

Hidden Meanings

As we draw near to the end of Deuteronomy we find a striking example of biblical poetry traditionally referred to as ‘the Song of Moses’ (32:1-43). It is Moses’ final instructions to the Israelites, reminding them of their covenantal obligations after settling in the promised land. Read the poem. Observe the grandeur of its imagery, emotion and lofty thoughts. Then let us focus on the concluding verses to this passage, verses 44-47.¹

“Moses came and recited all the words of this song in the hearing of the people... (Deut.32:44)

When Moses had finished reciting all these words to all Israel... (32:45)

“Take to heart all the words that I am giving... diligently observe all the words of this law. This is no trifling matter for you but rather your very life” (32:46-47).

The repetition is clear, indicated by our italics. But what is the significance of the emphasis on ‘all’ the words?

If we can appreciate that the Torah is like poetry, its meaning hidden in the details, then we can appreciate Moses’ insistence that the Israelites attend to ‘all’ the words. If the people are to grasp the true depths of God’s Word, they must make the time and effort to study its intricacies. The Torah does not reveal its riches in a casual glance or a quick ‘cram’ session, but requires a lifelong process of dedicated patient learning, including its application to life.

A reader may object: but some parts of the Torah can seem rather tedious and nonsensical! The sages are strong in their opinion that if we don’t find meaning there, then it is our own fault! Why? Answers one Talmudic source: *“Because you do not labour in the Torah” (Yerushalmi, Pe’ah 1.1)*. Do you agree with the sages? What is your reaction to their challenge?

In the Talmud we find the opinion that it is a form of vanity to suggest that Torah is a waste of time. The sages cite the poor conduct of the king of Judah, Menasseh, who would poke fun at words of Torah saying:

“Had Moses nothing better to do but record in the Torah that: ‘And Lotan’s sister was Timna’; ‘and Timna was concubine to Eliphaz’ (Gen.36:22;12)!”

The sages are unimpressed by such mockery. In their reply they demonstrate how a great lesson flows from this brief reference to Timna. According to one tradition, Timna, a noblewoman and sister to one of Esau’s chiefs, seeks to become part of Israel. But she is rejected by the Patriarchs, and so relinquishes her noble status to become the concubine of Eliphaz, saying, *“Better for me to be a handmaiden to this nation [Israel], than a noblewoman of [the chiefs of Esau].”*²

Timna bears a son, Amalek, who later causes suffering for Israel, which the sages view as divine retribution. Says Rashi, *“They should not have repelled her, but should have accepted her, since she came to shelter under the wings of the divine presence.”*

Timna: a marginal detail, or a compelling moral lesson? Can you think of another example of an insight based on a ‘minor’ detail in the text? Can you appreciate Moses’ insistence that we take to heart ‘all the words’? In this light discuss the relationship between Scripture and Tradition.

1. This leaflet is based on the teaching of Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (New York: Lambda, 1996), 351-356.

2. Midrash Tannaim on Deut.32:47. Compare with the midrash as told in TB Sanhedrin 99b. Scripture: NRSV.

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