



THOUGHTS TO PONDER

RABBI DR. NATHAN LOPES CARDOZO
Machon Ohr Aaron & Betsy Spijer

THOUGHT TO PONDER: 646

IS THE TORAH DIVINE?

Thoughts for Shavuot on Combustibility

In memory of Nechama Rivlin z.l.

Wife of President Reuven Rivlin

One of the most challenging aspects in Judaism is how to relate to the concept of revelation. The uncompromising claim by (Orthodox) Judaism that the Torah is not a book written by human beings, but is the result of a revelation of God's will, requires a formidable amount of faith in the face of today's widespread skepticism and secularity.¹

Over the last few hundred years, a major argument has erupted concerning the divinity of the Torah's text. Since the days of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico Politicus* (17th century), we have witnessed numerous Bible scholars dissecting the Torah in every way possible, concluding that the traditional Jewish claim of its divinity is unfounded and farfetched.

Throughout the many years, religious scholars have unsurprisingly responded with heavy artillery. They have written profound papers showing that the arguments of Spinoza and others were mistaken and often lacked intellectual objectivity.² In our days, a sincere but problematic attempt has been made by some mathematicians and Jewish outreach programs to prove the Torah's divinity through "Torah codes," which presumably are found within the biblical text.

But, is this the right approach? If the Torah is indeed the ultimate divine word, as Judaism maintains, is it at all possible or even advisable to take an academic approach to verify its divinity? Wouldn't the fact that it is divine make it totally unreceptive to academic scrutiny and proof? Isn't this similar to studying organic matter by applying accepted criteria used by scientists when studying inorganic phenomena? Moreover,

scholars, as well as teachers in outreach programs, should ask themselves if they are not violating the prohibition “You shall not test the Lord, your God, as you tested Him in Massah” when they look for definite proofs. (See *Devarim* 6:16 and *Shemot* 17:7)

On the other hand, if we don’t want to use the academic approach, what approach are we able to take? Or, are we asked to just believe this claim without any verification? A kind of *Credo quia absurdum* (“I believe because it is absurd / impossible”), originally attributed to Tertullian in his *De Carne Christi* (c.203-206). The possible meaning of this statement is that what is sometimes foolish to a human being may be true to God. (See NT: *Corinthians* 1:17-31)The phrase inspired a celebrated *bon mot* by [H.L. Mencken](#): “Tertullian is credited with the motto *Credo quia absurdum*—‘I believe because it is impossible.’ Needless to say, he began life as a lawyer.”

This kind of approach seems to contradict Judaism’s fundamental belief that one should make use of one’s God-given intelligence and reason even when it comes to matters of belief. To believe because it is absurd is not an option.

What then are the means by which to grasp or reject the Torah’s divinity? Why are we not as convinced as our forefathers who *did* believe in its divinity? Is this due to the fact that we are more intellectually sophisticated than they were? Or that our studies have now proven beyond doubt the absurdity of this belief? Many of us may be of this opinion, but we should ask ourselves if we are not guilty of self-deception.

Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (1785-1865), in his monumental work *HaKetav ve-HaKabbalah*, seems to touch on this problem and shows us a way that is neither academic nor the result of blind faith.

Commenting on the *quality* of the revelation at Sinai and quoting the verse: “And the appearance of God’s glory was like a consuming fire (*aish ochelet*) on the mountain top, before the eyes of the Israelites” (*Shemot* 24:17), the venerable rabbi asks what is meant by the expression “a consuming fire.” Doesn’t this indicate a destructive force? Why not just say that God is like fire?

Reminding us of the fact that at Sinai the entire nation of Israel had risen to the level of prophecy immediately following a life of misery and spiritual slavery in Egypt, he continues:

The truth is that the people of Israel were not all equal in their spiritual level. And they did not all see or perceive the same kind of revelation at Sinai. Rather, each one was able to receive this revelational experience only in accordance with the spiritual condition of their soul. Every Jew saw something, but what they experienced was directly proportional to the preparation they had put into it. **When a person was less prepared, they experienced only a minimal level of revelation at Sinai; and the one who prepared more received more.** This is the meaning of “a consuming fire.” The perception of God’s greatness is exactly the same as the way fire takes hold of various objects. There are materials that are intrinsically combustible, so that when you touch them with a flame an enormous fire erupts. But, there are other items that are fire-resistant, and when you put a flame to them nothing happens. Just as nature has made certain materials receptive to fire, so it is with the Sinai revelation.

A flame grows or diminishes depending on the combustibility of the material it comes in contact with. So it is with the Jew, and with all people. *Their receptivity to the divinity of Torah is proportionate to the condition of their soul.*

I would suggest that the reason we are nowadays confronted with so much skepticism concerning the Torah's divinity is not only because of intellectual sophistication and academic biblical studies (which are often very subjective), but also because of lack of spiritual receptivity, which is developed through labor of the soul. This may seem like a convenient escape when dealing with the issue at hand. But in truth, it touches on the very essence of people's spiritual condition. As with music and art, the Torah cannot be approached from the perspective of academic learning. It is the soul's language that is at stake. Fire cannot penetrate where no spark burns. Or, as the common expression goes, "Like attracts like."

Aristotle once said, "The slenderest knowledge that may be obtained of the highest things is more desirable than the most certain knowledge of lesser things".³

It would be wise for all parties concerned to stop trying to affirm or deny the Torah's divinity and first ask: Are we or are we not made of material that is combustible with the inner world of the Torah which could possibly open the way for us to recognize the divinity of Torah? Only when we have transformed ourselves and our souls into spiritual fire can we ask questions concerning the Torah's divinity and come up with honest answers. As long as our souls are not open to the possibility that we *could* recognize its divinity, we cannot reject or accept this claim. This is the fundamental question we need to ask ourselves on Shavuot.

Chag Sameach!

¹ To understand whether original Orthodoxy really claims that *all* of the Torah was given at Sinai, see Dr. Marc Shapiro in his *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004) Chapter 7. Dr. Shapiro shows clearly that many earlier and later Orthodox sages were of the opinion that parts of the Torah text as we know it today were added or even removed with Divine permission. See also *Sanhedrin* 21b and *Bamidbar Rabba* 3:13 where it says that Ezra the Scribe edited the Torah.

² For a comprehensive treatment of the academic approach toward the Torah, see my books *Between Silence and Speech*, 1995, chap.10, and *The Written and Oral Torah*, 1997, pp. 201-233, both published by Jason Aronson. Both essays are by now outdated and need to be partially revised.

³ Quoted by Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (1:1:5 AD 1).

* * * * *

Rabbi Cardozo's book, *Jewish Law as Rebellion: A Plea For Religious Authenticity and Halachic Courage*, Urim Publications, Jerusalem/New York, December 2017, is now available at Amazon and all Judaica bookshops in Israel and abroad.

* * * * *

**If you find Rabbi Cardozo's articles of value,
please consider supporting the Cardozo Academy.
Go to: www.cardozoacademy.org and click on Donate tab**

* * * * *

Dear Friends,

Every week I receive hundreds of emails, as well as a host of important observations on my essays, via our website, Facebook, newspaper blogs, and other media outlets. It is therefore completely impossible for me to respond—for which I apologize—but please be assured that I read every comment, which I deeply appreciate and from which I learn so much. Only in exceptional cases will I respond in a subsequent essay. My office staff will try to be more prompt in posting these remarks on our website.

Thank you very much for taking the time to share your comments with me, as well as with your fellow readers. I hope you will continue to do so.

Nathan Lopes Cardozo