

Shavuot:
On the Utility of Ambiguity
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'Be patient for it is from doubt that knowledge is born' - Khalil Gibran

On one of my recent visits to New York, I ended up at a friend's friend for a Shabbat meal. As everyone was introduced and chatted before Kiddush, one of the pictures on the wall caught my eye. At first, it looked like a photo of an architectural detail. On closer inspection, I realized that while the buildings had great depth and perspective, there was nonetheless something implausible about the painting. It combined both indoor and outdoor architectural elements in a seamless yet not entirely logical whole. It was precisely this lack of clarity that intrigued me. It pulled me into its labyrinth of structures as I attempted to walk around the image in my mind, wondering what the artist had intended. Luckily I was able to ask her directly as she was one of the dinner guests. Laini Nemett explained that her art was composed of fragments of places she had visited around the world. They were portrayed on canvas as they would come to one's mind in a non-linear way. Laini introduces an element of ambiguity into her images that engages the observer in a process of testing multiple possibilities.

Laini's art is a case study for the important function ambiguity and doubt serve in engaging us in the exploration and development of ideas. While we are often driven to question and study in order to resolve or eradicate doubt, studying Torah and Talmud in particular can often leave us with more questions than answers. Rabbi Louis Jacobs (Teyku, 1982) reviews over three hundred talmudic debates that remain unresolved and close with the word *teyku* 'let it stand [unresolved]'.

Doubt is ubiquitous in Torah study, but what is its function? Francis Bacon, a 17th century english philosopher and scientist, advocated two specific roles for doubt:

The registering and proposing of doubts has a double use; first it guards philosophy against errors, when upon a point not clearly proved no decision or assertion is made (for so error might beget error) but judgement is suspended and not made positive; secondly, doubts once registered are so many suckers or sponges which continually draw and attract increase of knowledge; whence it comes that things which, if doubts had not preceded, would have been passed by lightly without observation, are through the suggestion of doubt attentively and carefully observed. (Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, 1605, reprinted in *Francis Bacon: History, Politics and Science, 1561-1626*, Cambridge 1993, pp 356-57)

Teyku is one example of the suspended judgment that Bacon proposes as the first function of doubt. The second function, that of increasing knowledge, finds a striking parallel in the writings of the fifth Chabad Rebbe Shalom DovBer of Lubavitch (1860- 1920) who contrasts the study of Mishnah to that of Talmud. While the study of Mishnah is straightforward, that of Talmud is inherently complex. Yet paradoxically, the study of Mishnah does not generate novel ideas and perspectives in the way that Talmud does. Rabbi Shalom DovBer illustrates this with two models of light: direct "אור ישר" and refracted "אור חוזר". The direct light of *ohr yashar* represents inspiration that is manifest directly and clearly but which is inherently limited. The refracted light of *ohr hozer* represents the kind of novel inspiration that can only emerge through wrestling with a problem or struggling through opacity. (Sefer ha-Mamarim 5666 pp 78-81). This concept is aptly illustrated in a Talmudic vignette sketching Resh Lakish's personality as a student of Torah. Resh Lakish was a former gladiator who took up Rabbi Yochanan's challenge to abandon his occupation and devote his strength to Torah study instead. As a brilliant Torah scholar Rabbi Yochanan favored him as his *havruta*. After Resh Lakish died however, Rabbi Yochanan seemed to be on the verge of losing his mind from grief. Worried, his colleagues nominated the bright Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat to take Resh Lakish's place as Rabbi Yochanan's study partner. As Rabbi Yochanan espoused his opinion on a particular law,

Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat would cite a *beraita* that supported Rabbi Yochanan's position. When this pattern repeated itself consistently, Rabbi Yochanan quickly exploded in frustration shouting: "Are you like the son of Lakish? When I stated the law, the son of Lakish would raise twenty four objections and I would give twenty four answers, which would then lead to a fuller understanding of the law. But you say: 'A *beraita* has been taught which supports you' - Don't I already know that my dicta are right?" (TB Bava Metzia 84a). Rabbi Yochanan's ability to study Torah and creatively interpret the law was contingent on Resh Lakish 'doubt', provided in the form of counter-arguments and questions leading to a better understanding.

A further insight into Resh Lakish's approach to Torah study can be gained from his positive interpretation of Moshe's breaking of the *luchot* (Exodus 34:1) suggesting that God says: 'ישר כחך ששברת' - rather than berating Moshe, he congratulates him: 'well done for breaking them' (TB Shabbat 87a). How is that possible? Why would God approve? Furthermore, Resh Lakish contradicts Rabbi Elazar's opinion who suggests that the use of the word "חרות" - 'engraved' in the description of the *luchot* implies that, had the first tablets not been shattered: 'Torah would not have been forgotten from Israel' (TB Eruvin 54a).

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner (1906-1980), elegantly reconciles these two contradicting views (Pachad Yitzchak, Shavuot 18:16). In his unique hassidic approach he suggests that rather than reading Resh Lakish at odds with Rabbi Elazar, we should read Resh Lakish's assertion as encompassing that of Rabbi Elazar: God congratulates Moshe for shattering the *luchot* in full knowledge of the forgetting of Torah that this is causing. The Pachad Yitzchak's reading is consistent with the saying attributed to Resh Lakish: "פעמים שביטולה של תורה זהו יסודה" - 'At times, the abolition of Torah is [indeed] its establishment' (TB Menachot 99a/b). Resh Lakish is not afraid of 'forgetting' Torah, indeed he seems to be embracing it.

But how can 'abolition' and 'forgetting' play a part in the foundation of Torah? We can understand forgetting as the opposite of certainty. Certainty might be comforting at first, but it precludes the need for further investigation, questioning or indeed study. We saw how certainty and confirmation were stifling and limiting Rabbi Yochanan's study and how he desperately missed the expansion of Torah instigated by Resh Lakish's questions and doubt. Rabbi Hutner is suggesting that for Torah to remain alive within us, a shattering is necessary. He contrasts the simplicity of the smooth *luchot* with their words of commandment clearly engraved with the scattered shards. The first is the embodiment of clarity, the latter the epitome of doubt. But Torah comes alive, not in the smooth certainty but in the demanding yet captivating labour of reconstruction. The foundation of Torah is precisely in that it requires us to engage our minds in elucidation, interpretation and resolution. It is precisely the doubt caused by the shattering that creates the Kol Torah, the sound of arguing and deliberating in the Bet Midrash that has resonated throughout the ages in Jewish communities around the world.

Laini's art captures my relationship with Torah study. I find the texts that are ambiguous the most engaging, precisely because they invite multiple possibilities and interpretations. All the parts of Torah contain truth, but we each juxtapose them differently in our mind through our study, collectively creating a rich mosaic of ever expanding Torah.



Rabba Dina Brawer was born in Milan, Italy and studied in Jerusalem and New York. She holds a BA in Hebrew and Jewish Studies from the University of London and an MA in Education and Psychology from the Institute of Education, London. Together with her husband, they have recently co-launched Mishkan: The Jewish Community Beyond Borders. In 2013 she launched JOFA UK as a platform to engage in communal discussions around religion and gender. She ranked 55 in The Jewish Chronicle's Power 100 List of individuals who are most influential in shaping the UK Jewish community.