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THE SWORD IN THE SCROLL: UNWINDING AN INFLUENTIAL METAPHOR FOR POWER

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

The opening phrase of Parshat Bechukotai is a conditional: *If you walk in My chukim*. A standard comment found in almost all midrashim goes roughly like this:

The sword and the scroll
were given (or: descended)

interwound

from the Heavens.

הסייף והספר
ניתנו (ס"א: ירדו)

מכורכין

מן השמים

My understanding of this passage was long malignly influenced by a statue at Brandeis University that allegedly represented an angel holding a sword in one hand and a scroll in the other. There's no angel in the text, and depicting the objects as held in separate hands actively undermines the visual metaphor in the text.

However, one might argue that the "interwinding" is not essential to meaning; the point is that the recipients were faced with a choice between the two. Thus Midrashei Aggada generally play the metaphor out as follows, building on the "if" of "*If you walk in my chukim*".

Said The Holy Blessed One to them:

If you observe what is written in this scroll – you will be
preserved from the sword,
but if not – in the end it will kill you.

אמר להם הקדוש ברוך הוא:

אם שמרתם מה שכתוב בספר זה - הרי אתם ניצולים מן הסייף;
ואם לאו - סוף שהוא הורג אתכם

The scroll is the Torah, which was given to the Jewish people with an implicit threat of punishment for nonobservance. The moral may be that force is necessary for law. But I welcome alternative understandings.

This extension may successfully match the image of the interwound sword and scroll. But it is a terrible fit for the verse. Bechukotai presents the alternatives of material reward and punishment, not book and punishment, yet here we find no reference to reward of any sort. Note that a competing midrash replaces sword and book with rod and loaf, and puts the loaf first.

A story on Talmud Avodah Zarah 17b seems to challenge the metaphor directly. Rabbi Elazar ben Parta is arrested by the Romans for teaching Torah and for robbery. His exculpatory response to them is:

If a swordsman – not a scrollsman;

If a scrollsman - not a swordsman;

and since this isn't so (Rashi: = I can't be guilty of both charges),

this also isn't so (= I must not be guilty of either).

אי סייפא - לא ספרא;

ואי ספרא - לא סייפא;

ומדהא ליתא

הא נמי ליתא-

Swords and scrolls are mutually exclusive! We can try to reconcile this story with our midrash by arguing for a separation of powers: the law must be enforced, but not by the same people who decide it. But this reconciliation yields a very weak interpretation of "interwound". We end up visualizing two angels descending simultaneously, one carrying a scroll and the other a sword.

Separation of judicial and executionary powers may have an immediate appeal to Americans. But it also runs the risk of removing responsibility from judges, in the manner of the Inquisition handling heretics off to "the secular arm" for punishment. Relatedly, this approach can easily be used to justify the exclusion of Torah scholars from military service.

The question is whether we can have it both ways, whether we can have deep ambivalence about combining Torah with power without making Torah immature and escapist.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik tries to pull this off in the second of his *Five Addresses* to Mizrachi in the 1960s. He reads the scroll and the sword as representing two distinct modes of leadership: influence and power. He is careful not to present them as mutually exclusive. "Halachah never denied that in certain circumstances it is impossible not to use the sword."

Nonetheless, it is clear that using the sword is a *bediavad*, a concession to necessity that should be as limited as possible.

Rabbi Soloveitchik argues that the sword is necessary for self-defense, and also when large-scale things must be accomplished rapidly. The trade-off is that such accomplishments are deeply unstable and may be ephemeral. His meta-metaphor is that the conquest of Joshua sanctified more of Israel than the settlement of Ezra, but that only Ezra permanently sanctified the Land.

Ezra's methods might have been useless in the time of Joshua. The Rav was very much not a Ghandian. Swords must be met with swords. But he also emphasized that conquest through power is never an end in itself.

The Rav does not explicitly consider the possibility of tragic paradox, for example that Joshua's necessary exercise of power made achieving Torah influence impossible without an intervening Exile. Very likely he would have thought of that as taking the meta-metaphor too far. But I suspect that without some such move, he cannot adequately explain "interwound".

Some interpreters take a radically different approach. The sword and the scroll are wrestling rather than cooperating! The

scroll stands for Yaakov, and the sword for Esav. The twins' lives are interwound from birth, and therefore Yaakov must sometimes take up the sword to defend himself. But the goal is to disentangle scroll and book from each other, or perhaps for the scroll to somehow absorb the sword, as when Yaakov comes to terms with the Esav within him after a night of wrestling.

This proposal would fit better if the original metaphor had some hint of aggression or tension between scroll and sword. Moreover, the Torah associates the sword with Yishmael rather than Esav.

Here it is tempting – and the form of this essay generally requires this – to provide a new interpretation that somehow satisfies all the demands of my challenges above: it understands “interwound” with great seriousness and fidelity, fits well with the opening of Bechukotai, increases moral responsibility, and so on.

I don't have such an interpretation. Instead, I want to offer a brief reflection on the above. Somewhat ironically, this reflection depends on your understanding that I wrote it before almost any of the above.

Reading the opening midrash immediately set me to thinking about the relationship of Torah and power. I knew that I was not thinking creatively. Rather, I was asking the kinds of formal questions that my Brisker teachers had taught me to ask whenever two things are connected, such as ‘Congruence, Confluence, or Conflict?’.

My question then became whether it was important to ask these questions even if they were unlikely to produce anything new, if at most they would provide a framework for categorizing previous approaches. My answer was yes, because they would prevent me from too easily accepting that current Orthodox thought fits well with the midrash. Here's the much longer version of that answer, which the first section of this essay hopefully illustrates.

Every mode of Torah thinking eventually reaches its creative limit. The ripe and low-hanging intellectual fruit are harvested in the first generation; ladders and patience make the effort worthwhile in the second generation; by the third, consumers have to sort through multiple baskets to find one edible apple. (My analysis here follows that of Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and that of Dr. Haym Soloveitchik in various contexts).

But this critique misses a key point. The purpose of paradigms is not to stimulate creative geniuses but rather to ensure the productivity of ordinary minds. For example, mechanical halakhic thinkers trained to doggedly apply a widely acceptable method will get the psak right-enough almost every time.

To some extent this outcome is circular. By analogy: monetary justice integrates three primary components: that people get what the law entitles them to, what they deserve, and what they reasonably expect. A good court decision balances these factors well. Similarly, a good psak in areas of ritual halakhah generally must fit within the questioner's parameters of plausibility.

This is so for many reasons, but the one I want to draw attention to here is that halakhah must be predictable in order for observant people to feel religiously secure.

Religious security can be deserved. People who genuinely strive to live by the law and have successfully done so for years ought not have to be continually anxious that they've gotten a detail wrong.

Religious security also carries the danger of religious complacency. People stop asking questions. People assume that what they've always done remains the right thing to do even when their circumstances change dramatically. Or they assume that they are in fact doing what they've always done, when in fact their practice has changed, for one of many reasons. Consider for example athletes who change the motions of their entire body to accommodate an injury.

Creative genius is one antidote to the problems of religious security. But creative genius often has difficulty making itself heard. This is partially because it may be genuinely unintelligible to people trained to think in whatever forms are conventional, and partially because creativity inevitably threatens security, and therefore activates deep-seated psychological defense mechanisms.

Therefore, it's important to understand that systematically applied conventional analysis can also palliate the problems of religious security. The key thing is to validate questioning and questions.

“Brisk” in today's intellectual Torah world refers to a specific type of formalist analysis that has become highly conventional. But part of its achievement, by the third generation, was to train students to ask certain kinds of questions **every single time**. The goal was no longer radical creativity but rather understanding the material in the conventional manner of the school. To cultivate the agricultural metaphor, Briskers now bring mechanical reapers to fields that have been fully cleared and then planted by Brisker predecessors in patterns designed to maximize the efficiency of those machines.

I suspect that a Torah community can maintain its integrity even if it lacks creativity. But it can't if it stops asking its Torah and its Torah leaders the questions it knows how to ask, if some areas and people become immune to challenge.

I'd love to say that this represents the difference between influence and power. Influence invites questions and challenges, while power quashes them.

But influence often yields power, in a way that the Rav's essay doesn't address. A successfully influential ideology gains control of academic hiring decisions, for example. The Rav argues that influence works through awe of the influencer, and my experience is that the influenced often develop a *yetzer hora* to impose their awe on others. The scroll and the sword are inextricably intertwined.

Shabbat shalom!