

Logic and Listening:

A Study of the Opening Lines of Sifra

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INTRODUCTION

Many editions of the weekday *Siddur* (prayerbook) begin with a selection of short study materials drawn from Torah, Mishnah, and Talmud. These selections are offered so that people can fulfill the mitzvah of daily study as they warm up intellectually and emotionally for prayer. One popular selection is “*B’shlosh esreh middot*,” thirteen rules of inference for making halakhic (legal and practical) interpretations of Torah. This list of thirteen rules of inference originally appears at the beginning of *Sifra*, a rabbinic Midrash on Leviticus compiled in the third century.

The *Siddur’s* offering of this list as a meditation before prayer seems to suggest that reciting and memorizing it is a prelude to successfully receiving the word of God. In its original context, however, the list does not provide a technique for receiving the word of God. Instead, it *raises the question and begins a discussion* of how one should prepare for and interpret the call of God. *One voice* in the discussion argues that God’s word must be derived from Torah following the rules of inference, while the other voice insists that a person undergoes a lengthy inner process of listening before

beginning any logical analysis! The discussion is sparked by the first line of Leviticus, “And God called...”

Below I present *Sifra*’s discussion about the roles of logical analysis and inner listening. The discussion begins with a presentation of the two voices that speak in *Sifra*, and explores the issues that are raised, extending them as some contemporary voices join in the discussion.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Ancient Mystic: One of the speakers in *Sifra*, a rabbinic commentary on

Leviticus/*Vayikra*. At the beginning of the conversation, the words of the Ancient Mystic are drawn from the text of *Sifra*. Towards the end of the conversation, I put into the mouth of the Ancient Mystic what the mystic would likely contribute to it.

Ancient Scholar: One of the speakers in *Sifra*, a rabbinic commentary on

Leviticus/*Vayikra*. At the beginning of the conversation, the words of the Ancient Scholar are drawn from the text of *Sifra*. Towards the end of the conversation, I put into the mouth of the Ancient Scholar what the scholar would likely contribute to it.

Modern Mystic: One of the speakers inside my mind awakened by *Sifra*.

Modern Scholar: One of the speakers inside my mind awakened by *Sifra*.

Jacques Derrida: Postmodern Jewish philosopher

William James: Modern philosopher and psychologist of religion

Baruch Spinoza: Early modern Jewish philosopher

THE TEXT UNDER DISCUSSION (Leviticus 1:1):

He called [*vayikra*] to Moshe! God spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying...

THE DISCUSSION

Ancient mystic: A person receives divine revelation in five stages:

1. First God calls – a kind of wordless call.
2. A person is called to attention and attends.
3. Then God speaks words.
4. The person meditates on the message, and begins to take it in.
5. The person is changed by the process.

Ancient scholar: This account of the process of receiving revelation – is this consistent with the Torah? How do you derive your account from the Torah?

Ancient mystic: I am thinking of a few times in the Torah when we see the word *vayikra* – he called. The Torah describes God calling Moshe at the burning bush, calling Moshe at Mount Sinai, and calling Moshe from the Tent of Meeting. In each case, God first calls and then speaks.

Ancient scholar: It is not true that the language used in all of these examples is the same. In some cases, when the Torah reports that God speaks, it uses the verb *vayidaber*, implying specifically that God spoke words. In other cases, the Torah uses the word *vayomer*, stating only that God spoke. Is it really right to say that these are all examples of God presenting words? And there are other relevant differences. Sometimes the information God presents is just for Moshe, and sometimes it is for all Israel. Sometimes there is fire present and sometimes there is not. Do you want to flatten all of these important contextual details into a single landscape and blandly say, “first there is a call and then there are words”?

Ancient mystic: Yes, let us focus on what is common in all of these situations. They are all examples of calls from the Holy One to Moshe.

Ancient scholar: For the sake of dialogue, I will agree. Let us assume these are all similar situations, and grant that first God calls and then God speaks. Let us then move on to your claim that people must take time to meditate on God's word. From whence in the Torah do you derive this claim?

Ancient mystic: I learn this from the pauses in the text of the Torah – from the places where there is a white space between sections in the Torah scroll itself. Look, for example, at the way scribes organize the words in the scroll of Leviticus. With only a single exception, every white space is followed by the words *vayidaber Hashem* – God spoke words. The pauses and the words that follow teach us about Moshe's process in writing the Torah. Each time Moshe wrote down a communication from God, he had to pause and reflect on that communication from God before moving on to the next one. If that was the case for someone as spiritually attuned as Moshe, so much more will it be the case for anyone else who hears God's call.

Ancient scholar: This explanation makes good sense. It is based on a feature of the text. But how do you know about your final claim, that people are changed by the call? Where does the text say that?

Ancient mystic: Usually when the Torah uses the word *vayikra* to describe God calling to someone, the person's name is called twice. There are many examples: God called "Moshe, Moshe; Avraham, Avraham, Ya'akov, Ya'akov, and Shmuel, Shmuel."

Ancient scholar: The doubling of the name is God's way of expressing the urgency of the call.

Ancient mystic: No, the doubling of the name has a deeper meaning. It shows that each person – take Moshe, for example – is one Moshe before God speaks with him, and another Moshe after God speaks with him.

Modern mystic: What a wonderful description of the process of learning to hear God's call! See how well it fits the case of Avraham, when he binds Yitzchak for sacrifice. At the beginning of that story, God speaks Avraham's name once, and Avraham says "here I am." The text continues with the words *vayomer eylav* – God said to him – words that Avraham understands as instructions for making of his son a burnt offering. Towards the end of the story, however, the Torah uses very different language to describe the communication between God and Avraham. The text says

vayikra: a messenger of God called to him from the heavens, saying “Avraham, Avraham!” The messenger explains that God is secure in Avraham’s faith and does not really want Yitzhak to be burned on the altar. This story has all the elements that *Sifra*’s mystic says it should! The first time, Avraham doesn’t sense the wordless call, so he doesn’t prepare himself by attending – by listening – properly. And his name is called only once, so there is no evidence that he meditated on the words after hearing them, that he grasped their deeper meaning, that he was changed by the process of reflection. But at the end of the story, Avraham does sense the call, he does prepare himself to truly listen, and his name is called twice to show that he changed profoundly between the time the angel first got his attention, and the time he grasped the message. This is a lovely teaching! I am convinced that there is a process of spiritual listening that begins long before the words are spoken and ends long after they are heard.

Modern scholar: You accept the idea that the transmission of a spiritual message goes way beyond words. Yet it is words themselves that convince you of the idea. You find it presented and confirmed in the text of the Torah.

Jacques Derrida: You know that every text reaches beyond what it explicitly says. Every text defeats itself. It has to, because writing is only a secondary means of communication. Speaking is primal communication. Speakers attend to the present moment and what they say is more likely to be authentic. Sophisticated texts are drafted, edited, rewritten. But if they are very good texts, they can point beyond this overbearing process to the moments of oral speech and aural listening in which they originated.

Baruch Spinoza: Yes, words can distort a message, especially a message from God. Mostly we get to know God by living in God's world. But there are three ways we might receive deeper information from God: through images, words, and intellect. Images include dreams, visions, and works of art. Our later prophets were granted visions from God, and they recreated those for us with poetry. But the images are indistinct, symbolic of many things, and easily misinterpreted. Words are more distinct, and they have fewer multiple meanings. Our teacher Moshe often received communications from God in words. But words also have shortcomings. They require a physical medium. God delivers them through a voice, and people hear them through their ears. Voice and ears are both created things. Thus, any message delivered in words is twice removed from God the

creator. The most elevated way to receive God's word is without any artistic or linguistic representation. Mind to mind communication, directly from the mind of God to the human mind, is the only undistorted type of revelation. As I read Jewish scripture, however, it never describes this type of communication. Only Jesus is said to know the mind of God.

Modern scholar: Yes, words are the Jewish way. Our entire walk through this life, our halakhah, is derived from the text of the Torah, using thirteen carefully worked out rules of inference, presented in the rabbinic midrash *Sifra*.

Ancient mystic: Have you not listened to our discussion so far? It was I, a speaker from *Sifra* itself, who urged everyone to listen before and after the barrage of words. When *Sifra* was edited into its final form, my call to listen was placed immediately after the presentation of the thirteen rules of inference. I want to remind all readers, all writers, and all talkers that sometimes the most important transmissions are given and received in the wordless spaces.

William James: How true this is! The entire foundation of religious experience lies in what I call mystical experiences. They may be short-lived, but they are powerful. These experiences come upon human beings without their agency, as if a divine power reaches out to them. The experiences seem to occur out of time, or, if you will, in spaces that seem to open up in the fabric of life. In such spaces, people say, the deeper meaning of life is revealed. And when ordinary consciousness returns, a sense of the deeper meaning somehow stays. People often say they have been permanently changed, that they carry new knowledge with them – and yet, they are utterly unable to put that knowledge into words.

Modern scholar: Perhaps I can make a distinction that renders both sides of this debate correct. Perhaps I can honor those who love words, and those who see the shortcomings of words. Could we say that the individual, inner experience of the divine presence is not derived from any text, while the public practice, that needs to have an authoritative legitimacy, should be so derived?

Modern mystic: I cannot agree with that distinction. Are not our public practices our spiritual technologies? Are our rituals not tools that set the stage for listening to the divine?

Ancient scholar: I cannot agree with the distinction either. Our *Sifra* is a commentary on the great and beloved book of Jewish spiritual and ethical practice, *Vayikra/Leviticus*. *Vayikra* assumes that a Tabernacle or Holy Temple is the focus of worship, life-cycle, and festival observance. Without a Temple, and with little hope of rebuilding it in the foreseeable future, we had to completely reinterpret *Vayikra*. We had to find a way to understand the essence of its teachings and bring them to life through a new set of spiritual technologies. We wanted to create the containers through which people could be moved spiritually to connect with the Holy One.

Modern mystic: I find myself limited sometimes by those containers. When I see the rules of inference listed in my *siddur* at the beginning of the morning service, I wonder why they are there. Are they simply there as a way to help me fulfill my commitment to Torah study? Yes, the rules represent a historically important piece of text to recite and reflect upon. Yes, early morning repetition of the rules plants them firmly in the mind of

every serious student of halakhah before the day's study. But I worry about the rules of inference being treated as a sacred text of worship. They seem to imply that my own spiritual experiences must be evaluated according to established rules. They seem to encourage my intellect to rise up against my emotions each time I feel open to God. They seem to shut down prayer experience before it begins.

Modern scholar: Do you not want some guidelines for interpreting your spiritual experiences? For example, if you have a dream with obscure symbolism, would it not be helpful for you to turn to ideas and images from the Torah to help you interpret the meaning of the symbols? After all, you are likely to represent your own experience to yourself using symbols from your Jewish tradition. If you do find it helpful to turn to Torah, realize that by doing so, you are actually applying *Sifra's* second rule of inference, *gezerah shavah*, which states that "similar words in different contexts are meant to clarify one another."

Modern mystic: I do not mind using the words of Torah as a starting point for the interpretation. But then I need to meditate upon the words, measure my experience by them, and measure them by my experience. I need to see

whether and how they can be integrated into my understanding of the dream and its message.

Ancient mystic: Now you two have found the middle ground, and grasped what we tried to convey at the beginning of *Sifra*. Yes, the rules of inference are the starting point for collecting data from the Torah. But in order for us to hear the data “speak,” we must take full advantage of the blank spaces.

Ancient scholar: Every intellectual conclusion one can draw about the nature of spiritual experience is an experiment. Words we propose may describe it. Practices we create may invoke and shape it. But no words will speak to everyone, and no practice will endure for all time. However, as long as human beings continue to write words to and for one another; as long as they look towards leaders for spiritual technologies; as long as they try to hold their experiences in social and intellectual containers, we must develop, refine, and yes, sometimes put aside our tools.