

At the Foot of Sinai: Midrashim¹ on the Giving of the Torah

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Note: In the text below, words that are translated in bold are fairly direct translations of the Hebrew. Words in regular type are extrapolations necessary to make the text understandable in English. Words in parenthesis are further clarification of the meaning of the text.

Shemoth Rabba Chapter 25 (Selections)

Exodus 19:3

שמות פרק י"ט:ג

וּמֹשֶׁה אָסַף אֶל הָ-אֱלֹהִים וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו ה' מִן הַהָר לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יַעֲקֹב וְתִגִּיד לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

And Moses ascended to God and the LORD called to him from the mountain saying: "Speak thus to the house of Jacob, and tell the Children of Israel."

The following Midrash focuses on the double language of "Speak thus to the house of Jacob" and "tell the Children of Israel." The Midrashim that follow presume that "Speak thus to the house of Jacob" refers to speaking to the women of Israel and "tell the Children of Israel" refers to men.² Different explanations are given for the separate reference to men and women. Strikingly, the different explanations offered display different perspectives towards women in rabbinic society.

ב . . . כה תאמר לבית יעקב, אלו הנשים, א"ל אמור להם ראשי דברים שהם יכולות לשמוע, ותגיד לבני ישראל, אלו האנשים, א"ל אמור להם דקדוקי דברים שהם יכולין לשמוע

(2) **"Speak thus to the house of Jacob," these are the women** (i.e. the people referred to by this phrase are the women) – **God said to him (Moses): "Tell them the main points that they can understand."** **"And tell the Children of Israel," these are the men** (i.e. the people referred to by this phrase are the men) – **God said to him (Moses): "Tell them the details, for they can understand."**

ד"א למה לנשים תחלה שהן מזדרזות במצות,

Another explanation (of why women and men are mentioned separately): **Why does it say to speak to women first? Because they are prompt** in fulfilling **mitzvot** (commandments).

ד"א כדי שיהו מנהיגות את בניהן לתורה,

Another explanation (of why women are mentioned first) **so that the women would direct their children** (alt: sons) **to study of Torah.**

א"ר תחליפא דקיסרין אמר הקב"ה כשבראתי את העולם לא צויתי אלא לאדם הראשון ואחר כך נצטויות חוה ועברה וקלקלה את העולם עכשיו אם איני קורא לנשים תחלה הן מבטלות את התורה לכך נאמר כה תאמר לבית יעקב.

Another explanation of why women are mentioned first: **Rav Tachlifa of Caesarea said: The Holy One Blessed is He said: When I created the world, I only commanded the Original Adam** (i.e. Adam of the Garden of Eden story) **not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and then afterwards Eve was commanded** (by Adam, i.e. second hand) **and Eve sinned and ruined the world; now, if I do not call women first, they will void the Torah. Therefore it is said: "Speak thus to the house of Jacob"**

¹ "Midrash" (plural midrashim) literally means "seeking out" and refers generally to seeking out the meaning of biblical text either through literal or homiletic explanation.

² In rabbinic times, "house" or "my house" was a common euphemism for a wife.

The following commentary gives an alternate explanation of who are set aside by the phrase "Speak thus to the house of Jacob."

ור' יוחנן אמר כה תאמר לבית יעקב אלו סנהדרין שנאמר (ישעיה ב) בית יעקב לכו ונלכה באור ה'

Rabbi Yochanan said: "Speak thus to the house of Jacob" these are the Sanhedrin³ (i.e. the people referred to by this phrase are the Sanhedrin) as is said: "House of Jacob let us go and walk in the light of the LORD." (Isaiah 2:5)⁴

Exodus 20:1

שמות פרק כ:א

וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאַמְרָו:

And God spoke all these words, saying:

ד את כל הדברים האלה לאמר, שהוא עושה את הכל בבת אחת, ממית ומחיה בבת אחת, מכה ורופא בבת אחת, אשה על המשבר יורדי הים והולכי מדברות וחבושי בבית האסורין אחד במזרח אחד במערב ואחד בצפון וא' בדרום שומע כולן בבת אחת, וכה"א (ישעיה מה) יוצר אור ובורא חשך

(4) **"All these words, saying:" for He (God) does everything simultaneously. He kills and gives life simultaneously, afflicts and heals simultaneously, a woman on the birthing stool, those who descend to the sea (i.e. go on boat trips, which are hazardous) and travel in wildernesses, and those captive in prison – one is in the east, one is in the west, one is in the north, and one in the south – God hears all of them simultaneously, and thus it says (Isaiah 45:7) "God is the fashioner of light and creator of darkness . . ."**⁵

עפר כמו כן נהפך לאדם חזר נהפך לעפר, שנא' (עמוס ה) והופך לבקר צלמות מהו לבקר כתחלתו, בתחלתו מהו אומר (שמות ז) ויהפכו כל המים אשר ביאור לדם, חזר ונהפך הדם למים, בשר חי נהפך למת חזר המת ונהפך לחי, המטה נהפך לנחש חזר הנחש ונהפך למטה, הים נהפך ליבשה חזרה היבשה ונהפכה לים, וכה"א (עמוס ה) הקורא למי הים וגו' **Dust, similarly, turns to man and returns to dust as it is said: (Amos 5:8) "and turns the shadow of death to morning."**⁶ What does "to morning" mean? "To morning" means "To its original state." I.e. God takes something that has turned negative and turns it back to good. **Regarding its original state, what does it say, (Exodus 7:20) "And all the waters in the river turned to blood," and the blood turned back to water. Live flesh turns to dead, and the dead flesh turns to living flesh.**⁷ **The staff turned into a serpent and the serpent turned back to a staff.**⁸ **The sea turned to dry land and the dry land turned back to sea.**⁹ **Thus it says (Amos 5:8) "who calls to the waters of the sea and pours them out on the face of the earth."**

³ The Sanhedrin was the rabbinic judicial and legislative body.

⁴ How Isaiah 2:5 demonstrates that "House of Jacob" refers to the Sanhedrin is less than clear.

⁵ Significantly, this verse concludes with the statement that God creates both *Shalom* (peace, wholeness) as well as evil.

⁶ The relationship of this verse to proving the cycle of man to dust is less than clear.

⁷ Taken in context with the next sentence (discussing Moses's staff turning into a snake), some surmise that the reference to flesh dying and coming back to life is a reference to God turning Moses's hand to being leprous and then healing that hand during the burning bush encounter (see Exodus 4:6-7).

⁸ Exodus 4:3-4.

⁹ Exodus 14.

וכן דבור זכור את יום השבת לקדשו, ואומר (במדבר כח) וביום השבת שני כבש' בני שנה, דבור (ויקרא יח) ערות אשת אחיך לא תגלה (דברים כה) כי ישבו אחים יחדו, וכלן אמרן בבת אחת הוי וידבר א-להים את כל הדברים האלה לאמר.

So too it was stated (Exodus 20:7) “Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy,” and it says (Numbers 25:9) “And on the Sabbath day sacrifice two he-lambs of the first year (which requires actions that are considered *melachot*, the forbidden actions of Shabbat). Similarly it is stated, (Leviticus 18:16) “Do not uncover the nakedness of your brother’s wife” (i.e. the relationship of a man to his brother’s wife is forbidden) and it is stated, (Deut. 25:5) “When brothers live together and one passes away, and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not go outside the family to marry a stranger, her levir shall come upon her and take her as a wife and levir her.”

The preceding midrash indicates God’s capacity for seeming opposites. The words of the verse, “all these words, saying” are taken to indicate the compatibility of these laws. The following midrash also views the phrase “all these words” as an indication of God’s diverse nature.

ה בא וראה שאין מדותיו של הקב"ה כמדת בשר ודם, מלך ב"ו = בשר ודם = אינו יכול להיות עושה מלחמה ולהיות סופר ומלמד תינוקות, והקב"ה איננו כן אתמול בים כעושה מלחמה שנאמר (שמות טו) ה' איש מלחמה ואומר (איוב כו) בכחו רגע הים, והיום במתן תורה ירד ללמד תורה לבניו, וכה"א (שם /איוב/ לו) הן א-ל ישגיב בכחו מי כמוהו מורה, הוי וידבר א-להים את כל הדברים האלה .

(5) Come and see that the manner of the Holy one, Blessed is He is not the manner of flesh and blood. A flesh and blood king cannot make war and be a scribe and a teacher of children. But the Holy One, it is not thus – Yesterday, on the sea he was as one who makes war, as it is said: (Exodus 15:3, part of the Israelite’s song at the Red Sea) “The LORD is a Man of war,” and it says, (Job 26:12) “Through his strength he stirs up the sea,” while today, at the giving of the Torah, He descended to teach Torah to His children, and thus it says: (Job 36:22) “For God is lifted up through His strength, who is a teacher like Him.” (A verse referring both to God’s strength and to God as teacher) This is the meaning of the verse, “All these words.”

ו ד"א וידבר א-להים את כל הדברים האלה לאמר, א"ר יצחק מה שהנביאים עתידים להתנבאות בכל דור ודור קבלו מהר סיני, שכן משה אומר להם לישראל (דברים כט) כי את אשר ישנו פה עמנו עומד היום ואת אשר איננו פה עמנו היום, עמנו עומד היום אין כתיב כאן אלא עמנו היום אלו הנשמות העתידות להבראות שאין בהם ממש שלא נאמרה בהם עמידה, שאע"פ שלא היו באותה שעה כל אחד ואחד קבל את שלו,

Another explanation of the phrase “And God spoke all these words, saying:” Rabbi Yitzchak said: What the prophets of each and every generation were to prophesy in the future they received from Sinai, for thus Moses says to Israel: (Deuteronomy 29:14) (that the covenant with God extends not only to the Israelites of that generation) “but with all who are here standing with us today and with those who are not here with us today” it is not written here “and with those who are not here standing with us today” rather “and with those who are not here with us today.” This refers to the souls that were to be created in the future that do not have substance (i.e. physical existence) at the time of revelation because “standing” could not be said about them,¹⁰ because even though they were not in existence at that moment, each and every one received his prophecy (at Sinai).

¹⁰ The verse in Deuteronomy refers to those present “standing with us today” and to those not “with us today.” Had the verse referred to people not “standing with us today,” it would have implied the inclusion of people already in

The preceding midrashim understood “all these words” to refer to some multifaceted nature of God and God’s laws. In this midrash (immediately above and continuing below), “all these words” is taken to indicate that at Sinai God not only spoke the words that were communicated to the people at Sinai, but also the prophecies that would be communicated through other prophets through the generations. The indication is that the prophets did not have corporeal form at Sinai, but were present at Sinai to receive their prophesy at that time. The midrash now continues to elicit proofs that all of God’s prophecies emanated from Sinai:

וכה"א (מלאכי א) משא דבר ה' אל ישראל ביד מלאכי, בימי מלאכי לא נאמר אלא ביד מלאכי שכבר היתה הנבואה בידו מהר סיני ועד אותה שעה לא נתנה לו רשות להתנבאות,

And thus it says (Malachi 1:1): The burden of the word of the LORD to Israel in the hands of Malachi,” it does not say “in the days of Malachi” but “in the hands of Malachi,” for the prophecy was already in his (Malachi’s) hands from Mount Sinai, but until that very hour, he (Malachi) was not permitted to prophesy.”

וכן ישעיה אמר (ישעיה מח) מעת היותה שם אני, אמר ישעיה מיום שנתנה תורה בסיני שם הייתי וקבלתי את הנבואה הזאת, אלא (שם/ישעיהו מ"ח/) ועתה א-להים שלחני ורוחו, עד עכשיו לא ניתן לו רשות להתנבאות,

And so Isaiah said (Isaiah 48:16): “From the moment that it was, there I am,” Isaiah said: from the time that Torah was given at Sinai, I was there and received this prophecy, however, (id.) “now [The Lord] God sent me, and his spirit.” But until now permission to prophecy had not been granted to him.

ולא כל הנביאים בלבד קבלו מסיני נבואתן, אלא אף החכמים העומדים בכל דור ודור כל אחד ואחד קבל את שלו מסיני, וכה"א (דברים ה) את הדברים האלה דבר ה' אל כל קהלכם, קול גדול ולא יסף,

And it was not only all the prophets that received their prophecies from Sinai, rather all of the sages who stood up in each and every generation received his insight from Sinai, and thus it says (Deuteronomy 5:19) “These things the LORD spoke to your entire congregation . . . with a great voice that continued no more.”

existence at the time of Sinai who were simply not present at Sinai, but not necessarily to future generations. Instead, the reference to those not “with us today” implies the inclusion of people who were not even in existence at the time of Sinai – i.e. future generations.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 88b-89a

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף פח עמוד ב - פט עמוד א

אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: בשעה שעלה משה למרום אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא: רבונו של עולם, מה לילוד אשה בינינו? אמר להן: לקבל תורה בא. אמרו לפניו: חמודה גנוזה שגנוזה לך תשע מאות ושבעים וארבעה דורות קודם שנברא העולם, אתה מבקש ליתנה לבשר ודם? +תהלים ח+ מה אנוש כי תזכרנו וכן אדם כי תפקדנו +תהלים ח+ ה' אדנינו מה אדיר שמך בכל הארץ אשר תנה הודך על השמים!

Said Rabbi Joshua ben Levi: At the time that Moses ascended to heaven, the Ministering Angels said before the Holy One Blessed is He: "Master of the Universe, what business does one born of woman have among us?" God said to them: "He has come to receive the Torah." The angels said before Him (God): "The hidden treasure that has been hidden by you for 974 generations before the world was created, you want to give to flesh and blood?" The words of two verses of Psalms are put in the angels mouths: **"What is man that you remember him, and son of man that you take notice of him."** (Psalms 8:5) **"Adonay our LORD, how majestic is your name upon all the earth, for you placed your glory upon the heavens."**¹⁴ (Psalms 8:2)

אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: החזיר להן תשובה! - אמר לפניו: רבונו של עולם, מתיירא אני שמא ישרפוני בהבל שבפיהם. - אמר לו: אחוז בכסא כבודי, וחזור להן תשובה, שנאמר +איוב כו+ מאחז פני כסא פרשז עליו עננו. ואמר רבי נחום: מלמד שפירש ש-די מזיו שכינתו ועננו עליו.

The Holy One Blessed is He said to him (Moses): "Return to them a response" (i.e. respond to their complaint). **Moses responded before him: "Master of the Universe, I am afraid lest they incinerate me with the breath of their mouths."** God said to him: **"Hold on to the throne of glory, and return to them a response,"** as it is said: (Job 26:9) **"He causes one to hold his throne, spreading his cloud over him."** And Rabbi Nachum stated: **This teaches that the almighty spread a piece from the glow of His Shekhinah (divine presence) and His cloud over him (Moses).**

אמר לפניו: רבונו של עולם, תורה שאתה נותן לי מה כתיב בה - +שמות כו+ אנכי ה' א-להיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים. אמר להן: למצרים ירדתם, לפרעה השתעבדתם, תורה למה תהא לכם?

Moses said before Him (God): "Master of the Universe, the Torah that you are giving to me, what is written in it." God responded: (Exodus 20:2) **"I am the LORD your God who took you out of Egypt."** **Moses said to them (the angels): "You went down to Egypt? Were you subjugated to Pharaoh? Why should the Torah be yours?"**

שוב מה כתיב בה - לא יהיה לך א-להים אחרים, בין הגויים אתם שרויין שעובדין (פט). עבודה זרה?
Moses asked God: "Again, what is written in it?" God responded: (id.) **"You shall have no other gods."** **Moses asked the angels: "Are you steeped among the nations who worship idols?"**

שוב מה כתיב בה - זכור את יום השבת לקדשו כלום אתם עושים מלאכה שאתם צריכין שבות?
Moses asked God: "Again, what is written in it?" God responded: (Exodus 20:7) **"Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it."** **Moses asked the angles: "Do you do work that you need rest?"**

שוב מה כתיב בה - לא תשא, משא ומתן יש ביניכם?
Moses asked God: "Again, what is written in it?" God responded: (Exodus 20:6) **"Do not raise up the name of the LORD your God in vain"** **Moses asked the angles: "Do you have commerce (Lit: "give and take") among you (false oaths being associated with disputed business dealings)?**

¹⁴ This verse is taken as an indication that until this point, God's Torah was kept in the heavens.

שוב מה כתיב בה - כבד את אביך ואת אמך אב ואם יש לכם?

Moses asked God: **“Again, what is written in it?”** God responded: (Exodus 20:11) **“Honor your father and mother.”** Moses asked the angles: **“Do you have father and mother?”**

שוב מה כתיב בה לא תרצח לא תנאף לא תגנב, קנאה יש ביניכם, יצר הרע יש ביניכם?

Moses asked God: **“Again, what is written in it?”** God responded: (Exodus 20:12) **“Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal.”** Moses asked the angles: **“Do you jealousy among you? Do you have evil inclinations among you?”**

מיד הודו לו להקדוש ברוך הוא, שנאמר +תהלים ה+ ה' א-דנינו מה אדיר שמך וגו' ואילו תנה הודך על השמים - לא כתיב.

The angels **immediately conceded to the Holy One Blessed is He, as it is said: (Psalms 8:10) “Adonay our LORD, how majestic is your name, etc.– whereas in contrast to 8:2 “you placed your glory upon the heavens” is not written.**¹⁵

מיד כל אחד ואחד נעשה לו אוהב, ומסר לו דבר, שנאמר +תהלים סה+ עלית למרום שבית שבי לקחת מתנות באדם, בשכר שקראוך אדם לקחת מתנות. אף מלאך המות מסר לו דבר, שנאמר +במדבר יז+ ויתן את הקטרת ויכפר על העם ואומר ויעמד בין המתים ובין החיים וגו', אי לאו דאמר ליה - מי הוה ידע?

Immediately, each one of the angels became to him (Moses) one who loved him, and gave him an item as a gift, as it is said: (Psalms 68:19) “You went up to heaven and took captives, you took gifts of man,” - which means as a recompense for the fact that they called you a man (i.e. they had debased Moses by referring to his being human) you have taken gifts.” Even the Angel of Death gave him (Moses) something, as it is said (Numbers 17:12) during a plague on the Israelites: “And he (Aaron) placed the incense and atoned for the nation,” and it says (id. v. 13) “and he stood between the dead and the living, etc.” if he (the Angel of Death) had not told him, how did he (Moses) know what to do.

Babylonian Talmud Menachot 29b

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מנחות דף כט עמוד ב

אמר רב יהודה 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 שעתיד להיות בסוף כמה דורות ועקיבא בן יוסף שמו, שעתיד לדרוש על כל קוץ וקוץ תילין תילין של הלכות.

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: At the moment that Moses went up to heaven (the reference is to Moses going to Heaven to receive the Torah) Moses found Him, The Holy One Blessed is He, that he was sitting and attaching crowns to the letters. Moses said before Him (God): “Master of the Universe, who detains your hand” (i.e. who is making you do this). God said to him: “There is one man who will be in the future at the end of a number of generations, and Akiba ben Yoseph is his name, who in the future will expound based upon each and every tip of letters in the Torah mounds and mounds of laws.

¹⁵ The mention of God placing God's glory in heaven in Psalms 8:2 was taken as the angels arguing that God's Torah belongs in heaven. When the phrase “Adonay our LORD, how majestic is your name” is repeated in 8:10 without this second phrase, it is used as a demonstration that the angels had conceded in their argument.

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, נתיישבה דעתו. חזר ובא לפני הקב"ה, אמר לפניו: רבוננו של עולם, יש לך אדם כזה ואתה נותן תורה ע"י? אמר לו: שתוק, כך עלה במחשבה לפני.

Moses said before Him (God): "Master of the Universe: Show him to me. God said to him (Moses): "Turn around." Moses went and sat at the end of eight rows (i.e. Moses sat at the back of Rabbi Akiba's academy) and he did not know what they were saying. Moses's strength weakened (i.e. he was upset that he could not understand). When he (Rabbi Akiba) got to a certain matter, his students said to him: "Rabbi, from where is this known to you?" Rabbi Akiva said to them: "it is a law given to Moses on Sinai." Moses's feelings were settled. Moses returned and came before the Holy One Blessed is He and said before Him: "Master of the Universe: You have a person like this and you give the Torah through me (Lit: in my hands)?" God said to him (Moses): "Be silent, this is what arose in my thoughts." (lit. "Thus arose in thought before me") (i.e. this is what I decided)

אמר לפניו: רבוננו של עולם, הראיתני תורתו, הראני שכרו, אמר לו: חזור [לאחורך]. חזר לאחוריו, ראה ששוקלין בשרו במקולין, אמר לפניו: רבש"ע, זו תורה וזו שכרה? א"ל: שתוק, כך עלה במחשבה לפני.

Moses said before Him (God): "Master of the Universe, you showed me his Torah, show me his reward (i.e. his destiny)." God said to him (Moses): "Turn around." Moses turned around and saw them weighing his (Rabbi Akiba's) flesh in the meat-market. Moses said before Him (God): "Master of the Universe, this is his reward?!" God said to him (Moses): "Be silent, this is what arose in my thoughts."