

THE TORAH AS DIVINE FIRE

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The Torah is imaged by a multiplicity of symbols and metaphors in the Tanakh and rabbinic writings. Well-known similes include the Torah being compared to water or the Tree of Life. Perhaps the most widely evidenced image is that of the Torah as fire; more specifically, in its original form the Torah was composed of this primal element. When one traces expressions of this idea, one discovers that it is not merely a literary device, but rather, like fire itself, it grew in intensity and has widespread, practical life applications.

The cornerstone of rabbinic associations of fire and the Torah is based upon a biblical verse that is found near the start of Moses' farewell song; that is, *ve-zot ha-berakhah*, in Deuteronomy 33. The key phrase transliterated reads: *mimino eshdath lamo* (33:2). In the NJPS translation this is rendered as . . . *Lightning flashing at them from His right*. The note on this text states: "Meaning of Hebrew *mimino eshdath* uncertain, perhaps a place name."

According to the masoretic tradition "*eshdath*" is to be read as two words. This results in the traditional rendering of the verse as: *from His right* [hand] *a fiery law* [was given] **to them**. Targum Onkelos translates this phrase into Aramaic somewhat differently: *His right* [hand] *wrote* [it]; *from amidst the fire He gave the Torah to us*. Moreover, connecting *eshdath* with the Torah also makes sense contextually, as Verse 4 specifically mentions that the Torah was transmitted *to us*. Rashi, in his commentary on Deuteronomy 33:2, mentions Onkelos' rendering second. Initially, Rashi suggests that the fire from which the Torah emanated was primordial. In so doing, he quotes a talmudic expression concerning black fire on white fire that will be discussed below at some length.

Before leaving this enigmatic passage it is interesting to see how it has been handled in Gesenius' *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, revised by Brown, Driver and Briggs. Therein *eshdath* is rendered as "lit. fire of a law or fire was a law, but *dat* law is Pers[ian] and late."¹ To bypass this anachronism, A. Dillmann suggested that the text might be emended

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to read *esh [lappi] dot*, thereby yielding "a fiery torch."² On its own, this reading is plausible in that it portrays God as carrying a torch in His right hand. There is, however, a basic grammatical problem with this hypothesis. *Lappid* is consistently a masculine noun throughout the Tanakh, with "im" as its pluralized ending. Ironically, the only instance of the word *lappidot* appearing in Tanakh is as the proper name of the husband of Deborah in Judges 4:4. Dillmann's emendation fits thematically if not grammatically with an assertion in the Midrash: "The word *lappid* can only be referring to the Torah" (Midrash Tehillim 52:8).

Midrashic literature is replete with discussions of Deuteronomy 33:2. A multi-leveled discourse on this verse has been preserved in *Sifre Devarim* No. 343:

From His right a fiery law to them (Deut. 33:2). This verse teaches that the words of Torah are compared to fire. Just as fire is delivered from Heaven [that is: lightning], so too the words of the Torah were given from Heaven, as is said, *You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens* (Ex. 20:19). Just as fire exists perpetually, so too are the words of the Torah eternal. Just as a person that is too close to a fire is burned and if he is too far coldness [results], so too with the words of the Torah. As long as a person is involved in them, they are life-giving, but when one removes himself from them, they kill him. Just as they use fire in this world and the World to Come, so too are the words of Torah used in this world and the World to Come. Just as fire makes an imprint upon the body of anyone who uses it, so too with the words of Torah – anyone who uses it, it will make an imprint upon him. Just as people who work with fire are recognizable within the general population, so too are the sages recognizable while walking about, in their conversations, and through their public activities. *A fiery law for them* (Deut. 33:2) – if it were not for the law that was given with it, no one could withstand it [that is: the fire].

Another application of our passage from Deuteronomy related to Torah study is the following: "R. Yohanan said: Anyone who wishes to engage in Torah study should view himself as if he were standing amidst fire. Thus it says: *a fiery law to them* (Deut. 33:2)."³ Thus, it is not just the Torah per se

that is on fire, but also the activity of studying Torah is intense and incendiary. This can be readily observed by walking into a *beit midrash* in which study partners are engaged in fierce debate.

JEREMIAH AND ISAIAH

A second biblical text that is frequently cited in this context is from Jeremiah: *Behold, My word is like fire – declares the Lord* (Jer. 23:29). In this context note also Jeremiah's emphatic assertion: *But [His word] was like a raging fire in my heart* (20:9). This profession is part of Jeremiah's poignant lament wherein he acknowledged that the word of God overpowered him and he was unable to resist it. The talmudic tractate Hagigah concludes with a reference to Jeremiah's formulation:

R. Abbahu reported that R. Eleazar said that the fire of Gehinnom has no sway over the Sages . . . for the entire body of a sage is comprised of fire, as is written: *Behold, My word is like fire – declares the Lord* (Jer. 23:29) – B. Hagigah 27a.

In the alphabetical midrash ascribed to R. Akiva, the salvific power of the Torah to save one from the fiery punishment of the Underworld is extended to anyone who engages in Torah study. The Hebrew letter "*ayin*" is associated with the Torah and eventually this leads into a discussion of the relationship between the Torah and fire.

Through her [that is: the Torah] the Israelites are saved from the judgment of Gehinnom, as is said: *When you walk through fire, you shall not be scorched* (Isa. 43:2). This results because the Torah is fire, as is said: *Behold, My word is like fire* (Jer. 23:29). She saves the Israelites from the judgment of Gehinnom which is full of fire as is said: *His firepit [has been made both wide and deep], with plenty of fire and firewood* (Isa. 30:33).⁴

Along similar lines, the midrash underscores that not only the Torah but also Mount Sinai was ablaze. The name "Sinai" itself is even interpreted as emphasizing this point. "This is Sinai. This terminology is none other than burning and incandescence . . . *The mountain was ablaze with flames to the very skies* (Deut. 4:11).⁵

WHITE FIRE INSCRIBED BY BLACK FIRE

At this juncture it is appropriate to consider the seminal formulation by Resh Lakish which exerted a major influence on many midrashic and post-talmudic discussions of the fiery nature of the Torah. Resh Lakish (R. Shimon b. Lakish) was a second generation Galilean amora, active in the mid-third century C.E. His famous brother-in-law and colleague was R. Yohanan b. Nappaha, who also contributed to this topic, as we saw previously.

R. Pinchas says in the name of R. Shimon b. Lakish: The Torah that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to Moses was given to him [*nitanah lo*] from white fire inscribed by black fire. It was fire, mixed with fire, hewn from fire and given by fire, as is written: *From His right a fiery law to them* (Deut. 33:2) – Talmud Yerushalmi, Shekalim 6:1, f. 25b).

A minor variant to this statement is found later on in the Talmud Yerushalmi. In *Y. Sotah* 8:3, f. 37a, instead of *nitanah lo* the passage reads: *orah*, its hide, thereby yielding "its hide was from white fire inscribed by black fire." This reads better and is usually found in later citations of Resh Lakish's statement.

Resh Lakish's formula and Jeremiah's above-quoted assertion are creatively connected by the late 19th-century Torah commentator Baruch ha-Levi Epstein, in a discussion of the tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were inscribed:

"White fire inscribed by black fire" that is to say the stones themselves were white fire and the letters that were written on the tablets were from white fire. It is possible that this is an allusion to the text: *Behold, My word is like fire – declares the Lord* (Jer. 23:29). The hewing refers to its coming from the holy source under the Throne of Glory, which is founded on holy fire. It was given by means of fire by the Holy One, blessed be He, according to the text: *For the Lord your God is a consuming fire* (Deut. 4:24).⁶

More recently, Reuven Margoliot used Resh Lakish's statement to reconcile the commonly-held assertion that the 600,000 Israelites (adult males) who exited Egypt correspond to the letters of the Torah. In fact there is approximately half that number of letters: 304,805. Margoliot ingeniously resolved this by suggesting that the white fire that was interspersed between the letters of black fire should also be counted as letters.⁷

EFFECTS ON JEWISH LAW

Numerous halakhic directives have emanated from the foundational passage in Deuteronomy. One of these is the mishnaic requirement to save a Torah scroll and other sacred texts that are endangered by a fire, even when this action would violate the prohibition of work on the Sabbath. It is codified in the prescription: "All holy writings should be saved from a fire on the Sabbath" (M. Shabbat 16:1).

This is amplified in the Midrash Tanhuma as follows:

"Please teach us, our rabbi, if a fire occurs on the Sabbath in a house in which there is a Torah scroll and other [holy] books, can one save them from the fire?" [Answer:] "This is what our rabbis have taught: All holy writings should be saved from a fire on the Sabbath, whether or not they are read [as part of the liturgy]" – M. Shabbat 16:1. Why did they say that they should be saved? This is owing to the honor of the Torah that is written on them – for if they were to be burned they would become worthless. You can find that when the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Torah everything consisted of fire, as is said: *From His right a fiery law to them* (Deut. 33:2). Resh Lakish said: "The Torah was of fire; its hides were fire; its writing was fire; its sewing was fire." As is said: *From His right a fiery law to them* (Deut. 33:2). The intermediary's face became fire, as is said: [*Aaron and all the Israelites saw that the skin of Moses' face was radiant;*] *and they were shrank from coming near him* (Ex. 34:30). The angels that descended with him were of fire, as it said: *He makes the winds His messengers, [fiery flames His servants]* (Ps. 104:4). *The mountain was ablaze with flames* (Deut. 4:11) and it (the Torah) was given from fire that consumes fire as is said: *For the Lord your God is a consuming fire* (Deut. 4:24). And on the earth He showed you His great fire and even the Word went forth from the fire (Yitro, 90a).

Moses' radiant face is explained by Resh Lakish in an intriguing way in a related midrash:

Moses did not know that his face was shining. When did this occur? – when He spoke with him. Resh Lakish said: "When he

wrote the Torah, Moses acquired a radiant face." How? Resh Lakish said: "The Torah that was given to Moses, its hide was white fire and it was written with black fire and sealed with fire and entwined with fire. When he was writing, he wiped his pen on his hair and from thence he acquired a radiant face" (Midrash Rabbah Devarim 3:12).

Resh Lakish's basic formulation has been associated with another of his statements that served as a major springboard for additional rabbinic musings:

Seven things preceded the creation of the world by two thousand years: the Torah, the Throne of Glory, the Garden of Eden, Gehinnom, repentance, the sanctuary in Heaven, and the name of the Messiah. And how was the Torah written? With black fire upon white fire, as it rested on the knee of the Holy One, blessed be He . . . R. Huna said in the name of R. Shimon b. Lakish: These (six things) together with the Torah preceded the creation of the world by two thousand years, for the Torah says: *I was with Him as a confidant, a source of delight every day* (Prov. 8:30). One day for the Holy One, blessed be He, is a thousand years, as is said: *For in Your sight a thousand years are like yesterday that has past* (Ps. 90:4).⁸

THE MENORAH AND MOSES

In the midrashic imagination it was not only the Torah that was created by combining differently colored fires. According to the Midrash Tanhuma, the *menorah* [candelabrum] of the desert Tabernacle was also a product of variegated cosmic fires.

When Moses ascended the mountain, the Holy One, blessed be He, showed him how to construct the *mishkan* [Tabernacle]. When the Holy One, blessed be He, showed him the construction of the *menorah*, it became too difficult for Moses. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "I will demonstrate how to make it for you." What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He showed him a white fire and a red fire and a black fire and a green fire and from them he constructed the *menorah* – its cups, calyxes, petals and the six branches (Midrash Tanhuma, Shemini f. 149a).

Another midrash that associates Moses, the Torah, and fire pertains to the day that Moses was destined to die. As such, it is implicitly connected to his farewell address in Deuteronomy 33. The storyline begins with God requesting that Gabriel and then Michael retrieve Moses' soul. They both declined. Gabriel felt unworthy owing to Moses' exalted status as being equal to the 600,000 Israelites. Michael then said that his role as Moses' teacher would make the situation too difficult to bear. Finally, God sent Samael, the Angel of Death. Moses refused to surrender his soul and a lengthy dialogue ensued. Moses reviewed the highlights of his life and among other claims asserted the following:

When I was three months old, I prophesied about myself and said that in the future I would receive the Torah from amidst flames of fire . . . [After the Exodus from Egypt] I ascended and journeyed to Heaven where I fought with angels. I received the Torah of fire and dwelt under the throne of fire and took shelter under the pillar of fire and spoke with Him face to face (Midrash Rabbah Devarim 11:10).

FURTHER RAMIFICATIONS ON JEWISH LAW

Numerous related *halakhot* revolve around the idea of the Torah's fiery nature, which thereby obviates ritual purity. There is an interesting halakhic prescription that comes from Deuteronomy's stress on God's right Hand. Since the Torah was written and transmitted with the right hand, it is customary to assign a special status to it. The Talmud poses the following question: "Why do not people wipe themselves with their right hand, but rather with their left [after defecating]?" Rava said: "Because the Torah was given with the right hand, as is said: *From His right a fiery law to them*" (Deut. 33:2) (B. Berakhot 62a).

Another halakhic ruling is based upon Jeremiah 23:29 and is found in a *baraita* preserved in the Talmud. It involves an encounter between R. Yehudah and one of his students. The latter had become impure from a seminal emission and was under the misimpression that this disqualified him from engaging in a Torah discussion.

It was taught: R. Yehudah b. Betayra used to say: "The words of the Torah cannot become levitically impure" . . . as it says, *Behold, My*

word is fire declares the Lord (Jer. 23:29). Just as fire cannot become levitically impure, so too words of Torah cannot become impure (B. Berakhot 22a).

In the Middle Ages, this formulation became normative and influenced numerous halakhot relating to women. Simchah of Vitry, a major disciple of Rashi and author of the important late 11th-century halakhic compendium known as the Mahzor Vitry, applied R. Yehudah's ruling to the case of menstruating women. Simchah quoted R. Yehudah's prescription and then continued: "Since the words of Torah cannot become levitically impure – for the Torah was not given to the ministering angels – we also say that a menstruating woman can cut off the challah portion and recite the blessing" (Mahzor Vitry, No. 474.) Can one imagine the disruption to the Sabbath celebration, had menstruating wives been forbidden to bake challah?

Rambam takes this notion one step further in his halakhic code Mishneh Torah: "Anyone who is levitically impure, even menstruating women or Samaritans, are permitted to grasp a Torah scroll and read from it – 'for the words of the Torah cannot become levitically impure.'"⁹ Thus, for Rambam the actual Torah scroll itself is impervious to impurity and not simply the words of the Torah, as they are being recited.

Rambam's extension of R. Yehudah's principle was accepted and included in the subsequent codes, that is, the Tur and Shulhan Arukh. Yaakov b. Asher in the Tur quotes Rambam virtually verbatim. The only difference is that he omits the reference to the Samaritans. Yosef Karo follows suit in his seminal work, the Shulhan Arukh. It is worth noting that none of the standard commentators on any of these three codes takes exception to Rambam's ruling.¹⁰

Rambam's innovation has served as the basis in modern times for permitting all women to touch and/or kiss the Torah scroll as it is being carried throughout the synagogue during Shabbat morning services. Nevertheless, there are many women who wrongly assume that when they are menstruating they are forbidden to touch the Torah. An even more far-reaching impact of this ruling pertains to Simchat Torah celebrations. Although traditionally dancing with the Torah has been an exclusively male activity, Shlomo Riskin and others have cited Rambam in support of the modern practice of giving women a Torah scroll to dance with during the festivities.¹¹

CONCLUSION

The Torah has been the national treasure of the Jewish people throughout the millennia. It is at the heart of Jewish religious consciousness. Especially in the midrashic narratives, the Torah also became an imaginative figure. Symbolic representations of it abound and a fertile matrix of imagery revolves around the association of the Torah with Divine fire. These formulations also incorporated Moses and the revelation at Mount Sinai into the mix. What is most intriguing is to see how these creative explorations into biblical hermeneutics eventually found practical expression in daily halakhot. Its talmudic applications were primarily directed towards the study of Torah and recitation of prayers by men. In the medieval codes there was a noticeable expansion and situations involving women also came under consideration. The most far-reaching of these prescriptions was Rambam's permission to menstruating women to touch a Torah scroll. This has fostered a more inclusive approach to the participation of women in synagogue activities, especially on Simchat Torah, and has significantly contributed to their spiritual development.

NOTES

All translations from the Talmud, midrashim and other rabbinic writings are by the author, unless otherwise noted. Where complete bibliographical information is absent for rabbinic literature, the text was accessed from Bar Ilan University's Judaic Library Plus Responsa CD-ROM, Ver.11 or The Torah CD-ROM Library, Ver. 9.

1. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, revised by F. Brown, S.R. Driver and C. Briggs (Oxford: Clarendon, n.d.) p. 77 on *esh*.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 77; see also p. 206 on *dat*.
3. *Midrash Tanhuma, Ve-Zot ha-Berakhah*, (Tel Aviv, 1961) f. 31a; cf. *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* (Mandelbaum ed.) Appendix, *Parashah* 1.
4. *Midrash Otiyot Rabbi Akiva Hashalem Nusah 1*, in *Battei Midrashot* 2 A. Wertheimer ed. (Jerusalem, 1980) p. 386.
5. *Midrash Tehillim* 2, 68:5 S. Buber, ed. (Vilna reprint Jerusalem, 1966) p. 317.
6. Baruch ha-Levi Epstein, *Torah Temimah* 5 (1902) f. 251a.
7. R. Margoliot, *Hamikra Vehamesorah* (Jerusalem, 1964) p. 46.
8. Slightly modified from *The Midrash on Psalms* vol. 2 on 90:12, W. Braude trans., p. 94.
9. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Ahavah, Hilkhoh Sefer Torah* 10:8 (Jerusalem, 1964) p. 92.
10. Jacob b. Asher, *Arbah Turim, Yorah Deah* 2:282 (Jerusalem, 1966) f. 227a; Joseph Karo, *Shulchan Arukh, Yorah Deah* 3:282:9 (Jerusalem, 1966) p. 216.
11. See Shoshana Olidort's article "Dancing Around a Delicate Issue," *Forward* Oct. 21, 2005, p. 13.