, you will continue to exist; if not I will bring you back to chaos. (The sixth day of Creation alludes to a definite day: the sixth day of the month of Sivan, the day of the giving of the Torah.)

The mountain turned upside down like a tub above the Israelites thus threatened the universe. God, therefore, did not create without concerning himself with the meaning of creation. Being has a meaning. The meaning of being, the meaning of creation, is to realize the Torah. The world is here so that the ethical order has the possibility of being fulfilled. The act by which the Israelites accept the Torah is the act which gives meaning to reality. To refuse the Torah is to bring being back to nothingness. ... The unfortunate universe also had to accept its subordination to the ethical order, and Mount Sinai was for it the moment in which its "to be" or "not to be" was being decided. The refusal of the Israelites would have been the signal for the annihilation of the entire universe. How does being realize its being? The question of ontology will thus find its answer in the description of the way Israel receives the Torah. This way consists-such is the thesis we are upholding-in overcoming the temptation of evil by avoiding the temptation of temptation.