

Transmitting Torah: Revelation

Rabbi Sherril Gilbert (2018)

In 1922, a young German author named Franz Rosenzweig¹ published an extraordinary book of Jewish philosophy called *The Star of Redemption*. How he wrote this book is, in itself, an incredible story. He began to write it from the Balkan front during the World War I, where he was serving with an anti-aircraft unit of the Kaiser's army.² Can you imagine writing down a very deep, philosophical treatise on army postcards while listening for the sound of attacking airplanes? It is said that he wrote portions of it on these postcards which he then sent home to his mother. The bulk of this complex work, however, was written after he returned to his hometown of Kassel, Germany.³

So there was Rosenzweig, sitting at the front, facing the enemy, and having all these high thoughts which he needed to put together because he could see that the world was falling apart. He needed to make sense of the world he was watching disintegrate.

In 1913, Rosenzweig had had a conversation with an older colleague named Eugen Rosenstock, whose passionate and articulate commitment to Christianity convinced Franz that religion – and specifically Christianity - could provide a meaningful orientation for modern life. That was the year before WWI began. By that time, he had become an accomplished philosopher who had written his doctoral dissertation on Hegel.

Rosenzweig considered accepting Christianity as his religion, and resolved to search for Truth. But the truth had to be a truth that was not merely philosophical. It had to be something to which he might devote his life. Knowledge, for Rosenzweig, had to be in service of humanity.

He did have one personal reservation about accepting Christianity: he said he could become Christian only if he remained loyal to Judaism during the period of preparation and up to his moment of baptism.

And so on Yom Kippur in 1913, Rosenzweig found himself in a traditional synagogue in Berlin. From the moment that he came into that shul, he reportedly felt that the people gathered there for Kol Nidre were actually facing a Higher Being. He really felt in those moments that not only was he witnessing something spectacular, he himself was experiencing a religious or spiritual metamorphosis.

He wrote that, "Anyone who has ever celebrated the Day of Atonement knows that it is more than a mere personal exaltation or the symbolic recognition of a reality such as the Jewish people; it is a testimony to the reality of God which cannot be controverted."

¹ The story of Franz Rosenzweig is told in *Credo of a Modern Kabbalist*, by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi with Rabbi Daniel Siegel

² N.N. Glatzer, Foreword to *The Star of Redemption*, pp xi-xii

³ Ibid, p. xiii

His experience of God's nearness taught him that there was still fire in the smoldering embers of Judaism, despite his having earlier dismissed that religious heritage as declining, and on its last legs. From that time on, Rosenzweig sought to uncover, express, and to operationally ground an answer to the puzzle of what constituted a life that was both fully Jewish and fully modern.⁴

Rosenzweig, who grew up in a secular Jewish home, began to read and to learn and to deeply engage with Judaism. When people would ask him, "Are you practicing *this* mitzvah?" "Are you keeping *that* observance?" he would answer, "Not yet."

Rosenzweig accepted that Torah was a document that reflected human vicissitudes. The documentary hypothesis – which argues that Torah consists of text reflecting the writings of four different authors – was, for Rosenzweig, not a bad hypothesis.⁵ And yet, at the same time, our tradition insists that Torah is the word of God, and so Rosenzweig came up with a very beautiful and simple answer to this very perplexing contradiction:

Even if a human being did sit there with scissors and glue and pasted together a J-document and a P-document and so on, this process is no less God-directed than thunder and lightning on a mountain top. For the Torah to be the word of God does not have to involve a process as stiff as one-word-at-a-time dictation, God to Moshe on Mount Sinai. The miracle may lie just as much in the fact that the Torah came together in such a way that its teachings are *enduring*; that it speaks to succeeding generations in an enduring way.

Rosenzweig related very strongly to this approach. He began to see, in his contemplation, where this might lead. In the trenches at the warfront he did not have writing paper. The only supplies available to him were the army postcards on which he needed to write in very small script in order to get any amount of real thought down. So he thought through his ideas very carefully before writing in order to condense a great deal of thinking onto a 3x5 postcard.



What he began to see were two triangles, in which each of the six points represented a major dimension or theme in our tradition. The first triangle consisted of God, World, and Humanity. The second triangle was composed of Creation, Revelation and Redemption. Taken together, these two triangles form a *magen david*, which is the Star of Redemption, the focus of Rosenzweig's book.

This pattern of Creation-Revelation-Redemption is fundamental to how we understand and relate to God,

⁴ *The Star of Redemption*, Kindle Location 218-9

⁵ The documentary hypothesis, first put forward by Julius Wellhausen, argues that Torah consists of text reflecting four different authors. Two are distinguished by the Divine name they favour (the "J" author uses the tetragrammaton YHWH, and the "E" author claims Elohim). A third author comes from priestly families and the fourth of found mostly in the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua.

the world, and humanity. Every prayerbook takes us through the cycle of Creation-Revelation-Redemption. Our davvenen would not be meaningful if those deep structures did not run throughout the words we are saying. The Shema, which we say in *shacharit* and *ma'ariv*, is surrounded by three long blessings. The first two, which thank God for Creation and Revelation are said before we say the Shema. The third, which thanks God for Redemption, follows after the Shema. Through our prayers, we understand that the Creation, Revelation, and Redemption are presented not just as discrete events located in the mythic past or even the future, but these are also cyclical processes presently ongoing within our lives.

In this essay I will focus on the center dimension of this second triad, which is Revelation. So, let's dig into the Revelation now.

[READING 1: Exodus 19:16-20,25]

So we have this intense seminal event – the giving over of the Torah - happening in Torah. Or rather, we think this event happened. Or we believe it did. But how do we *know* that the Revelation happened as described in our text? We are pretty sure that there were no reporters or photographers present at the time. And I don't think we would say that it is fake news, right?

The Talmud offers one explanation. This is a reading from the opening lines of Pirkei Avot:

[READING 2]

*At Sinai, Moshe received the Torah and handed it over to Joshua who handed it over to the elders, who handed it over to the prophets, who in turn handed it over to the men of the Great Assembly.*⁶

This mishnah describes the chain of transmission that stretches from Moshe to Yehudah Ha-Nasi (Judah the Prince), the 2nd century rabbi who compiled the Mishnah. This is one text that explains the inseparable link between the rabbis and Moshe who first received the Torah at Sinai.

Maimonides had a very detailed answer to this question of transmission of Torah. According to him, first of all, God spoke to Moshe. Then Moshe called Aharon and told him. Aharon then called his sons to come, and Moshe told Aharon and his sons. Next, he called in the twelve heads of the tribes. Now, Moshe was telling it to Aharon for the third time, a second time to the sons of Aharon, and a first time to the heads of the tribes. Then he called in the 70 elders and told them in front of the others, so that Aharon was now hearing it for the fourth time. Finally he called in the six hundred thousand Israelite men between the ages of 20 and 60, and Moshe Rabbeinu again repeated what God had told him.

As they all listened, they were inspired. By this time, Aharon is nodding at all the right places, since he had heard it so many times. Then Moshe “left the room”, as it were, and Aharon said, “And as my brother Moshe was teaching you...” and he repeated it once. Next, Aharon left the room and his sons repeated the teaching. Then they, too, left, and the 70

⁶ Pirkei Avot 1:1

elders repeated it to the house of Israel, which meant that everybody heard it five times. This is the way the Rambam described it, and I only wish it had happened that way.⁷

And so, from this description, it would appear that God is giving over the whole Torah to Moshe on Mount Sinai. But – *gei veis* (this will come as no surprise to you) - there was dissension among the ranks of the sages, some of whom believed that they had permission to “know and expound things ‘beyond what was spoken to Moshe at Sinai.’” For example, they would say that “things not revealed to Moshe were revealed to Rabbi Akiva.”

Rabbi Akiva was a 2nd century scholar and sage. Here’s the story as it appears in the Talmud⁸:

[READING 3]

Said Rav Judah in the name of Rav: At the time that Moshe ascended to Heaven, he found the Holy and Blessed One sitting and affixing crowns to the letters. He said to him: “Master of the Universe, who is forcing your hand [in that you must add crowns to what you have written]?” God said to him, “there is a certain man who will live after many generations, by the name of Akiva ben Joseph, who will one day extract piles and piles of halakhot from each and every jot.” Moshe said to God, “Master of the Universe, show him to me.” God said, “Turn around.” Moshe then went and sat at the back of eight rows in Akiva’s academy, and he could not grasp what they were saying. Akiva was explaining the Torah of Moshe in such creative ways that it was unrecognizable to Moshe. At this, Moshe began to feel powerless. But when they reached one particular matter, the disciples said to Akiva, “Master, where do you know this from?” He said to them, “it is a halakhah given to Moshe from Sinai.” At that, Moshe felt better. So he turned around, to the Presence of the Holy and Blessed One, and said to God, “Master of the Universe, you have such a person, and yet you give the Torah through me?” God said to him, “Silence! So I have decided.”

Akiva was the first rabbi to assert that the Torah in its *entirety* - not just the Ten Commandments - came directly from heaven. In this *sugya*⁹ the reason God placed “crowns” on the letters of the Torah was so that Akiva would later find meaning in these ornamental markings.

This story portrays a highly self-conscious moment that holds the potential for extreme discontinuity, when Torah might seem to have lost its mooring in either the historic Torah of Moshe or the Divine Torah of God. But then Moshe is reassured of *continuity* when Akiva credits the “new” Torah to Moshe. This is amazing: God seems to be assuring us that every

⁷ As told by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi z”l in Integral Halachah. See Rambam’s *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Introduction to Seder Zeraim.

⁸ Menahot 29b

⁹ A *sugya* is a passage of Gemara; topic

comment that a student of Torah will in the future make is already somehow encompassed in the original revelation at Sinai.¹⁰

Here, the Talmud is presenting us with a radically different view of Torah. Akiva's Torah is so much broader than its literal meaning. Here human beings are active in creating new Torah through midrash mandated by God; here human beings are liberated from the fear of violating God's word or from the fear of hubris lest they challenge Moshe the founding father's great wisdom or Moshe's historical closeness to the Mount Sinai Revelation. The overarching principle of Torah study is *chiddush* – meaning innovation - *chiddush* through human midrash rather than the authoritative *masoret* through repetition and memory. In this view, humans are actually co-creators of Torah, not merely interpreters.

The Netziv - Reb Hirsch Leib Berlin - explains the transition from the traditionalist to the innovative midrashic approach to the Torah as parallel to the transition from the first tablets at Sinai written by God to the second ones written by Moshe:

[READING 4]

In the first tablets there was no gift of chiddush at all but Torah was whatever Moshe heard, with its basis in the Written Torah. Moshe did not know how to make his own chiddush. But in the second tablets the power of chiddush was granted to innovate new halachot in every generation. That is the meaning of the Rabbinic phrase that "everything that a veteran student of Torah will in the future innovate is already given at Sinai." (HaEmek Davar Deut 4:14).

The Netziv goes on to say that "The reason God ordered Moshe to carve the second tablets was not because they were not worthy of a Divine act but to teach that the ever-renewing power of halachah given in the second tablets involves the active participation of the labor of human beings with Divine aid, as the second tablets were carved by Moshe and the writing was by God." (HaEmek Davar Exodus 34:1).

The fact that Akiva could come up with an alternative understanding of Torah that even Moshe could not understand, let alone critique, shows that even the greatest scholars must be skeptical of their own interpretations. And so the Netziv maintains that halachic research is like scientific research, and wrote that "scientific scholars can not claim in their hearts that they have understood all the secrets of nature... . A later individual or generation can, through research, contradict the previous scientific construction. So too, researchers into the nature of Torah cannot claim to have considered all the changes and all that requires thought. There is no certainty that what they have explained is the true intention of the Torah. So all we can do is do our best with what we have." (HaEmek Davar, Introduction, section 5).

¹⁰ *Can Later Rabbinic Creativity Transcend its Origins: Moshe v. Akiva in the Talmud* by Noam Zion; accessed at https://hartman.org.il/SHINews_View.asp?Article_Id=134

And that brings me to something else I really want to talk about this evening – cheesecake.¹¹

Because we all know that when Moshe came down from Mount Sinai with the Torah, the Israelites were eating cheesecake, right? Because God pre-ordained cheesecake on Shavuot for the Jews, right? If we use the arguments I just mentioned, somehow, the primal reason for eating cheesecake on Shavuot must have its origins at Mount Sinai, and the ritual was transmitted from generation to generation, and then over time, innovations abounded, and here we are today, eating all kinds of dairy food during the holiday.

But why dairy? Well, as usual, ask 10 rabbis and you get 20 opinions, but they all end with something like Well we don't really know but it's fun, and we're up late at night, so maybe it helps keep us awake. These are some of the more interesting answers to the question of why we eat dairy on Shavuot:

- Number 1. The word for milk in Hebrew is *chalav*. In the Hebrew aleph-bet, each word has a numerical equivalent so that the first letter aleph is 1, the second letter bet is 2. The word *chalav*, *chet-lamed-vav* - if you add up the numbers, adds up to 40. We eat dairy foods on Shavuot to commemorate the 40 days that Moshe spent on Mount Sinai receiving instruction in the entire Torah. Moshe spent an additional 40 days on Sinai praying for forgiveness following the episode with the Golden Calf, and then a third set of 40 days before returning with a new set of stone tablets.
- There's another one that says that Mount Sinai in the book of Psalms¹² is referred to as *Har Ha-gavnunim*, which means Mountain of Many Peaks, right, but *gavnun* sort of sounds like *g'vina* which is the Hebrew word for cheese.
- Here's one more: there's a verse in the Book of Numbers (28:26) that talks about the meal offering for Shavuot and the words – there are four words that describe this meal offering¹³ – and if you take the first letter of each of those four words - *mem-chaf-lamed-bet* - you get the Hebrew *me'chalav*, which means *from milk*.
- Then there is the idea that the Land, in the Torah, is described as a land flowing with milk and honey¹⁴, so we should have milk. Now why it's not traditional to have honey on Shavuot in most communities becomes unclear if we accept that explanation.

So there are a variety of these somewhat traditional reasons for eating dairy on Shavuot. There's also a more sociological sort of explanation that I've heard which is that this is a holiday of the springtime and the springtime is when new calves and new baby animals of various kinds are born, and so it would be a time when there would be plentiful milk, and so it makes sense to have a holiday in which milk played a major role.

¹¹ Cheesecake discussion adapted from *Shavuot Unbound Miniseries Part 3*, accessed at <http://www.judaismunbound.com/shavuot-unbound-one-hour-budget#One-Hour-One>

¹² Psalm 68:16–17/15–16

¹³ Pinchas (Numbers/Bamidbar 28:26): *mincha chadasha l'Hashem b'shavuoteychem / mem-chaf-lamed-bet*

¹⁴ Exodus/Shemot 3:18

There are other explanations that talk about the fact that before the Israelites received the Torah, they wouldn't have known the laws of keeping kosher, because they only found out about them from the Torah, and the concern was that when they received the Torah, all of a sudden they discovered that they weren't doing it right, that they didn't have the right dishes, they didn't slaughter the animals the right way, and it was a very confusing situation. And anyways, it was Shabbat when the Torah was given, so they couldn't wash their dishes anyways. And so, until they sorted it all out, it was just safer to have a dairy meal.

The bottom line of all these explanations, I think, is that nobody really has a clue. And that's the best way for it to be. It's as if a bunch of rabbis were gathered in a room, and playing an improv game – like on that show *Whose Line is it Anyways* – they give you one prop, and you have ten seconds and you have to come up with some way to use that prop for something, and you go back and forth between the two teams, and whoever can't think of something first loses. And I feel almost like this dairy thing is just the right level of weird – that it lends itself to all these bizarre, fun, interesting mind games that do actually add meaning and deepen the learning associated with the holiday. I like that we have all these diverse explanations.

It's interesting to think about a holiday in which we would intentionally subject ourselves to consuming a lot of lactose with all the ill effects because it seems that so many Jews are lactose-intolerant. Maybe that's what really keeps us up all night, I don't know. I was thinking about how milk is the way that we consume nutrients when we are babies and we are not fully able to fend for ourselves – perhaps this holiday renews us every year so that we get nourished by Torah, like new babies we're starting over, and this would be a great way to re-enact it.

The important takeaway from this isn't oh my gosh, all these explanations for all these rituals are wrong and we've been mis-taught and that's terrible, but the fact of creative explanations for why we do certain things – once you do them enough – that's the real memory, and it's important to note that these memories may or may not trace back to some metaphysical, divine, ancient, eternal thing. Putting your own ideas about this dairy ritual onto the table creates a kind of tradition that can become your family's real, capital T Tradition, or maybe it will morph into an even bigger and broader Jewish tradition.

Another method of transmission

Up until now, I've been talking about generational lineage – the idea that Torah is transmitted through the generations, *l'dor vador*, as in the Rambam's explanation, or the one in Pirkei Avot 1:1. But there is also another way that we have been taught that we receive Torah, which is that revelation was given to each one of us that day at Sinai.

The Tamud¹⁵ says that “a Divine voice goes forth from Sinai every single day.” According to the mishnaic sage Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, this means that God calls every Jew in every single generation.

¹⁵ Pirkei Avot 6:1

In the chumash, we read this remarkable pronouncement:

“I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day.”¹⁶

The Talmud¹⁷, commenting on this verse, says that all Jews were present at the Sinai encounter, including even those who had not yet been born or who were not yet Jews. It is not written, “with those who are *not here standing with us* this day,” but rather “with those who are *not with us here* this day.” The Midrash¹⁸ explains that these are the souls that were destined to be created, and are without substance so they could not be said to be standing. Their souls were there, even though their bodies had not yet been created.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his magnum opus called Heavenly Torah, says that “these words are stunning, and they have within them not only extreme abstraction, but also the air of paradox. Souls that “have no substance” and that have not yet been created are said to have received Torah from Mount Sinai! How can the “nothing” receive the “something”? asks Heschel.¹⁹

In response, Heschel says that this drash was not written simply for rhetorical loveliness but rather it rendered a decision in a matter of supreme importance. It is an expression of the desire to understand the secrets of cognitive apprehension, to understand the source of all knowledge, and knowledge of Torah in particular. The proverb of the wise one says, “Do not rely on your own understanding.”²⁰ We see that thought expands continually, daily, from generation to generation. Sages say things they did not hear from their masters; they construct narratives, and they innovate halachot. The corollaries set forth here are that the source of all new ideas is in that prophetic event at Mount Sinai, and that Torah is perpetually offered to every Jewish soul. As the twentieth century Hasidic luminary Rabbi Shalom Noach Berzovsky (the Slonimer Rebbe) suggests, “Receiving the Torah is eternal, and the Ten Commandments are unendingly spoken.” Revelation is not a moment, but continuous.²¹

I want to pull this all together now with a teaching from my colleague Rabbi Hannah Dresner²², who drashes on the S’fat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger, who lived during the late 19th century. The S’fat Emet wrote, in his commentary on the Torah portion Emor, that God’s acts of speech, which brought the world into being through Creation and also mandated our social structure through commandments, are, in the words of Psalm 12, “as pure as refined silver.” But what makes them even more precious, indeed seven times more precious in the eyes of God, is what we do with God’s words as we draw them

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 29:13-14

¹⁷ Shevu’ot 39a

¹⁸ Exodus Rabbah 25:4, Tanhuma Yitro 11

¹⁹ Heavenly Torah pp 584-585

²⁰ Proverbs 3:5

²¹ <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/is-there-shavuot-without-mount-sinai-1.5221924>

²² <https://forward.com/shma-now/ldor-vdor/399918/refining-torah-in-our-time/>

through the refining fire of our humanity, discovering the holy in creation and expressing God's commandments as we are able, in our own ways, reflecting our own lives in our own time. In other words, *we further refine the pure silver of God's word in every generation.*

The S'fat Emet goes so far as to say that "not only did Adonai, The Blessed One, give Torah to the children of Israel, the Blessed One literally planted the power of Torah within us, so that we can independently renew words of Torah and [re]configure the letters of the Torah!"²³

At Sinai, God speaks Torah to us, and, in every generation, we return the flow of God's love by listening actively and answering empathically, as any lover would. Our answer comes in the form of loving pushback as we consider how best to embrace and enhance our beloved's vision of our bond, our life together, and the sort of family we're going to be to one another.

And so *l'dor vador* can mean what we inherit from our parents, and then transform and pass on to our children for their further refinement as they create and reconfigure — in the words of the Sfat Emet — new Torah – or new cheesecake traditions. My grandparents, primarily cultural Jews who loved Judaism, would not recognize the Judaism I practice today.

Or would they? What would they think of a woman wearing a kipa and tallit? Or my inclusion of group aliyot during a Torah service? Or my placing Miriam's Cup on the seder table? What would they think of my feminine rabbinat, altogether? So much appears different, but the thread that connects it all is that my daughter continues, as an adult with a daughter of her own now to seek and claim her own Jewish authenticity, but in her own way and through her own means.

Torah was a gift to all generations at Sinai, *l'dor vador*. The power of Torah is in us, and holiness is aroused and enlivened by our expression of it, not when we feed God's words right back in blind obedience, or when we dutifully repeat the words of our ancestors, but when we express our unique and individual relationship with God by speaking our own versions of Torah: Torah that we understand, live, and transmit.

God doesn't want a conversation frozen in the era of the great rabbis of the Sanhedrin; God wants the juiciness of a living love. That's what God wants, and I think that's what the world needs.

²³ Rebbe Nachman's commentary on parashat Emor, Likkutei MoHaRan 5634/1874 p. 168b (author's translation)