

The Strong Hand

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An image that appears several times within the context of the story of the Exodus from Egypt called to mind a conversation that I had several years ago. Professor Marc Gopin, James H. Laue Professor of World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University, facilitated a visit to the United States of a number of moderate Saudi Arabian clergymen and academics. The visiting delegation met with a number of American groups in the interests of gaining greater understanding of one another's cultures. One of these meetings involved a number of Rabbis, including myself. I remember that at the end of our informative and revealing discussions, I was talking to one of the gentlemen and said to him that I hoped that something positive would result from our deliberations. He responded that this could happen only with the help of God. In response I paraphrased the following Talmudic passage:

Shabbat 89a

And R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: When Moshe went up to Heaven, he found the Holy One, Blessed Be He, attaching "crowns"¹ to the letters. He (HaShem) Said to him: Moshe, there is no "Shalom" in your city (i.e., no greetings of peace are offered by one person to another from where you come?) He said to Him: Is there ever a case where a servant offers blessings of peace to his master (i.e., peace can only come about when the more powerful, in this case God, Wishes peace upon the less powerful, Moshe, but

¹ Decorative "crowns" which are sometimes placed on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The taga is regularly composed of three flourishes or strokes, each of which resembles a small "zayin" and is called "ziyyun" (זיין זיונים) = "armor," i.e., "dagger"... The seven letters ש, ע, ט, ו, נ, ג, צ have the crowns on the points of the upper horizontal bars. The flourishes are placed on the tops of the letters, and they are found only in the Scroll of the Law, not in the printed copies of the Pentateuch. The tagin are a part of the Masorah. According to tradition, there existed a manual, known as "Sefer ha-Tagin," of the tagin as they appeared on the twelve stones that Joshua set up in the Jordan, and later erected in Gilgal (Josh. iv. 9, 20). On these stones were inscribed the books of Moses, with the tagin in the required letters (Naḥmanides on Deut. xxvii. 8). The baraita of "Sefer ha-Tagin" thus relates its history: "It was found by the high priest Eli, who delivered it to the prophet Samuel, from whom it passed to Palti the son of Laish, to Ahithophel, to the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite, to Elijah, to Elisha, to Jehoiada the priest, and to the Prophets, who buried it under the threshold of the Temple. It was removed to Babylon in the time of King Jehoiachin by the prophet Ezekiel. Ezra brought it back to Jerusalem in the time of Cyrus. Then it came into the possession of Menahem, and from him was handed down to R. Neḥunya ben ha-Ḥanah, through whom it went to R. Eleazar ben 'Arak, R. Joshua, R. Akiba, R. Judah, R. Miyasha (מייאשא), R. Nahum ha-Lablar, and Rab"...

--<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=16&letter=T>

not vice versa.) He Said to him: It is your responsibility to assist Me. Immediately he said to Him: (BaMidbar 14:17) “And now, let the Power of God be Expanded as You have Stated.”

My intent in mentioning this evocative Rabbinic passage was to emphasize the Jewish concept of the desirable aspiration that a partnership be established between man and God to carry forward God’s Plans for a just and holy human society. Yet, upon hearing the passage that I quoted, my Saudi counterpart stated that were he to say anything like this in his country, he would be guilty of blasphemy! Apparently, depicting the Divine in a manner that has any resemblance at all to human beings, in this case Writing, Conversing, Asking for a blessing, Stating that man is needed by God, etc., was viewed by the leaders of this individual’s faith as depreciating God. Judaism clearly assumes an opposite tack when it Commands people to emulate HaShem,² and on a micro-level aspire to replicate various Deeds and Attitudes associated with Him.³

Not only does the Talmud not hesitate in imagining personal interchanges between God and Moshe, but in the Tora itself, on thirty-one occasions, mention is made in one form or another of “God’s Hand.”⁴ In spite of the assertion by an authority as widely-accepted as RaMBaM that there are no literal corporeal features associated with God,⁵ anthropomorphisms abound within the bible. This phenomenon is usually accounted for by invoking the rule, “Dibra Tora KeLashon Benai Adam” (lit. the Tora speaks in human language; i.e., the Tora at times speaks figuratively, employing turns of phrase or concepts that do not literally reflect reality, but nevertheless are readily understandable by the average, nonphilosophically-trained individual).⁶ In this specific instance, since it is beyond human beings’ experience to relate to a purely non-corporeal entity, He must be Described in terms that are relevant to man’s thinking and experience, i.e., as if God Possesses human characteristics.⁷

²E.g., Devarim 28:9.

³ See Sota 14a.

⁴ “Yad HaChazaka” (Strong Hand) Shemot 6:1; 13:9; 32:11; Devarim 3:24; 4:34; 5:14; 6:21; 7:8, 19; 9:26; 11:2; 26:8; 34:12. (13)

“Chozek Yad” (Strength of Hand) Shemot 13:3, 14, 16. (3)

“HaYad HaGedola” (the Great Hand) Shemot 14:31. (1)

“Yadi” (My Hand) Shemot 3:20; 6:8; 7:4, 5; 9:3, 15; 15:17; 16:3; 24:11; Devarim 2:15; 32:39-41; 33:3. (14)

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⁵See Principle #3 at the end of RaMBaM’s introduction to Chapt. 10 of Sanhedrin (Perek “Chelek”). A shortened version of Principle #3 reads: I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, may He be Blessed, is not corporeal, and nothing that affects corporeal entities can affect Him, and there is nothing comparable to Him. The poetic form that Principle #3 takes in the liturgical poem, “Yigdal”, is: He has no likeness of a body, and He has no body, there is no way by which to evaluate His Holiness.

⁶ See for e.g., Ibn Ezra on Beraishit 6:6, discussing the Tora’s attribution to God of the human emotion of regret.

⁷ One could further contend that once man is Created “BeTzelem” (in the image—Beraishit 1:27; 9:6), “BeDemut” (in the likeness—1:26; 5:1) of God, then reciprocally, human characteristics should be applicable to God on some level, if not literally, then at least figuratively.

Dr. Amos Bardea,⁸ in “The ‘Mighty Hand’”, his contribution to the 2010 series of essays on Parashat HaShavua that Bar Ilan University coordinates, entitled reflects upon two Mitzvot, each containing, on the one hand, a reference to “God’s Hand”, a metaphor for meaningful action within human society, as well as, on the other, an additional dimension that appears to emphasize a sharply contrasting theme. Initially, the author compares the two reasons that are given for observing Shabbat in each of the versions of the Ten Commandments in the Tora:

Shemot 20:11

For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested on the seventh day; wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it.

Devarim 5:15

And thou shalt remember that thou was a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God Brought thee out thence by a Mighty Hand and by an Outstretched Arm; therefore the Lord thy God Commanded thee to keep the Sabbath day.

Whereas the reason in Shemot focuses upon HaShem’s Cessation of doing things upon His Completion of the act of the Creation of the universe, the explanation in Devarim points us not to what God Ceased from doing, but rather what He Did, i.e., Extracting the Jews from their Egyptian servitude by impressive acts demonstrating God’s Omnipotence.⁹ Dr. Bardea writes, “The two reasons given for this sanctification of time are none other than a parallel of equal weight; the ‘resting’ of God on the seventh day means a transformation of the perception of the essence of God from the Deity as Creator of heaven and earth, to a God Defined in terms of His Active Participation in the events of history.” Furthermore, when an individual emulates God’s Non-Action by observing each successive Shabbat, he creates for himself time to contemplate, reflect and remember.¹⁰ By extension, if we expect an individual to similarly channel HaShem’s “Strong Hand”, he should strive to find situations where he can make an active difference and proceed to try to do so.¹¹ Consequently the Divine “Yad HaChazaka” is to be ideally balanced with thought and understanding.

⁸ <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/vaera/bard.html>

⁹ Although the operant verb in the verse is “Shamor” (guard/observe) and it is generally associated with Mitzvot Lo Ta’aseh (Commandments entailing what one should not do, in effect suggesting, “Prevent yourself from doing the wrong thing”—see RaMBaN on Shemot 20:7), within Dr. Bardea’s parameters of comparing only the reasons given for Shabbat observance, the dichotomy between God’s Resting and Doing is more pronounced.

¹⁰ Just as an important feature of the Sabbatical Year is that aside from allowing the land to lie fallow, the farmers have an entire year where instead of engaging in the myriad tasks required to be successful in agriculture, they can refocus on spiritual matters, so too the worker in non-agricultural areas can and perhaps is even expected to utilize the Shabbat day to engage in the type of spiritual rejuvenation that their weekday activities preclude.

¹¹ It is notable that in Beraishit 5:3, Adam is described as having a child “in his image, in his likeness”, terminologies that exactly echo God’s Creation of Adam himself, an impressive example of “imitatio dei”.

In a parallel vein, the author, who teaches in Bar Ilan's Department of Life Sciences,¹² turns our attention to the Mitzva of Tefillin:

Shemot 13:9

And it shall be for a sign unto thee upon thy hand, and for a memorial between thine eyes, that the Law of the Lord may be in thy mouth; for with a Strong Hand hath the Lord Brought thee out of Egypt.

Dr. Bardea suggests a chiasmic reading, i.e., that whereas the Tefilla that is placed on the hand corresponds to the "Strong Hand" that HaShem Used when Redeeming the Jews, while the Tefilla on the head is justified by having the Divine Law in one's mouth—as a result of it being thought about in one's mind. Once again, the Mitzva represents the value of creating a synergistic relationship between mind and body.

But I think that this intriguing and personally resonating idea can be taken a step further. Dr. Bardea's concept is reminiscent of the major theme in R. Joseph Soloveitchik's essay, "Catharsis."¹³ The Rav proposes that the entire corpus of Halacha entails two movements, the active and the passive, in the interests of a checks-and-balances dialectic:

The Halachic catharsis expresses itself in paradoxical movement in two opposite directions—in surging forward boldly and in retreating humbly. Man's heroic experience is a polar, antithetic one. Man drives forward only to retreat and to reverse, subsequently, the direction of his movement.

The Tora wants man, who is bold and adventurous in his quest for opportunities, to act heroically, and at the final moment, when it appears to him that victory is within reach, to stop short, turn around, and retreat. At the most exalted moment of triumph and fulfillment man must forgo the ecstasy of victory and take defeat in his own hands.¹⁴

In other words, contemplation and action are not only two aspects of the human condition and personality, but they balance, delimit and challenge one another. To act unthinkingly detracts from the potential significance of what one does; the simply contemplate without acting deprives the world of good deeds and prevents an individual from living meaningfully.

¹² I believe that the area of Dr. Bardea's research and teaching is significant when studying his essay. Someone who is conscious of physiology will more acutely reflect upon the interplay between mind and body than someone who recognizes this tension philosophically or theologically. In general, the power of Bar Ilan's Parashat HaShavua series stems from the fact that not only specialists in Jewish studies, but all sorts of faculty members participate and bring their unique perspectives to themes in the respective Tora portions, a true exercise in Tora U'Mada. A volume that contains an entire year's worth of such essays is Professors on the Parasha (ed. Leib Moscovitz, Urim Publications, 2005) (See http://www.urimpublications.com/Merchant2/merchant.mv?Screen=PROD&Store_Code=UP&Product_Code=Pr of). A Hebrew version of this book is also available.

¹³ Tradition, Vol. 17. No. 2 Spring 1978.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 43.

At the end of the day, God's "Strong Hand" Inspires man to develop one on a comparable level, and the anthropomorphism ends up challenging us to similarly try to act powerfully and well.