

Reviewing or Relearning

Parasha Vaeschanan 5779

Rav Elisha Friedman

September, 26 2019

This morning we read the Ten Commandments. Of course, this is not the first time we are hearing it, and I'm not referring to my hope that all of the adults in this room have heard this list before. Rather even in our yearly readings of the Torah itself this is the second time we are reading this passage! The first was back in Exodus when God first gave Moses these commandments, and now we read them again as part of a historical review of that event.

This is in keeping with the book we are now reading – the book of Deuteronomy, which is in large part a review of events and laws we have come across before. The notion that the Torah would repeat events and commandments is itself somewhat problematic, but the commentators were bothered by an even more difficult issue: the passages about the same event or law at times are different!

History does not change, neither does the language God used to give his commandments, so we are left to ponder why are different phrases and words used for the same concrete event or Divine statement? Two major approaches have been developed in the history of Biblical interpretation: the rabbinic method used in Midrash and the critical method used by modern academic scholars.

The modern academic scholar sees in these discrepancies a proof that the Bible was collated and edited from different manuscripts and does not reflect the pure, unadulterated word of God. Therefore different phrases can be used for the same event, because in two ancient traditions there was a divide over the wording. Our version of the Bible was edited from these collections and so different words are used. This approach has little to offer the believer – who does see the Biblical text as a record of the word of God.

The rabbinic approach seeks to harmonize between the two different passages and finds a deeper truth hidden between these discrepancies. An example will help illustrate this methodology. The word used to describe observing the Shabbat in the Exodus commandments is זָכוֹר “remember,” while the word used in the second rendition is שָׁמֹר “guard.” Which word did God use, was it “guard” or “remember”? The rabbis famously answer that both words were uttered at once – בְּדִבּוֹר אֶחָד נֹאמְרוּ – This feat would be impossible for a human being to do or hear, but nothing is beyond God. This tradition also has ramifications for the laws of Shabbat, and so is a foundational concept in discussions of Shabbat.

There is a third approach, which is not as well-known, and is somewhere between the two discussed so far. This is the approach of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra – the great Biblical commentator who in many ways invented the peshat tradition, of interpreting the Bible without rabbinic traditions in the plain sense meaning of the words. Since as a traditional commentator Ibn Ezra believed in the authenticity of the Torah, he could not accept the academic approach. But since his interest lies in the plain sense meaning he also does not follow the rabbinic approach to these contradictions.

Instead, Ibn Ezra (Exodus 20:1) suggests there is no real problem here. It is grammatically proper to change

words slightly, so long as the general meaning of the passage remains the same. When one recounts some event or phrase it is legitimate to change slight aspects of the retelling, so long as the general meaning is not changed by these deviations.

ודע, כי המלות הם כגופות, והטעמים הם כנשמות, והגוף לנשמה, הוא כמו כלי, על כן משפט כל החכמים בכל לשון שישמר הטעמים, ואינם חוששים משנוי המלות, אחר שהם שוות בטעמן

Know that the words are like the body and meaning is the soul, and the body is to the soul a vessel. So the way of wise people in all languages is to preserve the meaning, but they are not concerned with the change in words, since the meaning remains the same.

Good, so there is no problem with some slight variation according to this approach, but why have these discrepancies at all? Could not the best selling book in all of history have been a bit better edited? The word of God couldn't be flawless in its presentation?!

It's been a number of years since I had specific times set aside to review what I study, but when I was in yeshiva there was a strong emphasis placed on reviewing what you had studied and there were even times set aside during the day not to study new material, but to review. This is a good idea, because we forget so quickly. Here is the interesting part: in the years after I left yeshiva I realized that although I had reviewed what I learned all those years I had done it the wrong way.

There are two ways to review. Suppose someone reads a long novel by Charles Dickens, they may decide to review it later, but they probably won't read every word again. They would more likely skim through, reminding themselves of the key points. This method helps remind them of what they studied, but does not enhance their understanding. They simply review the material they absorbed the first time. This is how students study for tests. They cram in the hours before the test, making sure they remember for the next few hours and then move on to other material.

But there is another way to review. It's to approach the material one has studied as if they have never seen it before. They relearn everything all over again, and find new insights they missed the first time. This review helps not only remember, but also uncovers layers of profundity the student missed in the first reading. It is this review we encourage when studying Torah. Not simply to review what was said the first time, but to relearn.

Reviewing often yields the same "words" as the first time, but relearning is always a bit different. And so, when the Torah reviews passages it is not simply a review, but rather a call to relearn, to approach the material again in a fresh way as if we are experiencing it for the first time. This yields different words, and that's why the words will change slightly from the first time to the second. When we study Torah each time should be fresh, each time should yield new insight.

We are coming up on the month of Elul, which will lead us to the High Holidays, and it is worth applying this insight to the upcoming period. Every year we do this season and every year it's the same rituals. But our job is to find new meaning in these rituals, not to do them by rote. We should not simply review what we did last year and the year before that, but rather relearn this season. The call to repentance, the opportunities for introspection, the times set aside to improve our self-awareness - these are not weeks to "go through" but rather opportunities for significant spiritual growth.

Let us remember that in Judaism we seek to relearn, to approach concepts and holidays we have known all our lives as if this our first encounter with them. In this way when we do it again, it looks ever so slightly different from the first time - much like the review of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy differed slightly from the

first one.