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Jewish Theology and Process Thought

Edited by

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and its suggestions leading toward a new type of liberation that the Bible itself does not fully present.

Notes

1. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 23-35, commenting on Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).
2. See David J. Lull, "What Is Process Hermeneutics?", *Process Studies* 13 (1983), 194.
3. John B. Cobb, Jr., *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), chapter 15.
4. See further the discussion in William A. Beardslee, "What Is It About? Reference in New Testament Literary Criticism," in Edgar V. McKnight and Elizabeth Strubers Malbon, *The New Literary Criticism of the New Testament* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994), 367-86.

Chapter 16

Living Torah: A Response to William Beardslee

Nahum Ward

For most of my adult life I have wrestled with Torah. On the one hand, I recognize in the Torah a sacred Source that has had great power in the life of my people. On the other hand, I wrestle to find Torah's power within my own life.

I have often experienced this ambivalent relationship with Torah within the congregation during the Sabbath service. At the height of the service, as the congregation sings, "From out of Zion goes forth Torah, the word of God from Jerusalem," I remove the Torah from the ark and face the congregation. I feel the excitement in the sanctuary as we sing, "Praised be the One Who in holiness has given the Torah to His people, Israel!" And then I walk through the sanctuary with the Torah. People move toward the aisles. They extend their hands to kiss the Torah, to connect to the Source. As I witness the people reaching to touch Torah, I am moved by the power of the moment.

I. Desire for Connection to the Sacred

When I reflect on the emotional response that the Torah evokes, I find myself asking why people who reach to touch Torah so rarely read Torah. Why do people who are moved by Torah's presence so rarely inquire into its teachings?

The answer is not hard to find. Many of us reach to touch Torah because we want a sense of connection to the sacred, to the Source. In the midst of the service, the power of the communal ritual can move us beyond the limitations of our rational thinking. For the

moment we encounter a truly sacred object. Unfortunately, as soon as we step away from the power of this moment, the limitations of our worldview take hold. We realize, once again, that the Torah is not God's word. The Torah may be wise, as much literature is wise, but it is not divine.

This ambivalent relationship with Torah is a phenomenon of the last two centuries. Until modern times, the predominant Jewish worldview held that Torah was *devar Adonai*, the word of God. Approximately two hundred years ago, liberal thinkers introduced historical consciousness to biblical interpretation. This historical consciousness inevitably called into question the divine authority of the Torah.

In the modern world, accordingly, we seem to be left with two choices. We either read the Torah with mental blinders and assert that the words of Torah are literally the words of God, or we learn from the critical insights of our day and give up the sense of an Ineffable Presence behind the text.

Fundamentalist readers of Scripture have chosen the former and have paid for that choice in the narrowness and rigidity of their worldview. Liberals, like myself, have chosen the latter approach. We have reaped the reward of open and inquiring minds, but we have also paid a price. The Torah no longer carries the power of the word of God coming alive in our lives. The traditional Jewish passion for Torah is lost for most liberal Jews.

Can Torah once again be for us a place where we come into intimate contact with the divine? Can we bring our modern historical consciousness to Torah without squeezing the sense of divine revelation from the text? Those are crucial questions for contemporary Jews.

Professor Beardslee asserts that process thought provides an understanding of the nature of sacred texts that allows us both our modern consciousness and our traditional reverence. The key to his argument is his understanding of the nature of an event and of the "happenedness of the events narrated in a tradition."

We can best understand Beardslee's approach by examining a specific biblical event. For this purpose, I've chosen the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai. The Torah tells us that God gave Moses two tablets of stone containing the Ten Commandments. Did a literal revelation of God's word happen or not? If we think the event happened, then we had better make camp with the fundamentalists and affirm the words of Torah as literally the word of God. If a literal revelation did not occur, we are free to understand Torah and its teachings in a manner that conforms to our current worldview.

Beardslee, however, presents a third alternative. He suggests that a process understanding of the nature of an event allows historically conscious people to affirm the happenedness of a biblical event. In our case, one could affirm that Moses met God on the mountaintop. However, in process thought, the reader is not limited to a literal understanding of the text. From a process perspective, the biblical account of the event is only one possible interpretation of what actually happened. Because the nature of the event at Sinai, as recounted in the Torah, is defined both by the divine presence and by Moses, the divine revelation at Sinai itself is still open to our interpretation. If a modern person could be transported to Mt. Sinai during the revelation, that person's experience and Moses' experience would differ from one another. Given the enormity of the event, we could imagine that Moses could have heard God talking. All of Moses' prior experience prepared him for an encounter of this kind. The modern person would bring a radically different life-experience and thereby would experience a very different event: most probably no voice, maybe only, if even this, the terror of the divine Presence.

I find Beardslee's approach helpful. We moderns are so often triumphant in our perception of reality that we discount any experience radically different from our own. Following a process approach, we can affirm that Moses could have experienced the revelation as described in the Torah. However, the biblical account is only one possible interpretation. We are not limited to the literal meaning of the text. We can continue our inquiry into the nature of God's presence behind the text and in our lives. Once liberal Jews can affirm the reality of Moses' encounter with God, the Torah regains its power as a sacred Source. When one approaches the stories as accounts of actual encounters, however embellished in the retelling, then God's Presence stands behind the account. The event moves beyond story and becomes mystery. How are we to understand, in our own terms, the mystery of Moses' meeting with God? In the case of mystery, our lack of understanding ceases to be an impediment and becomes an incentive to delve deeper. That is the shift we want to make, from Torah as story to Torah as mystery, continually revealing truth.

II. Sacred Texts and Creative Tension

This approach to sacred texts allows us to affirm that events that are inconceivable within our own experience could indeed have happened. But the question remains: *Did* these events happen? It is not enough to suggest that an event *could* have happened. We are

seeking God's presence behind the events recounted in the Torah. We want to know if the text offers us accounts of actual revelatory experiences, actual encounters with the holy. What can we find in the text that suggests that an event not only could have happened but *did* happen?

Beadslee offers an answer to this question. He suggests that we "rest the nature of the transformation that the text elicits in us: is it the creative transformation that God is continually working, or is it to be reconsidered because it is not in harmony with this criterion?" I understand this to mean: Does this text move within our experience as we know the Divine Presence to move in our life?

This criterion is certainly not an objective standard for determining the historicity of a biblical event. And I agree that we should not be looking for an objective standard. When we read Torah, our ultimate goal is not objective proof that an event actually happened. Rather, we seek to experience God's presence in the encounter described in the text. Hence, we seek not an external, objective knowing, but rather an internal, subjective sensing. And Beadslee offers us a viable subjective standard: Does our meeting with this text have transformative power in the way that we know God to be transformative within our lives?

Assessing the transformative power of a text offers a powerful criterion. After all, the Torah is about transformation. In the Torah we read about encounters in which the Divine challenges humans to transform their lives. The God of the Torah is forever breaking into the human scene to shatter old forms and to offer a new form, a higher covenant. This God opens avenues of liberation, which move people past prior limitations and enable them to make a new covenant on a more expanded ground. This is the God whom the patriarchs and matriarchs knew, the God of Exodus, the God of the Wilderness and the Promised Land, the God of the prophets and psalmists. This transformative power is the God many people seek in coming to the sacred text.

We come to Torah asking that the Divine help us to break through those forms that bind us and to embrace a larger mode of living. The Torah serves as a transforming power in our lives by confronting us with a reality that breaks into and challenges our own. Like our ancestor Jacob who awoke from a dream with his eyes open to a larger reality, one can emerge from an encounter with the text affirming, "God is in this place and I did not know it."

In modern times we have diminished the transforming power of Torah by dismissing elements in the Torah that do not conform

to our contemporary worldview. In so doing, we have eviscerated the Torah's power to disrupt the established patterns of our lives. If the Torah must make sense within our current worldview, how can Torah function to challenge the limitation and narrow places of this view?

The process approach to Torah allows us to preserve the creative tension between the biblical vision and our own worldview. As Beadslee writes, "We do not assume that our contemporary vision of the world is a fixed and finished entity. We hold together in contrast the biblical vision and our own, in the conviction that our vision can be creatively transformed."

This approach, which embraces conflict and tension, is not foreign to Rabbinic hermeneutics. One classic Rabbinic method of interpretation was to affirm both the happenedness of an event and some problem in the text when viewed from a contemporary perspective. The ensuing tension served as a springboard for a new teaching.

It is worth emphasizing that the classic Rabbinic interpreters did not limit themselves to a literal understanding of the text. Liberal readers can find solid support for nonliteral approaches to Torah within traditional Rabbinic commentaries. The Rabbis understood that every text speaks on at least four levels. They accepted the truth of the simplest, most literal level of the text, which they called *psbat*. But they also understood that the literal account only touched the surface of what happened. The *psbat* of any text contained countless *remezim*, hints, of details and meanings that are not to be found in the literal account. And these *remezim* can open up into entire expositions, *nidashim*, worlds unimagined in the simple *psbat*-level description. At the deepest level, every text also contained a mystical or secret teaching. The Rabbis knew that the literal words of the Torah were both true and not the full truth. Every letter of the Torah opened up a gateway to the profound mystery at the center of life.

Of course, the Rabbis did not use process thought to arrive at their understanding of a text. Their worldview more easily accommodated apparent contradictions in the understanding of a text. For contemporary people, who approach a text with a modern sense of history and of "objective reality" process thought can be useful in understanding that the "events" recounted in the Torah both could have happened and are still open to our interpretation.

III. Torah Study as Transformative

Beadslee's approach opens the events of the Torah to modern interpretation. But I believe that we must go much further. When we

study Torah, we are not after interpretation, we are after *revelation*. By this I mean that we want Torah to reveal to us that which is normally hidden, the sacred presence manifesting within our life experience. So we must ask, how can Torah speak at this deep level of life experience?

I have found that revelation is possible to the extent that students bring their full selves to the encounter with the text. If Torah study is only a mental exercise, then the student may receive new insights, but not revelation. Revelation requires that the student come fully present in heart, mind, body, and soul. In this sacred study, a conversation opens between the text and the entire life experience, and especially the deepest concerns of the reader. As we saw in the Rabbinic method, the student engages the text around some point of conflict, tension, or heightened interest. A dynamic dialogue ensues. Something fresh and new emerges—a new revelation.

This kind of dialogue requires significant openness, vulnerability, and trust on the part of the reader. The reader is being asked to permit a real meeting between the most profound depths of the self and an ancient text. As modern people, we are not naturally inclined to such an encounter. We cherish our freedom and are understandably wary of opening ourselves to a text that purports to be God's word. How do we support people in opening their lives to a meaningful encounter with the text? This is a crucial question for serious students of Torah.

I have discovered two keys to creating an atmosphere of openness. The first is to support students of Torah in validating the authority of their own life experience. Each student comes to the text with a wealth of personal "lived-in" knowledge about life. In the study, the authority of one's life experience must be held in balance with the authority of the text. All too often, we either give up our authority too easily or fail to open ourselves to the transforming authority of true teaching. The value in this process comes from holding the authority of one's life experience and the authority of the sacred text in creative tension.

The second key is community. I have found that a safe, supportive, non-judgmental community of fellow students helps to create an atmosphere that fosters openness and risk-taking.

The meeting with Torah takes place most effectively in the context of community for an additional reason as well. Torah addresses the community. The dialogue between the reader and the text is unbalanced if the reader stands alone. The dialogue takes place between communities—the ongoing community that received and recorded the revelation, and the community that encounters the

revelation as handed down by tradition. Each individual within the community will understand Torah from within the uniqueness of his or her individual life experience. But each individual comes to this understanding from within the context of the study community.

A third requirement for a deep encounter with Torah is imagination. In modern life we have been taught to devalue our imagination as idle fantasy. This arbitrary limitation on our tools of comprehension is a peculiarly modern phenomenon. The Rabbis understood that the imagination is a tool of deep knowing. They used their imagination in interpreting a text and confidently held that these new teachings, these *midrashim*, were also given to Moses by God at Mt. Sinai. In our day we study Midrash. I suggest that each student in search of the living Torah needs to do Midrash. We need to bring our own imagination and creativity to the text. We need to find deep within ourselves the stories, images, songs, and dances that the sacred text evokes. We cannot afford to leave the arts solely to the trained artists among us. For millennia humankind probed the depths of awareness through imagination. The creative arts have always been vessels of the sacred. We need to use these sacred vessels, the imagination and the creative arts, to bring forth the truths of Torah.

In my experience, Torah does not seem to carry transformative power when people simply read Torah. Torah truly speaks deeply and transformatively when students are invited into a deep dialogue with the text. This deep dialogue with the text seems to follow a certain process. First, people open their lives to a dialogue with Torah. Second, people work through the tension that rises out of this dialogue. Third, people bring their own imaginative creativity to the wrestling with Torah. Fourth, this process takes place in the context of a study community that embraces these values. When these four elements are present, I have been repeatedly amazed by the power and the vitality of the dialogue between life and text.

Too often our study of Torah falls flat because it is too safe, lacking in conflict, vulnerability, imagination, and communal risk-taking. Those who wish to transmit living Torah are challenged to bring together communities of students that can support this kind of living, creative process.