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I thought you'd like a bit of Talmud on the theme of Purim. It's meritorious to study something about a holiday near the time the holiday is approaching, so let's dig right into this mitzvah!

The passage comes from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Megillah, which explores the customs and theology of Purim. This particular passages shows one of the most common midrashic forms: the running midrash that explains apparently superfluous words. The text of the Tanach is usually quite terse. So this verse, Esther 6:10, seems odd:

Then the king send to Haman, Make haste, and take the apparel and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordechai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate; let nothing fail of all you have spoken.

This sentence is spoken by Ahashuerus immediately after Haman has described to him what should be done for the "man the king wishes to honor." Ahashuerus could have simply said, "Do so for Mordechai." The continuation of the sentence, "the Jew, who sits at the king's gate, let nothing fail of all you have spoken" is, strictly speaking, unnecessary. Therefore the rabbis explain these phrases by supplying a dialogue that brought them about. This dialogue also shows how the rabbis viewed Haman: as a selfish, greedy man who resisted honoring Mordechai.

What is the point of this method? First of all, it helps to explain things to the sages, according to their theology. Perhaps more importantly for us, it shows us how to open up the Biblical text. Torah and, to a lesser extent, Tanach, is unlike any other document I know of. It has so many layers. When you study intensely, you begin to realize that you barely understand the most rudimentary meanings of a verse, let alone its deeper, non-literal meanings. Let's take a look at three examples of this one method the sages use to open up the text:

B. Megillah 16a:

"And do even so to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate, let nothing fail of all you have spoken.(Esther 6:10)"

He [Haman] said to him [Ahashuerus], "Who is Mordecai?"

He said to him, "The Jew."

He said, "There are many Mordechais among the Jews."

He said, "The one who sits in the king's gate."

Said [Haman] to him, "For him [the tribute] of one village or one river is sufficient!"

Said he [Ahasuerus] to him [Haman], "Give him that too. 'Let nothing fail of all you have spoken.'"

A similar "fill in the blanks" midrash, and a much more famous one, portrays God as using a seemingly round-about way of telling Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Instead of simply saying, "Take Isaac", God says:

B. Sanhedrin 89b:

"And God tested Abraham...and God said, 'Take, I pray you, your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac.'(Genesis 22:1)"

"Your son"

"[But] I have two sons!" [Abraham replied]

"Your only one"

"Each is the only one of his mother!"

"Whom you love"

"I love them both!"

"Isaac."

And why all this? [Why didn't God just say "Take Isaac.?"] So that his [Abraham's] mind would not reel [from the shock of hearing this command directly].

Another beautiful example of this method is a comment on the famous declaration of loyalty Ruth makes to her mother-in-law, Naomi.

B. Yebamot 47b:

He [a prospective convert] is not, however, to be persuaded or dissuaded too much [from choosing to become Jewish].

R. Eleazar said: What is the Scriptural proof? It is written, "And when she [Naomi] saw that she [Ruth] was steadfastly minded to go with her she left off speaking to her. (Ruth 1:18)"

"We are forbidden" she [Naomi] said to her [Ruth] "[to move on the Sabbath beyond the] Sabbath boundaries!"

"Whither you go I will go." [Ruth replied](Ruth 1:16)

"We are forbidden private meeting between man and woman!"

"Where you lodge, I will lodge." (Ruth 1:16)

"We have been commanded six hundred and thirteen commandments!"

"Your people shall be my people." (Ruth 1:16)

"We are forbidden idolatry!"

"And your God, my God."(Ruth 1:16)

"Four modes of death were entrusted to the Beit Din (the Jewish court)!"

"Where you die, will I die."(Ruth 1:17)

"Two graveyards were placed at the disposal of the Beit Din!"

"And there will I be buried" (Ruth 1:17)

Presently "she saw that she was steadfastly minded to go with her, she left off speaking unto her.(Ruth 1:18)"

Discussion Questions:

1. How is the non-literal text of Torah meaningful to you? Do you see in it numerology, a mystical code, a key to meditation or something else?
2. The sages heard dialogue beneath the surface of some Torah verses. Do you ever hear this "hidden" dialogue as you read Torah? Can you give an example?
3. How is studying Torah different from studying Talmud? How is it the same?

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