

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



## IF G-D KNOWS EVERYTHING, WHY DID HE ASK MOSHEH “WHAT’S THAT IN YOUR HAND?”

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

My father *a”b* was a communications engineer. He often commented that effective communication is not about the objective characteristics of the transmitter and receiver, but rather about their relationship. For example, a technologically superb FM transmitter will not succeed in communicating with a technologically superb AM receiver. Or: A graph that uses subtle color gradations to convey nuance will not successfully convey that nuance to a colorblind audience.

However, the relationship between a transmitter and receiver may not be fixed and immutable. Many of them can be tuned until they match. Couples therapy is largely about tuning human beings to each other’s frequencies.

The creation of a text is an effort at communication. It follows that a text by itself cannot communicate to all readers. Either the text or the readers need to be tuned to match each other. My goal in this essay is to briefly elucidate a variety of tuning techniques in the context of the opening dialogue of Shemot 4:2. Here is the text copied from AIHaTorah.org:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו יְקוֹק [מֶה־זֶּה] [מִזֶּה] בְּיָדְךָ וַיֹּאמֶר מִטָּה

This text differs from what you would find in a Torah scroll in at least three ways. It includes written instructions for vocalization, cantillation, and orthography. These instructions model the process of mutual tuning.

For example:

Most Torah readers are not sufficiently versed in Biblical grammar to pronounce the unvocalized text properly. Some consonantal texts are in any case grammatically ambiguous, so that the correct pronunciation must be conveyed by some means beyond the text itself. The *nikkud* tunes the consonantal text so that it can convey meaning to readers who are not native Hebrew speakers of Biblical Hebrew, and in some places disambiguates it even for native speakers.

This works only if readers have been tuned by learning what sounds each element of *nikkud* stands for. It works to convey added meaning only for readers who have been taught Biblical Hebrew grammar. Note that these two functions can be separated; *nikkud* can convey grammatical meaning to the deaf and phonetic meaning to the grammatically hobbled. A grammatically hobbled reader of *nikkud* can convey meaning to a grammatically able illiterate. Those of a certain age will

remember that radio transmissions often came with lots of static; that what Chassidische leining sounds like to someone used to “*sefaradit*”, and vice versa.

Properly conveying the sound-patterns that the text encodes is only the first step. (More precisely: The patterns that the text encodes which are conventionally represented via sound, since as noted at the end of the previous paragraph, different communities will use different sounds to convey the pattern). Receiving meaning from the text requires interpretation.

Let’s divide interpretation roughly into “translation” and “application”. I’ll illustrate the difference by means of perhaps the most striking feature on the AIHaTorah text, its orthographic instructions, conveyed by vocalizing a text in brackets while putting an unvocalized text in parentheses: (מה־זֶּה) [מֶה־זֶּה]. This indicated that the text should be vocalized “M<sub>a</sub>H Z<sub>e</sub>H”, even though it should be written MZH, with no letter and space after the initial “Mem”. Let’s focus for the moment on interpreting the vocalized text.

“M<sub>a</sub>H Z<sub>e</sub>H” translates as “What is this?”. The whole verse can then be translated:

He (=Hashem) said to him (Mosheh): What is this in your hand?

He (=Mosheh) said: A *mateh* (=wooden staff”).

Let’s assume that every element of the above translation is syntactically and semantically accurate. We are still left with the question: What does the dialogue mean?

The simplest answer would be that Hashem did not know what was in Mosheh’s hand, so He asked, and Mosheh responded with the relevant information. But we know that this interpretation is false, because we have been theologically tuned to assume that G-d sees and knows everything. We therefore need to apply our translation differently.

Rashi comments:

. . . But the *peshat* of the text is:

Like a person A saying to his friend B:

“Do you concede that this (object) in front of you is a stone?”

B said to A:

“Yes.”

A said to B:

“Behold I will make it wood!”

Rashi frames this conversation in terms of a magician and audience. To maximize the social/emotional impact of the coming transformation, the magician makes the audience commit to the prior facts, so that they can't later say "I knew all along that it was really wood". So too here, G-d makes Mosheh identify what is in his hand as (inert, rigid) wood, so that he will be forced to acknowledge G-d's power when it transforms in the next verse into a (fearsomely alive, flexible) snake.

It seems to me that Rashi's comment is intelligible only to someone who is familiar with sleight-of-hand as entertainment. Moreover, it assumes that this is the sort of thing that ordinary people say to each other, meaning that sleight-of-hand is casual entertainment and not limited to professionals. In other words, if Rashi is correct, understanding this text requires cultural attunement.

This makes me wonder how Rashi is received by later halakhic authorities who prohibit sleight-of-hand. Note that there are two very distinct grounds given for such prohibitions: 1) that it might cause people to mistakenly believe that magic is real and powerful, and 2) that it might be mistaken for black magic, which is real and powerful.

How one understands the *otot* that G-d gives Mosheh here, such as the transforming staff, will obviously be affected by this dispute as well. Understanding the text correctly in the context of our tradition requires halakhic attunement, which is a specific form of cultural attunement.

Our tradition also assumes that meaning is not conveyed exclusively by the vocalized text; rather, where vocalization varies from the written text, there must be a content-purpose for the divergence. Here is the first part of Rashi's commentary:

This is why (MZH) is written as one word, for the *derash*:  
*MiZeh* (=from this) in your hand  
you are liable for flogging,  
because you have suspected people who are kosher.  
But the *peshat* of the text is . . .

The reference is to Mosheh's complaint in the previous verse that the Jews would not have faith in him and would claim that Hashem had not appeared to him. This might be an excellent example of *derash* and *peshat* supplementing each other to form a greater consistent interpretation. The written text tells us that Mosheh was wrong to ask for an *ot*, while the vocalization conveys that Hashem will nonetheless supply one. This might also explain why Hashem does not tell Mosheh what is coming (even though the magician in Rashi's example does inform the audience); Mosheh's surprise and fear at the snake's appearance is a deserved punishment.

Rashi's *derash* also provides another excellent illustration of the differences between translation and application. Consider Hadar Zekeinim:

*Mizeh* (=from this) in your hand they will believe you.

This essentially makes the *derash* and the *peshat* identical, and for that reason I find Rashi more compelling.

I similarly prefer Rashi to the many commentaries that atomize מזה and use the initial ז as a reference to forty years, or to Rabbeinu Bechayay's suggestion that the intermediate ה is omitted because only five out of ten plagues will be initiated by Mosheh's staff. These seem to me to be impositions on the text (eisegesis) rather than expositions of the text (exegesis). One way to distinguish those categories is to ask yourself whether you would allow the method to teach you something you didn't already know. For example, I doubt that Rabbeinu Bechayeh would resolve an ambiguity about whether a plague was initiated by the staff on the basis of this missing letter. On the other hand, I think Rashi might partially ground his overall assessment of Mosheh's development on the position that he did wrong here and was punished.

One last illustration of the difference between translation and application, this time within the vocalized text. In contrast to Rashi, Rabbi Isaac Samuel Reggio sees the question "What is in your hand?" as a mere conversation-opener. Netziv posits that Mosheh had several things in his hand, and G-d was testing to see whether he understood that the wooden cylinder was intended. Malbim contends that such cylinders are identified by different words in Biblical Hebrew depending on their intended use; G-d was testing whether Mosheh would correctly answer *mateb* (staff) rather than *makel* (switch) or *mish'enet* (cane). It seems to me that the last two readings require G-d and Mosheh to be sufficiently attuned for Mosheh to understand what was being asked.

It is often difficult to recognize, let alone acknowledge, that when "what we have here is a failure to communicate", the fault is almost by definition exclusive to one side. Deborah regularly reminds me that I used to regularly remind her that teachers must tune their transmissions to the student-receivers in front of them (which generally requires being able to receive the students' transmissions as well).

It's also difficult but vital to recognize and acknowledge that perfect communication is as likely to lead to total war as to genuine peace. Ambiguity, confusion, and error are often much to be preferred from a utilitarian perspective.

*Shabbat shalom!*