

Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

Torah: Authorship and Authority



Context

One of the great challenges of religious life is how we engage with our foundational texts, how we find meaning and truth (or truths) in our textual heritage. Parts of these may draw us in, but they may also utterly repel us. Struggle and discussion with the text has, of course, been part of the Jewish conversation for thousands of years, and Reform Jews are not the first to both love and wrestle with Torah. However, an aspect of this struggle which is (relatively) new to modernity is the question of authorship and authority – who wrote the texts, and where does their ‘power’ over us come from?

*As **Rabbi Josh Levy**, Rabbinic Partner at Alyth (North Western Reform Synagogue), writes below, when we recognise that this collection of texts was written by our ancestors, in their grappling with the world around them, this allows us to live with intellectual integrity, but also presents us with religious challenges, too.*

Content

A great deal of the content of the Torah is wonderful: fascinating, challenging narratives; powerful pieces of ethical exhortation; inspiring laws: as relevant today as when they were written.

Much of it is wonderful, but certainly not all.

Some of it is mundane, uninspiring and tedious. Worse, some passages in Torah express values and ideals so repugnant that they are, in the words of 20th Century British Rabbi John Rayner, “*so plainly human... that to hold God responsible for them is a ‘profanation of God’s name’*”.

So what to do with Torah? How do we understand the stories it contains – good and bad? How do we relate to those sections that tell us what to do, many of which are long way from our own ethical instincts? How do we cope with the fact that much of it is just so ugly?

The classical Jewish position tells us that we can’t distinguish between parts of Torah at all. The work is to be treated as a unity, all of it with the same status, because it is a unity with a very special author – God.

The classical Jewish position understands that there is a God, who cares how we behave, and chose to communicate divine will for us through the means of revelation of Torah – given at one moment in time, but of eternal truth. The Torah, we are told by Moses Maimonides, the great Spanish Jewish scholar of the Middle Ages was “*given to us from Moses Our Teacher entirely from the mouth of the Almighty... he [Moses] was like a scribe taking dictation.*”ⁱⁱ

This model, known as “*Torah min HaShamayim*” (Torah from heaven) or as “*Torah l’Moshe mi-Sinai*” (the Law of Moses from Sinai) presents a position in which every story should be read as ‘true’ and every law as binding – for all of them come directly from God. In this model, the primary human exercise is to engage with the text – to engage in interpretation of this core work to understand what the law means, to find out how best to meet divine will.

It is a model that has produced some of the most beautiful literature in the world, in the form of the Talmud and Midrash. These are the product of an obsession with, love of, the text. And they are clever, and often inspiring works. As a method of reading our texts for modern times, *Torah min HaShamayim* is deeply flawed. For one thing, it requires us to start with authorship rather than starting with the text itself – in fact, asking that we ignore many features of the text itself. When we start with the text itself, we see that it is not a unity but a collection of documents woven together. When we start with the text itself, we see that the authorship must be in question.

Equally challenging is that this model demands full buy in. It allows little room for differentiation between passages, little scope for different understandings of divine presence in the world – or the text. If one biblical instruction is a binding statement of divine will by virtue of its authorship, then the same must necessarily be true of the next commandment in the list, however abhorrent we may find it. When we approach Torah in this way we give it the ultimate authority for our world view. As the Orthodox thinker Joseph Soloveitchik wrote of ‘Halakhic Man’: “*he comes with his Torah, given to him from Sinai, in hand. He orients himself to the world by means of fixed statutes and firm principles*”ⁱⁱⁱ.

Torah min HaShamayim therefore does not give us a mechanism for privileging, for example, that which is ethical in Torah: that which is about care for those for whom we are responsible; about lending graciously to the poor; about being just and fair to all; about giving our best in the service of God. It gives no way of privileging those over, for example, the law that a man who seduces a virgin must make her his wife by payment of a bride-price to her father. *Torah min-HaShamayim* does not allow us to identify one as representing divine will while the other is a law which must be seen as a product of its time.

So what of Reform Judaism and Torah? What replaces *Torah min HaShamayim* for us?

We believe that the Torah is a human creation – written by our ancestors and inspired by their understanding of themselves and the place of God in their lives – so ‘divine’ in one sense, but utterly human. This has some great advantages. For starters, the proposition that the Torah was created by human beings, and then edited together by other human beings, is almost definitely true. This position does not require us to ignore the evidence in front of our eyes, to be led by the theology rather than the text itself. It is not intellectually dishonest. Recognition of the human origin of Torah also allows exactly the sort of differentiation between texts that *Torah min-HaShamayim* cannot accommodate. We can say that some laws have ‘eternal truth’ while others are a product of their time. The fundamental Jewish exercise is therefore very different – to engage with the text (and the world) to try to find that which we can call ‘sacred’.

The rejection of *Torah min HaShamayim*, though, leaves a massive challenge. If the Torah is a human book, why give it any special importance in our lives? Why read it in synagogue? Why attach any more significance to Torah than to Shakespeare, or the Beano? This is a real challenge, but one with an answer: For many of us, questions of authorship – or, indeed, of historicity – are irrelevant to our relationship with Torah. This is our people’s story, our literature, our poetry, our law. This is the formative stuff of our religious and cultural lives. The relationship with Torah is a deeply intimate, and particularistic one because it is ours. Like all good relationships, for Reform Jews it can be a critical relationship, too.

Contemplation

The human origin of the text, and our ongoing human engagement with it, are not negatives. They form the bedrock of our Judaism. The Torah may (if we allow it to) reinforce prejudices and certainly will need arguing with, but it also provides the foundational material of our tradition, presents us with beauty and truth, and gives us sometimes radical ways of thinking about our lives, our communities and our world.

The challenge for us, as modern Jews, is to allow ourselves to both challenge and be challenged by the text, to find the beauty and ugliness of ourselves in it, and allowing it to be within us. What, though, are the boundaries of legitimate reading? How can we find truth (Truth?) in human texts from such a different time and place?

ⁱ John D. Rayner, “Jewish Religious Law- A Progressive Perspective” Oxford: Berghahn Books. 1998 p.65

ⁱⁱ Found within Maimonides 13 Principles of faith (number 8) in his commentary on Mishnah Sanhedrin

ⁱⁱⁱ Joseph Soloveitchik “Halakhic Man” New York: The Jewish Publication Society. 1983 p.19