

The Dawn of Jewish History

The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni* 685:22) suggests that the dawn referred to in Psalms (22) — “a psalm upon the morning dawn” — is a reference to Queen Esther; just as the dawn represents the end of the night, Esther marked the end of the era of miraculous salvations recorded in the Tanakh. Indeed, *Megilat Esther* is one of the last books in Tanakh, and essentially closed the period of the prophets. [In fact, in *Megilah 7a*, the Talmud debates whether or not Esther itself was written with *ruach hakodesh*.] Since that time, we have been denied the privilege of direct communication with God, who we can now speak to only through prayer, and hear only through Torah study. Undoubtedly, this has resulted in much confusion as to the true understanding of the Torah.

It is quite striking that the midrash utilizes the dawn as the metaphor for this shift. The dawn ends the night and begins the day, which promises clarity and brilliance that illuminates the darkness. In what way is this parallel to the close of the miraculous, prophetic era? Wouldn't dusk be a more apropos metaphor for this transitional period of Jewish history?

I believe that this metaphor is very deliberate and exact, and in fact highlights a fundamental truth and tension in Judaism. The prophetic era was truly transcendent, but relegated humanity to the position



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of passive recipient. The prophets were often literally and figuratively asleep during their prophetic visions. It is true that there was a need for our national history to be founded upon an era of direct revelation. This allowed for the foundational truths



of our faith to be communicated with clarity, and provided a firm basis to support our rich tradition. However, the impact of this divine period was limited and the prophets' words were often unheeded. This period was designed to be followed by a phase in which our people would become actively involved in the creation, interpretation, and application of these truths to our lives. Esther marked the end of that unique era of prophecy, and ushered in a potentially brighter phase during which the Jewish People would become active in the creation of our own religious destiny, led by creative and courageous scholars and leaders.

These two dimensions of our religious experience are also symbolized by the dual revelation at Sinai, in the form of the Written Law and the Oral Law. The Written Law was dictated word for word by God to Moshe. It represents unblemished truth and absolute perfection, providing the foundation for our tradition. The Oral Law, comprised of scholarly debates interpreting the Torah and defining the parameters of the *halakha*, is a definitively human endeavor. The guarantee that the Torah would remain with the Jewish People throughout history would be our inclusion in the process and, the exchange of perfection for participation in order to achieve perpetuation.

Moshe epitomizes the dimension that is represented by the Written Law. Every significant act that Moshe performed in respect to the Jewish People was instructed explicitly and directly by God, and only he heard the entire Torah from God. However, because Moshe heard everything directly from God, he never received Torah in the form of Oral Tradition. The Talmud (*Menachot 29a*) metaphorically describes the experience that Moshe had as he

envisioned himself in the classroom of Rabbi Akiva. As Moshe witnessed Rabbi Akiva's interpretations and extrapolations of every letter of the Torah, he did not understand where they had come from. Ultimately Moshe was surprised and gratified when Rabbi Akiva attributed his lesson to a "tradition from Moshe from Sinai." Moshe was unfamiliar with the process of interpretation and originality in understanding the Torah. Nevertheless, he ultimately understood that this was the design that was so brilliantly constructed at Sinai. Rebbe Akiva was a champion of the Oral Law, following the lead of Yehoshua, who was the first person to receive the Oral Tradition and begin this process.

Immediately after the exodus from Egypt, the Torah describes the war with Amalek (Exodus 17:8-16). In this war, Yehoshua took over as leader and led the Jews to victory. However, this war was not won through any obvious miracle. The people fought and, for the first time, were engaged in their struggles. Until this point, everything had occurred miraculously, by God, through Moshe and his "magical staff." From this point on, however, the people were involved. Yehoshua, the champion of the Oral Law, led the People into this new era that continued throughout the conquest of the Land of Israel. Moshe, who remained present in the background, held his hands heavenwards, with no mention of a "magical staff" in his hands. Now it would be the hands of man that would take on the responsibility.

The hands of Moshe were associated with success, as we were victorious

when Moshe's hands were raised (Exodus 17:11). Nevertheless, the midrash (*Talmud Bavli, Rosh Hashana 29a*) counters: "Could the hands of Moshe affect military success?" Certainly, the interpretation of the verse is that when Moshe's hands were held high, the spirit and attitude of the people were directed heavenwards, and, in return, God ensured their success. This midrash is particularly striking, considering the fact that the hands of Moshe so recently brought about the plagues and the splitting of the sea! Clearly the midrash understands the significant change that the Jewish People were making, from a "Written Law experience" led by Moshe to a human, "Oral Law experience," led by Yehoshua.

Purim also celebrates a military victory of the Jewish People over the descendants of Amalek. The Midrash notes that when the lottery of Haman landed in Adar, he immediately became extremely confident of his success, as he knew that Moshe died during Adar. Clearly, Haman reasoned, this month represents the downfall of the Jewish People and foreshadowed his success as well. Haman understood the notion of the Written Law and therefore understood the significance of Moshe. However, Haman could not fathom the overwhelming power of the Oral Law. He interpreted the death of Moshe as a symbol of the downfall of the Jewish People, but he did not understand that from the perspective of the Oral Law, death represents a rebirth and an opportunity for the creation of a renewed vibrancy and life. Therefore, Haman was defeated in exactly the same way that his ancestors were at Refidim.

In this vein, the Talmud (*Temurah 16b*) tells us that the 1,700 teachings that were forgotten during the period of mourning following the death of Moshe were deduced by Otniel ben Kenaz through superb analysis. My teacher, Rav Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht *zt"l*, suggested that this episode is a clear application of the lesson of the aforementioned midrash, and perfectly depicts the character of the Oral Law. Therefore, it is most appropriate that although the Jews were coerced into accepting the Oral Law at Sinai (*Midrash Tanchuma 68:3*), it was willingly reaccepted on Purim (*Shabbat 88a*, see *Asufot Maarachot*, p.55-59). This acceptance was most apropos for Purim, because everything about Purim represents the essence of the Oral Law. The name of God is strikingly absent from the Megillah because everything that happened was a result of human initiative, with God assisting only from behind the scenes. Therefore, it is in this sense that Esther truly personified the early dawn, which closed the era of prophecy and miraculous salvations, but ushered in a period of human innovation and involvement in the active transmission and development of Torah and halacha. This transmission has faced many challenges on all fronts, including persecution, assimilation, internal conflicts, and mere forgetfulness. Nevertheless, it has been a result of this *mesora* that has given the Torah the vibrancy and human investment that has allowed it to flourish until today.