



Many Hearts, One Torah

R. Elazar Symon – symon@hadar.org

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According to Rashi, the defining feature of the people of Israel at the moment of receiving the Torah is complete unity.

רש"י שמות יט:ב

"וַיֵּחַן שָׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶגֶד הָהָר" (שמות יט, ב) - כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד בְּלֵב אֶחָד.

Rashi on Exodus 19:2

"And Israel encamped there opposite the mountain" (Exodus 19:2)—Like one person, with one heart.

Rashi's comment is based on the Mekhilta (Massekhta de-va-Hodesh 1), which notices that the verb *va-yiḥan* ("and [Israel] encamped") appears here in the singular. The Mekhilta understands this as contrasting this encampment with the earlier ones in the wilderness, where the Israelites repeatedly complained against their leadership and about the harsh conditions of the desert. Here, by contrast, there is no complaint.



But something in Rashi's formulation—"like one person with one heart"—captures the imagination. Many understood it as making a deeper claim about Israel's spiritual condition at the moment of revelation: a state of profound unity and mutual responsibility.¹

Yet if it is so, this teaching also poses a challenge. Once the idyll of Sinai fades, how can that unified Torah guide us through a non unified reality? How can a Torah given to "one heart" remain relevant to many hearts?

In this sense, the *midrash* sharpens a more fundamental challenge in our relationship to Torah: the Torah is one, but those addressed by it are many. Once we recognize the uniqueness of each individual, there is something deeply strange about the idea that a single Torah could be equally relevant and true for radically different people. What is good for me is not necessarily good for someone else. Each of us feels drawn toward certain *mitzvot* and alienated from others. True, we are used to accepting universal laws that regulate society and establish norms of behavior. But Torah seeks far more than that: it seeks to guide a person toward a life of meaning, fulfillment, and joy. How, then, could the Torah be the same for each individual?

In one of the *derashot* in his book *Shem mi-Shmuel*, the Sochatchover Rebbe² seems troubled by precisely this point:

שם משמואל, בהר תר"ע

להיות האדם נרצה מצד הפרט צריך שיהיו כל רמ"ח אבריו מזוככים ומקודשים... שכינתא לא שריא
באתרא דפגים. אבל עוד יש לזה תקנה עכ"פ להיות נרצה מצד הכלל, כי בכל הכלל אי אפשר שלא
יצטרף בין כולם קומה אחת שלימה להיות מעון לשכינה... ואיש כזה אף שאינו נרצה מצד הפרט הרי הוא
נרצה מצד הכלל.

¹ See for example: Or ha-Hayyim on Exodus 19:2 and Kli Yakar on Exodus 19:2.

² R. Shmuel Bornsztain of Sochatchover, Poland, 1856-1926.



Shem mi-Shmuel, BeHar 1910

For a person to be accepted on the level of the individual, all 248 body parts must be purified and sanctified... for the Shekhinah (Divine Presence) does not dwell in a deficient place. But there is another possibility: to be accepted on the level of the collective. For within the collective, it is impossible that there should not emerge, among them all together, one complete stature fit to be a dwelling place for the Shekhinah.

God, says the Shem mi-Shmuel, does not dwell in an incomplete place. One who seeks revelation, one who wishes to receive Torah, must be complete, perfect—and that, of course, is impossible. But the Shem mi-Shmuel offers a simple solution: to become part of a community. When people join together, they cover for the deficiencies of one another, and together a kind of wholeness emerges.³

And then, the Shem mi-Shmuel adds, once a person merits the revelation of the Shekhinah “through the collective,” something further can occur:

ובאמת שמזה יוכל לבוא להשלים את כל פרטי אברי נפשו להיות נרצה אח"כ גם מצד הפרט.

Through this, one can eventually come to perfect all the particular parts of the soul, and afterward become accepted even on the level of the individual.

Union with the collective—and the healing and Torah that it brings—allows the individual to grow and become balanced. And once that happens, a person can reach revelation in their own right. Perhaps surprisingly, the Torah of the individual is presented here as a more advanced stage than the Torah of the collective.

³ This would seem to be a good explanation of the talmudic idea that prayers are only accepted in public, see, e.g., Talmud Bavli Berakhot 8a, Maimonides, Hilkhhot Tefillah 8:1.



The Shem mi-Shmuel continues and interprets the relationship between Pesah and Shavuot in a similar way:

כעין זה הם פסח ושבועות. כי פסח הוא מצד הכלל כמ"ש ויקחו להם איש שה לבית אבות, ואין שוחטין פסח על היחיד...

ולכך הקריבו עומר, דעומר הוא מלשון עימור והתאספות, ואח"כ הספירה שהיא התכללות ז' המדות ופרטי פרטי מִישראל עד חג השבועות... דחג השבועות הוא... שכל נשמה נקשרת בשרשה:

Pesah and Shavuot function in this same pattern. Pesah belongs to the collective, as it says: "They shall take for themselves....a lamb according to their ancestral house," and the *pesah* offering may not be slaughtered for an individual alone...⁴

Therefore they brought the *omer* [offering], for *omer* implies gathering and bundling together. Then comes the counting—the integration of the seven qualities and the many particulars of Israel—until Shavuot... for Shavuot is... when each soul becomes bound once more to its root.

The Shem mi-Shmuel (surprisingly in light of what we saw in Rashi) describes Shavuot as the moment of the individual. This is the individual who has already connected to the community, bundled himself up with other people like the binding of the sheaf in the *omer* offering, and merited with them the closeness to God at Pesah; who has worked on their character and refined themselves through the Omer period; and who now stands ready, as an individual, to receive a Torah that descends into the depths of their own soul.

The Shem mi-Shmuel's teaching resonates with another *midrash* about Sinai:

⁴ This is actually not precise: it is in dispute between the Tannaim in the Mishnah (Pesahim 8:7), and the Rambam's ruling (Hilkhot Korban Pesah 2:2) is that it is allowed but should be avoided.



פסיקתא רבתי כא

אמר ר' יוחנן - האיקונים הזה - אלף בני אדם מביטים בה, כל אחד ואחד אומר, בי היא מבטת,
 כך הקב"ה היה מביט בכל אחד ואחד מִישראל ואומר "אנכי ה' אלקיך".

Pesikta Rabbati 21

R. Yoḥanan said: A statue—a thousand people look at it, each one of them says, “It is looking at me!”

So too, the Holy Blessed One looks at each and every Jew and says: “I am YHVH your God.”

The great miracle of Revelation was not that God spoke to the people of Israel collectively, but that God spoke with each and every individual within Israel.

None of this, God forbid, is meant to diminish the importance of unity and shared purpose in receiving Torah. On the contrary: in this system unity is a necessary precondition for revelation. The state that Rashi describes must exist so that the Torah could be given. But that unity is meant to enable each individual to blossom in their own unique way and to hear the Torah's personal call addressed to them. No one can receive Torah alone—but the Torah one receives always has a personal dimension.

The way we discover that personal dimension in our lives is, of course, through Torah study. Every person's encounter with Torah—through their own interpretation and from the particular place in which they stand—generates a new Torah: unique, personal, and alive.

Hence the great importance of engaging deeply with Torah, quarreling with it and claiming it as our own. The *mitzvah* that rests on every individual to study Torah is not merely a way for *halakhah* to say that Torah is important. And the sanctification of polyphony within the *beit midrash* throughout the generations is not merely a pluralistic worldview. They are both profound recognitions of the importance of what emerges when each and every person



encounters the word of God revealed in the world, when the Holy Blessed One looks at each individual and whispers in their ear, “I am YHVH Lord your God.”