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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

WHEN 1000 WORDS CANNOT DESCRIBE A PICTURE

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Even the best of authors cannot really draw pictures or carve sculptures with words. Reducing an image, let alone a three-dimensional scene, to writing, inevitably involves a loss of detail. It follows that one cannot accurately produce an image or three-dimensional object on the basis of nothing but words. When G-d "looked in the Torah and created the world," He was not merely painting by number; either He was creatively choosing among the multiple possibilities arising from linguistic ambiguities, or else He was following a pattern He knew independently.

I want to extend this argument via analogy. Even the best of authors cannot comprehensively describe a legal or social system with words. That can happen only in conjunction with lived experience. Therefore *Halakhab* cannot be produced solely on the basis of abstract textual analysis.

My purpose this week is to root the above in *Netziv's* commentary to *Shemot* 25:9. *Shemot* 25:31-39 describe the *Menorah* in great detail. Nonetheless, Moshe is told in 25:40 to make the *Menorah* in the pattern which he has been shown. In other words, G-d provided Moshe with a visual pattern in addition to His linguistic description, and the rabbis argue that this means that Moshe was unable to accurately visualize the *Menorah* on the basis of the linguistic description. *Netziv* asks: If the *Menorah* was eventually constructed on the basis of the visual cue, why is it necessary for the Torah to include inadequate linguistic instructions at all?

Netziv answers: Language can be sufficient to reconstruct an image or object one has previously seen. Language can serve as a mnemonic, and this mnemonic can even be transferred; I can use language to create a picture of my

experience in your mind, so long as you have had similar experiences and we have established common language. Once Moshe saw a hologram of the *Menorah*, he could convey in language what it should be like, and thereafter, people who had seen the actual *Menorah*, or had access to a live tradition, would be able to reconstruct it from the Torah's language. So the Torah's instructions were necessary and useful for future generations, not for Moshe himself.

However, *Netziv* argues, there is still an unexplained redundancy in the Torah's account of the *Mishkan*. Moshe is specifically shown the patterns of the *Menorah* (25:40) and the altar (27:8), but he was also shown the patterns of the entire *Mishkan* and accessories (25:9). If Moshe received visual cues for everything, why are the *Menorah* and the altar mentioned separately? *Netziv* answers that the physical forms of the *Mishkan* and accessories were themselves a form of language. The *Mishkan* and accessories, as can be seen from the constant allusions to *Beresheet* 1 in the Torah's accounts of them, symbolize the world, or the multiple worlds of the mystical tradition. In the same way that Moshe needs a visual cue to understand the linguistic instructions regarding the *Menorah* and altar, he needed a further cue to understand the symbolism of the entire *Mishkan* and accessories, even though he could visualize them himself. It was not enough for Moshe to see them; he needed to understand them.

But Moshe did not make the items himself. Rather, that task was delegated to Betzalel, who "stood in the lee of G-d" when He instructed Moshe and "knew how to combine the letters of Creation." In other words, Betzalel was capable of constructing the *Mishkan* from the language of Torah without

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visual aids, and he understood its symbolism intuitively. Why was it necessary for Moshe to see and understand anything?

I suggest that while Betzalel could build things, he could not transmit his knowledge to anyone not directly in his presence; he was not capable of creating the linguistic mnemonics necessary for reconstructing them. That was Moshe's role. Moshe did not need the additional cues in order to follow the instructions; he needed them in order to produce the instructions in a way that would allow others to follow them. With regard to the *Menorah* and altar only, he lacked the necessary visual imagination; but he needed explicit demonstration of all the symbolism.

Even Moshe's instructions are an effective mnemonic only for those possessed of a live tradition. In the Second Temple, *Netziv* contends, even great Torah scholars and prophets no longer understood the symbolism of the *Menorah*, or of the Temple generally. Their attempts to reconstruct the Temple from the Torah produced only a simulacrum, something that looked like a Temple but was subtly lacking. It was not a microcosm, and therefore it did not merit the Divine presence.

So the Torah's language, even when an effective mnemonic for a previous sensory experience, can be sufficient for architecture only if the architect already understands the meaning of the space or object to be constructed. The Torah's language signifies, and the *Mishkan* and accessories are signified; but the building and utensils are also signifiers, and the signified is the world, or the multiple worlds of the mystical tradition. One who has insufficient knowledge of the world cannot construct the *Mishkan* even if they have perfect visual memory and a linguistic blueprint longer and more detailed than Moby Dick.

Netziv's analysis sets out three levels: the language of Torah, the physical phenomena signified by that language, and the reality signified by those phenomena. He contends that language without prior referents is inherently ambiguous, and therefore cannot enable accurate construction; it can only enable accurate reconstruction. How does this approach work, and what are its implications, when Torah language signifies actions rather than objects?

I suggest that we can map what *Netziv* says about the *Mishkan* onto *mitzvot*. The language of Torah by itself cannot enable the accurate construction of *Halakhab*. Any legal interpreter must either have, like Betzalel, a Divinely granted intuition about the structure and purpose of the laws, or else,

like Moshe, be engaged in reconstruction of something he once knew. A live tradition counts as access to Moshe's experience; that is, when the Torah is not in Heaven, no one can *paskeen* accurately unless they have a *masoret* or they are dealing with areas that tradition deliberately left ambiguous.

But it is not enough to have a tradition only about the form of the law. That would be equivalent to having been shown an image of the *Mishkan*, but not knowing what its forms stood for. Rather, it is necessary to understand what the law represents. In other words, to decide *Halakhab* requires one to understand the values of Torah.

Those who decide *Halakhab* on the basis of form, without reference to underlying values, end up constructing something like the Second Temple: everything looks right, but the Divine Presence is absent. I presume that *Netziv* thinks this is better than nothing. The question is: Is it better than any active alternative?

One consequence of modernity, *kal vachomer* post-modernity, has been the loss of confidence in traditional values. We are no longer sure that we know why the Torah commands us as it does, especially as we find some of its commands in sharp conflict with what we believe must be its core values. A natural and reasonable reaction is to retreat into the apparent safety of formalism. Much of contemporary Orthodoxy lives in a Second Temple, and as the Talmud records, anyone who did not see the House that Herod built has never seen beauty in their life.

A different approach is to do our best to reconstruct the values of Torah, recognizing that we may err, and that where our memory of the forms of law is crystal-clear, we may have to live with disjunctions between the form of the law and our understanding of what it stands for or is intended to accomplish. This approach is riskier, as erroneous reconstruction of values may lead to distortions of the forms of law, but it offers the hope of true Redemption.

My sense is that the Second Temple worked for a time, but eventually the absence of the Divine Presence made everyone recognize that their religion was hollow. Something like that may be happening in the beautiful Orthodoxy we have built in the post-Holocaust years. I for one would prefer if we tried to remedy the gap not by infusing halakhically disembodied, generic spirituality into our rites, but rather by seeking to restore the organic connection between law and values to the extent we can. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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