

Part XVIII

Believer: Just a minute. Let me explain the point that I wished to make with the story. Obviously, a law written in the summer applies equally to the winter. We assume that the author of the law is well aware of the differences between summer and winter, and that if the seasonal conditions are a factor he would have said so explicitly. Now, if G-d, before whom the entirety of time is an open book, communicates to us His vision of a perfect world and says to us, "This is the goal of my creation. This is what I want you to make of my world" are we to assume that a day, a year, or a millennium later the message no longer applies?

Skeptic: So what are we to make of the fact that the Torah's description of the messianic era--a king, a Holy Temple, etc.--appears to be 2,000 years out of date? Perhaps G-d wants us to constantly re-assess this vision and to re-apply to the times in which we live?

Believer: Look, I think that we have to get to the root of our differing perspectives on the "datedness" of the Torah. Earlier, we had a long discussion on two of the issues connected with Moshiach that are "archaic" in your eyes--Moshiach's kingship and the korbanot in the Holy Temple. I explained their ageless significance and relevancy, and you probably saw my words as a philosophical effort to force deeper meaning into concepts that my stubborn orthodoxy refuses to let go of. Until we clarify our views on what exactly the Torah is, we will be forever talking circles around each other.

Skeptic: Okay, I'll let you talk circles first (you seem to be pretty good at it). How do you see Torah?

Believer: First of all, let me say this: If the Torah seems "out of date" today, then it was far more out of date on the morning of the revelation at Sinai 3,305 years ago. Think of all the then revolutionary ideas which Torah introduced: The concept of a One G-d. Prohibitions against murder, theft, rape, incest, or the sacrifice of one's children to a pagan god. The obligation to honor and provide for one's parents. The duty to share one's wealth with the needy. Today, we find it incredible that such things needed to be commanded to us, but back then, they were no less fantastic than those elements of Torah which you find so hard to accept. What happened? Two million plus people took G-d's plan for existence and began to implement it in their lives, regardless of how well it fit in with the world in which they lived. Over the millennia, they inspired other monotheistic and near- monotheistic religions and great social movements. They deeply influenced many other doctrines, legal systems, ideologies and cultures. In a word, they brought the world that much closer to the Torah's ethos and ideals. Torah is not a creed which came in response to a given century and set of circumstances, but one which came to impose its principles and practices on an as-of-yet unperfected world. So it is always out of date. It is the "times" which are steadily approaching the Torah, not the other way around. If the Torah were entirely "up to date" it would mean that it has fulfilled its function---it would mean that Moshiach has come.

Skeptic: As you said, that is your view of Torah. Others may have different theories on the matter...

Believer: Still, I think that before anyone formulates his own "theory" on what the Torah is, he ought to be aware of how the Torah sees itself...

Skeptic: That's exactly what I've been saying to you until I'm blue in the face: How can you tell me what I am, instead of asking me how I define myself! Of course, my self-definition may be wrong, and you might know some things about me that I'm not aware of. That's how psychoanalysts get rich. But to construct a theory about someone or something without first consulting its own self-definition is not only arrogant---it's downright foolish!

Believer: I agree. And I wonder how many why people who've expounded on the Torah and its function know what the Torah says about itself. Here, this is from the Midrash Rabba on the first chapter of Genesis:

"The Torah says: 'I was the tool of G-d's artistry.' An architect who builds a palace does not do so on his own: he has scrolls and notebooks which he consults how to place the rooms, where to set the doors. So it was with G-d: He looked into the Torah and created the world." In other words, the world that G-d created in the initial "six days of creation" represents not the completion of His works, but the installation of the raw materials of which man is to develop the finished product. At Sinai, the architect delivered his plans to his contractors: G-d communicated the Torah to man, imparting His vision of reality to those whom He had charged to implement it in his creation. Imagine, then, the workman who consults the original state of his materials rather than the architect's plan. "The blueprint calls for a square plank", he muses, "but the log I have is round. Perhaps we can edit the plans a little?" Why labor to change the world, if we can conform our moral vision to reflect it?

Skeptic: You know, I've noticed that we're forever getting off the subject. We start talking about Moshiach, and we end up discussing the basic questions of life: good and evil, freedom and servitude, totalitarianism and pluralism, orthodoxy versus revisionism...

Believer: But all that is THE subject. Moshiach is not a side issue but the sum total of everything the Jew believes in. That why it is one of the thirteen "foundations" of Judaism. If life has meaning, it leads to Moshiach.