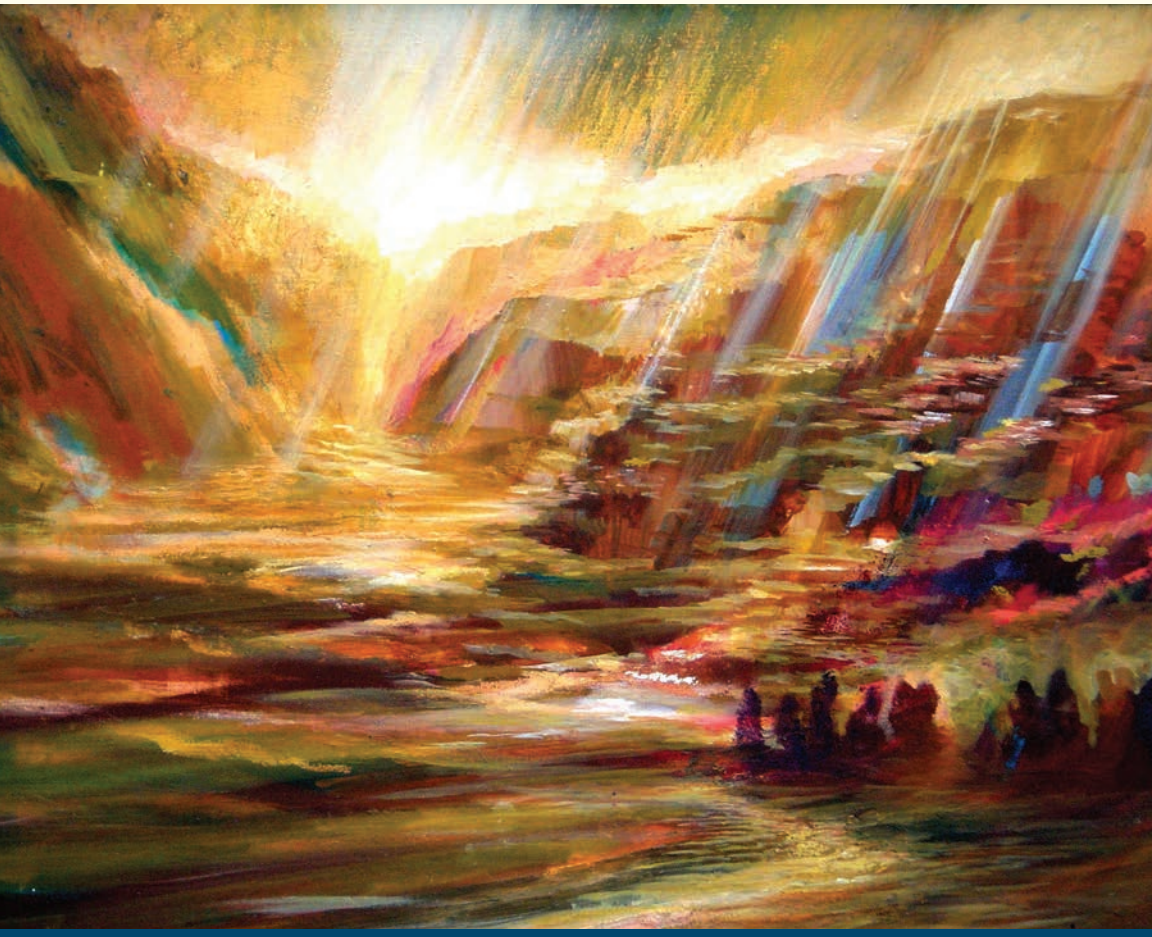
IT TAKES TWO TO TORAH

An Orthodox Rabbi and Reform Journalist Discuss and Debate Their Way Through the Five Books of Moses



ABIGAIL POGREBIN | RABBI DOV LINZER

FOREWORD BY MAYIM BIALIK

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BEDFORD, NEW YORK

For Devorah,
whose warmth, humanity, and deep wisdom
sustain and inspire me every day.

— Dov Linzer

For Dave,
without whom life would have less color,
clarity, fascination, safety, and joy.

— Abigail Pogrebin

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FOREWORD

by Mayim Bialik

An Orthodox rabbi and a Reform journalist walk into a podcast studio . . .

No, it's not the opening line of a joke. It's an opportunity to witness a living conversation about the most important book ever written.

The conversation is fifty-two weeks long, but it is also eternal; it is a conversation designed to get directly to the heart of the matter. The matter at hand for Abigail Pogrebin and Rabbi Dov Linzer is the Torah, aka the Chumash, aka the Five Books of Moses.

The Torah is the guidebook and jumping-off point for all the questions humans have and even those we don't yet know we have. You're not going to find anything in the Torah about how to get more followers on TikTok or how to use an AI algorithm to improve attendance in your synagogue. You also won't find anything about which $300 sneaker you should (or shouldn't) buy your teenager for their birthday, and you certainly won't find anything about which transcendental experience might help you overcome the pervasive anxiety that is with you for all of your waking hours and some of your sleeping hours as well.

What Abigail and Rabbi Dov both believe, albeit from different sides of the ideological and philosophical room, is that the Torah is a foundation and a scaffold for life. Everything is in it, and everything comes from it. It is from this shared conviction that they embarked on the conversation which you are now holding in your hands.

One of the most exceptionally unique things about the Torah as a foundational document of the Jewish religion is that it is prescriptively designed to not be studied in isolation. The Torah is said to be understood only by turning it over and over, inside and out, questioning and interpreting all of

it and living it fully—but in order to do so, this should never be undertaken alone. Rather, the Torah must be studied with another person.

This kind of healthy confrontation of the text has historically occurred between two men. In addition, Orthodox Judaism tended to be the venue for this type of approach to interpretation of the Torah. However, the beauty of the Torah is that it allows for every conversation and every possibility in its understanding and analysis—especially those that shed new light on the wisdom contained within its letters and spaces.

What used to be a separation between men and women, between the Orthodox and the rest of us, has shifted and evolved as, similarly, so many of the black-and-white aspects of our culture have shifted and evolved. And what the Torah holds truest is that we are all united in our capacity to think and to learn and to question and find delight and joy in the Torah.

Abigail, a venerable and respected journalist and thinker, has decided to wade into the waters of Torah analysis with an Orthodox rabbi from another dimension of Torah teaching. This book is the product of two people literally meeting in the middle of all that there is and all there was and all there will be to bring us their most honest intellectual and relevant understanding of the Divine Torah.

Every chapter has a narrative as it walks us through each story and lesson, but consistent with any thorough analysis of Torah, each chapter also touches on hidden interpretation and insight into Divine meaning. Rabbi Dov and Abigail dutifully sift through their doubts, fears, and confusion together to find where they agree, where they disagree, and where they—and all of us—can be united. Where they find themselves united is in the most diverse of places: the place where we are all one.

For those of us who crave Torah knowledge, Abigail and Rabbi Dov deliver. For those looking for a deeper understanding of the mystery and beauty of the Torah, this conversation does not disappoint. And for all of us who picture a world where, despite our differences, we are drawn closer together to find greater understanding, a deeper sense of purpose, and an intoxicating blissfulness that only comes from the partnership of Torah analysis, Rabbi Dov and Abigail let us into their world. Which is also *our* world. In every chapter, they establish new branches on a thriving Tree of Life, and our wisdom, understanding, and joy grow with each branch we climb with them.

INTRODUCTION

by Abigail Pogrebin

I used to resist the metaphor I kept hearing from rabbis: that "we all stood at Sinai."

It wasn't just because I'm a literalist and know that we weren't there, 4,000 years ago. The symbolism felt remote, alien: How could I have inherited a document I do not live by? How can I possibly honor a contract I've never signed? I'm an involved Jew but not a *halachic* one. Sinai is more a parable than a pledge.

But instead of rejecting out of hand the idea that the Torah was given to me, too, I began a very simple act: talking about it. And lo and behold, doors started to unlock, windows started to swing open. I spotted or stumbled upon its verses and stories everywhere—in fiction, comedy routines, song lyrics, election stump speeches. In my quotidian activities and the hardest questions in my head. In my parenting and my politics, my friendships and my failures. This ancient, stubbornly enduring tome literally came to life—in conversation.

I admit it didn't hurt that the person on the other end of this dialectic was a rabbi who knows the document backward and forward and whose life's work is teaching it, but most importantly, he is someone who has a core belief in the God it describes.

Dov Linzer and I met back in 2009, when he was dean of the Orthodox seminary, Chovevei Torah (he's now its president), and I was a freelance journalist writing for publications about Jewish identity (or a lack of it). We were fortunate to be invited by *The Jewish Week* to a conference on Jewish ideas called—appropriately—The Conversation.

We've been talking ever since.

But our *chavruta* [study partnership] isn't an obvious one. We come from different ends of the spectrum when it comes to observance: Dov prays three times a day, I pray once a week if I make it to synagogue; he fasts six times a year, I fast once, on Yom Kippur; he is Sabbath-observant, I'm not; he keeps kosher, I don't; he sees the *mitzvot* [commandments] as binding, I do not.

We gently spar as much as we agree; part of what has kept us talking is that we push each other—often to a more honest realization of a personal roadblock we didn't admit or a spiritual challenge we share.

It's not a shock that an Orthodox rabbi would choose to parse Torah with a non-Orthodox Jewish journalist; of course, that's possible. What's less probable is that our partnership has endured on democratic footing. Neither of us claims to be teacher or student. Each of us listens as much as we talk (unless we're interrupting each other). And despite disparate perspectives of how this sacred text obligates us, each conversation feels sacred. Not just because it connects me to my heritage of learning and disputation but because it reminds me that this is what it means to sign up for meaning: It doesn't just land in our laps, but if we find a study-mate and prioritize the hours, this story can fire our brains and speak to our lives right at this moment.

Three years ago, Dov and I proposed a podcast that would allow us to take on one parsha at a time—with the discipline of just ten minutes each—zeroing in on one verse or passage that animated or flummoxed us both.

Tablet magazine graciously produced that podcast, called *Parsha in Progress*, and we're grateful to editors Alana Newhouse, Wayne Hoffman, Jacob Siegel, and producers Josh Kross and Shira Telushkin for all their wise support through that adventure.

But it felt like something was left unfinished. We kept hearing from friends, fellow congregants, and intrigued strangers, asking if our full Torah exploration existed somewhere in print in one place. They wanted the chance to walk through the entire Torah via these accessible ten-minute exchanges, perhaps using our discussions as springboards for their own.

Publisher Fredric Price of Fig Tree Books gave us the gift of making that book a reality, and he masterfully edited our real-time transcript for clarity and concision so that it has become a very different full journey on the page.

In the Torah-dive you're about to read, Dov and I disagree on everything from whether Reuben—Joseph's brother—is courageous or a coward, whether welcoming the stranger means welcoming the non-Jew or solely the convert, and whether Moses was unjustly barred from ever seeing the Promised Land.

We ask whether punishment can be holy, whether a loan preserves more dignity than charity, and whether faith can give us a kind of armor.

We try to square the *Sotah* ritual (I still can't), which forces a woman accused of infidelity to drink ink. We ask each other—when discussing the ornate Tabernacle—whether we personally need a fancy prayer space to feel prayerful. And we look at the key fact that human hands, not God's, were used to carve the second set of Torah tablets, just as Moses later instructed the Israelites to "inscribe every word."

What I took away from this ride was not just how relevant Torah remains, but how indelible the experience of traveling the entire story out loud, with someone else, is. Judaism has persisted not just through its study but through the interrogation it requires.

It also became clear to me that the Jewish tradition is an invitation. It beckons, in a sense, to get into the fight. Not to see the document as something fragile, untouchable, or fixed, but durable, reachable, and responsive to our struggles. "Kick its tires," Dov always encouraged me. "Wring every word."

These conversations proved again and again that the Five Books of Moses were meant to bring people together. We should not study in silence or alone. If you speak to these stories, they *will talk back*.

Torah lives on in repartee and in combat.

It takes two, indeed.

And of course, it took so many generations who came before us.

INTRODUCTION

by Rabbi Dov Linzer

"It's about being a lifelong learner."

That's what Abigail said to me when we reached the section in Deuteronomy that commands the king to keep a Sefer Torah with him at all times. It's right there in the verse: "And it shall be with him, and he shall read from it all the days of his life" (Deut. 17:19).

But here's the funny thing: Though I have been a lifelong learner—someone who has been immersed in the study of Torah since my teens, spending hours each day with my nose buried in one of the Five Books of Moses or Talmud, sometimes to the point of being so caught up inside my head with the ins-and-outs of a Talmudic discussion that I would bump into telephone poles—I never saw that verse in that way.

For me, the message had always been about what comes at the end: ". . . in order that he learn to fear God to observe all the words of this Torah." The point was that the king had to be constantly reminded that there is an authority and power greater than he, that even a monarch is under God and bound by God's Torah. And all of that is still true about what this text teaches. But how did I miss that key message of being a "lifelong student," which Abby rightly highlighted?

I missed it because I'd overlooked what it means to be a true learner. It's not just the hours one spends with their head buried in a book. It's about engaging with other people and ideas, which may be radically different from your own. It's about asking yourself: *What can I learn from this other perspective?* It's about cultivating genuine curiosity and stepping outside of your echo chamber.

In the world of the *yeshivot*, the learning of Torah is not an individual pursuit; it is always studied *bi'chavruta*, in pairs. Two people, often sitting

on opposite sides of a table with the same text open in front of them, work together to plumb its depths and argue back and forth, even yelling at times, in the pursuit of arriving at the true meaning of a particular piece of Torah.

The daily partnership of study is a beautiful image and exhilarating to experience. And yet. The difference in viewpoints—which each member of the pair brings to the conversation—is often extremely slight. The *chavruta* arrives at a deeper understanding but within very bounded parameters of shared theological and religious commitments.

Abby taught me—through the many years that the two of us have been learning, laughing, sharing, and challenging one another—that to be a committed learner requires not only going deep but also going wide. Otherwise, your field of vision will be so narrow, you'll keep on walking into telephone poles.

That said, for me, learning Torah has always been more than an intellectual exploration. It is inexorably intertwined with my core religious beliefs and how I live my life. Like the king in the previously cited verse, I learn Torah "to fear God," because I believe that study is a *mitzvah* and orients me toward a constant and ongoing relationship with God.

Learning Torah elevates me out of the urgency of the moment, the busyness of the mundane. At the end of the day, the stories and laws in the Torah are all about what it means for us to be human and to be created in the Divine Image, with a mandate to choose good, to choose life. Making time to study a parsha [Torah passage], whether on my own, or—much better—with a *chavruta* and sparring partner, gives me the space and breathing room to be reflective about myself, my world, and the people around me.

The Torah pulls you in with its messy stories about imperfect human beings, doing what God wants them to do (or not), acting toward their spouse or a stranger in ways that are awe-inspiring or horrific or a little bit of both. And in the middle of all of that, I find it drawing me back to the same questions again and again: How would *I* act in these situations? How do these issues play out in my own family, friendships, and work? What are my values and priorities, and are they the right ones? What is it that I want from God, and what does God want from me?

Part of what it means to see the Torah as coming from God is that I approach the text with reverence, which does not mean silent submission. Learning Torah, for me, is an exhilarating experience of challenging

and being challenged, of arguing and being persuaded, of struggling and embracing. But all are done with a deep recognition of this book as a God-given text, one that not just guides but also obligates me.

The Torah is a blueprint for how I should live my life: "He shall read from it all the days of his life . . . to observe all the words of this Torah." I am bound by its *mitzvot* and its laws. When a question arises about a commandment in the Torah, it will, in the end, directly impact my actions and practice. This makes it alive and pressing. Every minute detail of every law fully matters. It also makes it more than a little bit daunting, because there are some laws—for instance, stoning adulterers—which I am not so eager to incorporate into my daily life.

This is where "the Rabbis" come in. By "the Rabbis"—a phrase I use often in my discussions with Abby—I mean the rabbis who lived in the Talmudic period, from about 100–450 CE after the Second Temple was destroyed and after the locus of Judaism moved from the Temple to centers of Torah learning in the Land of Israel and the diaspora.

These rabbis of the Talmud were committed to the belief in a divine and binding Torah. And they understood that it was their task to interpret the Torah and its *mitzvot* in a way that was actionable and applicable while staying true to the text, true to life, to the tradition, and to its deepest values. Their commentary went a long way toward smoothing out the rough edges of the text.

I am trained to read the Torah through the lens of the Rabbis. This means a lot has already been "pre-solved" for me, whether morally vexing narratives or *mitzvot* that seem dated and alien. To some degree, the more the text matters, the more its difficult passages have been tamed.

Thank God, then, for Abby. She has shaken me out of my over-familiarity with one way of reading and learning the Torah. Abby is one of the most incisive, insightful, informed, and intelligent—not to mention kind, caring, and funny—people with whom I have had the privilege of learning Torah with. She is a woman who has devoted her life to thinking, talking, asking, challenging, and writing about what it means to be Jewish. And she doesn't let anyone—not the superstars whom she interviews regularly nor her Torah study partner—get away with complacency or wishy-washiness. Abby has kept me honest and helped make me, truly, a lifelong learner.

Our Rabbis teach us that when two people sit together to learn Torah, the *Shechina*, the Divine Presence, dwells among them. When two people challenge one another to understand Torah, they connect with something bigger than either one of them. They can even achieve a degree of transcendence. That has been my experience, and it can be yours as well.

I hope you will consider joining us as we talk and debate our way through the Torah. Pull up a chair—there's room for one more. Feel free to argue with us; we can take it. Better yet, find a study partner and read this book together—maybe a chapter a week, that's not a heavy lift—and see how the world opens. I guarantee you'll start to see Torah everywhere.

To cite the famous Rabbinic Chinese proverb: The journey of a thousand verses begins with a single word. So let's begin.

Vayeshev

וַיֵּשֶׁב

DL: The parsha of Vayeshev is a story some people might have heard of: *Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat*. Oh no, that's the musical!

AP: I know every lyric. I could sing it all right now.

DL: I do not doubt it, Abby. Please don't.

AP: Just to translate Vayeshev before we dive into the story, it means, "And he dwelt," which refers to Jacob settling in Hebron with his twelve sons.

DL: Right, but we are going to focus on Jacob's son Reuben, how he tried to save his brother Joseph, and whether good intentions matter.

AP: We are in Genesis, Chapter 37. I'm starting with Verse 19. This is when the brothers are all together and they see the dreamer—that's Joseph—coming.

> And they said, one to another, "Behold, the dreamer cometh. Come now, therefore, and let us slay him and cast him into some pit. And we will say some evil beast hath devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." And Reuben [Joseph's eldest brother] heard it, and he delivered him out of their hands and said, "Let us not kill him." And Reuben said unto them, "Shed no blood, but cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness and lay no hand upon him," that he might rid him out of their hands to deliver him to his father again.

Reuben is basically saying to his brothers, "Don't do this, we want to bring Joseph back to our dad, Jacob. Don't lay a hand on him."

DL: And that word you read, "rid" as in "that he might rid him out of their hands," it's actually in order to *save* him.

AP: But his brothers don't listen.

DL: They do listen!

AP: Well, they still throw Joseph into the pit! So Reuben's not effective in stopping the larger malfeasance here.

DL: Yes, because Reuben goes off somewhere and then—

AP: He just walks off.

DL: The text doesn't say where he went.

AP: He's simply offstage for a little bit.

DL: He later comes back and finds out his brothers sold Joseph to these Midianites, who wound up bringing him down to Egypt.

AP: So Joseph is gone, and Reuben failed.

DL: Yes, Reuben failed to return Joseph to his father.

AP: The late Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and a beautiful writer, has a take that I love about Reuben, written in 2008 and titled "Reuben: The Might-Have-Been":

> He is a person of good intentions. He cares. He thinks. He is not led by the crowd or by his darker instincts, he penetrates to the moral core of a situation. That is the first thing we notice about him. The second, however, is that somehow his interventions backfire. They fail to achieve their effect.

What I like about that, what resonates for me, is that yes, Reuben had a good impulse, but he didn't see it through. And ultimately, I think that is something I relate to. I feel it for myself, and I've seen it in others. We care, but we don't affect the situation in a significant enough way to improve it.

DL: Yes, I mean, where's the follow-through? Where did Reuben go? Where'd he walk off to? Does Jonathan Sacks say his follow-through is the problem?

AP: Sacks says he lacks confidence. He says, "He begins well but does not drive the deed to closure." How many of us don't drive to closure? I mean this, for me, is the lesson: You can't just care; you have to finish the job.

DL: That resonates with me too. I see in other stories about Reuben that he also has good intentions, but he doesn't succeed. I see him as someone who can be rash and not just someone who doesn't follow through—

AP: He's impulsive.

DL: Yes, impulsive. He has an immediate response to the situation but doesn't step back enough to develop an effective strategy. You can't follow through if you don't have a plan.

AP: Maybe, though, there is still something admirable in doing what you can in the moment.

DL: I'm with you. The only reason Joseph survived was because Reuben stepped up when he did. So, before we criticize his lack of follow-through, the fact that he jumped in and stood up to his brothers saved Joseph's life. What's your takeaway?

AP: Mine in one line would be: it's not enough to have empathy. You also need courage. I don't think Reuben had courage enough to get it done.

DL: Wait, can we talk about that? What do you mean he didn't have courage? He didn't have follow-through. He didn't have a strategy. But he did stand up to his brothers. You really don't think that took courage?

AP: He took a baby step. To me, that's not—

DL: What's the difference? Where is the line between courage and foolhardiness? What would you have had him do? Stand up to ten brothers who are against him, then totally fail?

AP: He walked away from his brother in a pit, Dov.

DL: So it's that he left Joseph behind? Okay. That I hear. For me, the lesson is that it's best to have a plan, but sometimes, even in the absence of one, we have to take action, because otherwise, it might be too late. Reuben saw that something had to be done, but he knew if he confronted his brothers too forcefully, he wouldn't succeed, so he came up with this idea on the spot. And guess what? Joseph survived. So, my takeaway is to have the courage to intervene in a bad situation even if nobody else does.

Naso

נָשׂא

DL: Today we're talking about Naso, meaning "to lift up." In the Torah, to count someone is to "lift up" their head. God is telling Moses to count the members of the different families of the Levites and assign them to their various functions of the Tabernacle. The parsha then goes on to present a number of laws and introduces a particularly challenging ritual—the *sotah*.

AP: And we're asking a pretty fundamental macro question: How do we deal with parts of the Torah that make us squirm?

DL: Yes. What do we do with a text that's both sacred and, at the same time, in conflict with our contemporary values, seemingly going against some of our most basic ethical principles?

AP: There's some tough Torah on the table today. *Sotah* is a ritual in which any woman who is suspected of infidelity is forced to undergo a barbaric test to prove her guilt or innocence.

DL: I'm not sure I'd say it's barbaric, but I agree that it's pretty demeaning and degrading.

AP: Which *is* barbaric, in my estimation.

DL: We can debate that.

AP: Okay, here we go. We're in Numbers 5:12.

> If any man's wife has gone astray, and broken faith with him, in that a man has had carnal relations with her unbeknown to her husband, and she keeps secret the fact that she has defiled herself without being forced, and there is no witness against her, but a fit of jealousy comes over him [the husband] and he is wrought up about the wife who has defiled herself, the man shall bring his wife to the priest.

Let's pause and summarize the bizarro ritual she has to do, Dov, just for the sake of time.

DL: The woman is brought to the Temple before the priests, and a priest takes off her head covering and dishevels her hair, which is a form of debasing her. It's like stripping her naked because the hair of married women was covered at that time. Then there's a declaration of curses that will befall her if she actually did commit adultery—but it's pretty much assumed that she has.

AP: Then the priest scrapes off the words of the curses from the scroll they were written on.

DL: Right.

AP: How do you scrape off words?

DL: You write them with ink on parchment and then, when the ink dries on the surface, you scrape them off with a knife into water, which is mixed with dirt from the Temple floor. Next, the woman is made to drink this mixture, and if she's guilty, the verse says her belly will expand, her thighs will collapse, and it leaves to the imagination what will happen next. But if she's innocent, no harm will befall her, and she will be fertile and conceive a child.

AP: The text reads—Num. 5:19:

> If no man has lain with you, if you have not gone astray in defilement while married to your husband, be immune to harm from this water of bitterness that induces the spell. But if you have gone astray while married to your husband and have defiled yourself, if a man other than your husband has had carnal relations with you . . . may the Lord make you a curse . . . may this water that induces the spell enter your body, causing the belly to distend and the thigh to sag.

DL: I'm going to go out on a limb and say that you have a lot of trouble with this.

AP: That's an understatement. As far as I can tell, there's no redeeming lesson or moral in this chilling ritual. It honestly reminds me of the Salem witch trials. I should mention that I played a brilliant (if I do say so myself) Abigail in *The Crucible* in fifth grade. A woman is humiliated

here; she is hauled before a kangaroo court of some kind, because I guess it's a priest's business whether or not she had an affair. While, I'll point out, no man is called to account for the same exact crime of adultery. Then the woman is made to drink dirt, which presumably is going to sicken her, and she's lucky if her belly doesn't blow up.

DL: I also have real problems with this. For me, the difficulties begin even before the ritual. The fact that the husband can bring his wife to the Temple just because he's jealous or suspicious, with absolutely no evidence whatsoever—that gives him unilateral and unchecked power over his wife. It's almost like she's his property, which was sort of the reality in patriarchal societies—the woman has no rights. And it doesn't work in the reverse, as you said. If the wife suspects her husband of adultery, sorry, she can't do anything about that; she has no power over him. She is considered defiled through an adulterous act, but not he.

AP: It's been a long time since anyone would say this feels like a justifiable way to handle a situation like this in a marriage. So, how do you deal with these affronts to our moral sensibilities today?

DL: The first way is to put it in historical context.

AP: You're already worming your way out of it by saying, "This is of the time."

DL: Yes, and honestly, this is an *improvement* over the way things had been done. In past societies—and in some places even today—a husband who suspected his wife of adultery could just take the law into his own hands and have her killed. This *sotah* ritual represented progress for those times. Because, instead of the husband being able to act capriciously and unilaterally, he had to bring her to the Temple for the priests to adjudicate the situation.

AP: Let me get this straight: you're okay with a biblical passage that runs entirely counter to our ethical sensibilities because it was better than the bad thing that was the norm of the time? If this is truly from God, shouldn't it be good in the absolute sense and not just relative to the time period?

DL: Yes, but the Torah was also given to human beings. Maimonides writes that sometimes society isn't ready for radical change, and the Torah has to take a step in the right direction. Not everything in the Torah is

the absolute moral ideal. It is moving society to a better place, and the *sotah* ritual was a step in the right direction.

AP: Even if it was a watered-down trial of a woman—

DL: "Watered down," ha ha!

AP: Very funny. I didn't even intend that double entendre. The woman is still debased, and she can still be found guilty.

DL: Right, but let's face it, it's not likely that any woman has ever blown up from drinking dirty water. It won't happen unless God intervenes miraculously to make it happen, which God—I think it's fair to say—did not tend to do. So, at the end of the day, she gets debased, which allows her husband to feel she was punished. Then she's found innocent because God doesn't intervene miraculously to prove her guilty. Subsequently, they both go home and live happily ever after.

AP: You're saying this test was essentially designed so every woman would pass it, and therefore, it's not so offensive? She's going to drink a potion that's *not* going to make her belly distend, so who cares if she has a little bit of nausea—no harm done? Then they go home and everything's fine? You're good with that?

DL: His jealousy is put to rest, and they're able to get on with their lives.

AP: I'm so glad he feels better.

DL: It's bad by our standards, but it's better than the alternative.

AP: I can see that, but I don't agree.

DL: We're going to have to agree to disagree here. But I do continue to struggle with this text because of how it's been used to justify harmful attitudes and behaviors toward women. And also because it's had lasting implications in Jewish Law.

AP: In what way?

DL: For one, the Rabbis say that because the Torah refers to the wife as having been "defiled," this teaches us that any woman who commits adultery is subsequently off-limits to her husband—that she and her husband are forbidden to have sex.

AP: You're saying that even if they've reconciled, they can't have make-up sex?

DL: Forget make-up sex. They can't continue to live together as husband and wife. But there are workarounds.

AP: *Workarounds!*

DL: Yes. First of all, we make it very hard to prove adultery has ever really happened. Even if the woman herself admits to it, we take her testimony as inadmissible.

AP: It seems sometimes like a lot of commentary is a workaround.

DL: Anyway, that's how I deal with this parsha. What I'm really wondering, Abby, is how do you, as a Reform Jew, deal with this? Does this challenge your notion of the Torah as sacred?

AP: I don't love the question being framed with "as a Reform Jew . . . ." I'll answer as a Jew. I have a problem with this text. I reject this ritual. I still think the Torah is a sacred document. I can hold both thoughts, because the Torah is sacred in the sense that it is enduring, inherited, magical, extraordinary, challenging, and resonant. But it isn't a blueprint for living; it's not a handbook. It's not meant to be followed to the letter in that sense. I know it hasn't been followed to the letter by Orthodox Jews either.

DL: What do you mean by that?

AP: You're not stoning someone who doesn't correctly observe the Sabbath. There are plenty of times that your community has chosen—*selected*—what you feel is comfortable in terms of *halacha*. It's not like all 613 *mitzvot* are being met every moment. I once interviewed an Orthodox rabbi on Tisha B'Av who wasn't fasting.

DL: I'm not going to ask who, but okay.

AP: My point is that Orthodox Jews may accept the text as divine, but it is not an instruction manual.

DL: I didn't say that. We *do* accept it as divine, and we deal with difficulties through interpretation. But I want to know how *you* deal with difficult passages.

AP: I identify them as just that: difficult. I'm interested in unpacking them and discussing them, but I am not wrestling with whether to live by them. It feels like you are pretzeling yourself to accept a text as holy that is offensive to you.

DL: I start with the principle that it is holy and divine, and I have to square that with a belief that God is good. That's what the Rabbinic enterprise of commentary and interpretation is all about.

AP: I can engage with the *sotah* ritual, but it is not our religion to me. Part of grappling with our religion includes rejecting parts of it. That's sometimes hard. But in this case, it's not hard for me. It's in the tradition; it's in the text, but I'm not struggling to find meaning in it.

DL: Well, I will continue to struggle.

Chukat

חֻקַּת

AP: Chukat means "statute," Dov. What statute is relevant in this parsha?

DL: The parsha opens with the statutes, or laws, of purification from coming in contact with a corpse. From there it moves on to some very interesting narratives.

AP: The most famous being the story of Moses hitting the rock and being told that *he* can't enter the Land of Israel.

DL: Yes and we've decided to focus on the question, "Did Moses get a fair deal?"

AP: My answer is "No."

DL: Why could I have guessed you'd say that?

AP: Where is the justice when great visionaries don't get to see their visions realized in their own lives? Here's the verse—Numbers 20:7: "The Lord spoke unto Moses, saying, 'Take the rod and gather thou the assembly together, thou and Aaron, thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes and it shall give forth His water.'" So, just to be clear, when God says, "Speak ye unto the rock," that's an instruction for Moses to literally coax water *verbally* from the stone.

DL: Right, or, if not to coax it from the stone, to command it. And then, through a miracle, God will make the water come out.

AP: Okay, to continue:

> And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock . . . And he said unto them, "Hear now, ye rebels, shall we fetch you water out of this rock?" And Moses lifted up his hand and with his rod he smote the rock twice and the water came out abundantly and the congregation drank, and their beasts also.

DL: Let's pause for a moment and point out that Moses did not *speak* to the rock as he was commanded. He hit it; he smote it twice.

AP: God's not pleased at all with the smiting, as we see in these final verses from Numbers 20:12: "But God said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.'" That's that. Moses didn't follow God's instructions, so he can't enter the Promised Land.

DL: Right, game over. After forty years of selfless service, it all went down the drain in an instant. "Sorry Moses, you blew it one time. Now you're not going into the Land."

AP: Aaron couldn't go in either. It sounds like Aaron is punished for Moses's mistake, or maybe he's being slapped retroactively for the golden calf sin, which happened a long time before. It just doesn't make any sense to me, honestly. What exactly was Moses's fatal error here? The Torah does not lay it out.

DL: That's another really curious part of this story. The assumption that the Rabbis tend to make is that the sin was hitting the rock as opposed to speaking to it. But even if that's true, what's so terrible about that? It's not exactly what God instructed, but at the end of the day, why is that a reason to be kept from the Land?

AP: I researched this parsha, and I found that the commentators give many explanations of Moses's sin that kept him from the Promised Land. I thought it might be interesting to share some of them.

DL: Go for it.

AP: I'm sure you know them all by heart, Dov. The first is that Moses called the people "rebels," and he displayed his anger, which was out of control.

DL: That's Maimonides.

AP: See? You do know all the commentators by heart. Impressive.

DL: Thank you. Go on.

AP: The hypothesis from Nachmanides, the thirteenth-century Spanish commentator, is that Moses screwed up by implying it was *he*, not God, who was making the water come out of the rock.

DL: Oh, interesting.

AP: Others believe it was because Moses and Aaron ran away from their people when the rebellious congregation initially confronted them.

DL: Which goes back to our previous episode on courage.

AP: Right, they didn't have it. Regardless of what Moses's sin was, let's talk about where the justice is in this. It's such a severe punishment, all kidding aside. If you consider everything that Moses did, the degree of self-sacrifice, all of which was leading to bringing the people into the Land, and then it's just, "Sorry." He did all the work and gets no reward.

DL: Okay, so here's a theory: maybe Moses wasn't being punished at all. Maybe there was a deeper issue about his leadership, something that made it clear he could not be the one to bring the people into the Land.

AP: You're saying Moses failed the leadership test in a way we can't necessarily see? Like, maybe his poor anger management—which was Maimonides's explanation—was too problematic a trait to have in the leader who's going to take you into the future. That it was a dealbreaker.

DL: Right, but I would move beyond just the anger issue. I think it was more specific. Moses struck the rock rather than speaking to it, and I think that shows, symbolically, that Moses is stuck in his old ways. Because forty years earlier, when they came out of Egypt and were thirsty, God told him to hit the rock, which he did, and that was just fine. Now God is saying, "Let's see if you can do something different this time—*speak* to the rock." And Moses just falls back into his old patterns. That's a problem. As a leader, you are going to face new realities in the Land of Canaan. Are you going to be able to adapt? Are you going to be able to change, or are you stuck in your old ways? This is a new generation. They're more mature, and they're not whiny and immature people like the slaves who came out of Egypt. They deserve a leader who can talk to them like adults, not one who is going to try to hit them over the head as if they're children.

AP: Nice metaphor. But I'm not satisfied. We still haven't answered the basic question—which I'm not just harping on for its own sake, but because, it seems to me, it's the essence of the turn that's taken here—between slavery and freedom, the old life and the new. Where is the justice in the fact that this leader, Moses, whom we have held up as an icon of our tradition and our faith, is getting short-changed here? He's out. If we look back at the fact that he didn't want the job in the

first place, his hesitancy was a virtue. When God said, "You have to lead the people out of Egypt," he said, "I'm not the man for the job." God pushed him to do it, and Moses did it beautifully, heroically. And now one rock-smite, and he's sidelined. To me, humility is a sign of real leadership.

DL: I agree with all of what you said, but that's a separate conversation. Moses was a great, humble leader, but that doesn't mean he should be the one to take them into Canaan. Even with his initial hesitancy to lead, we have to acknowledge that he got the job by fiat. God decreed it; he was not chosen by the people. His leadership was a top-down appointment, and he governed in a top-down manner. That wasn't the right model for an independent, empowered people, who were about to enter the Land of Canaan. It all goes back to a leadership style that's about hitting the rock, not speaking to it. Maybe the Torah is also instructing us to pursue solutions through words instead of violence.

AP: Then let's discuss this next question: Did Moses get recognition in his own time? The Torah text suggests that he was not praised until his death, so he is dying as *persona non grata* after being this hero.

DL: I feel for Moses, but—

AP: It doesn't sound like you do.

DL: Well, maybe I have to work on that. But it's not like he didn't get his day in the sun. The entire Torah is named after him. It's called *Torat Moshe*, "Moses's Torah," for God's sake. (That's not a pun!) In the tradition, he's known as Moshe Rabbeinu—"Moses, our Teacher." He is the number one figure in our religion. He might not have taken the people into Israel, but he gets credit for the whole shebang.

AP: After he's dead.

DL: Okay, I get that. You're right—in his life, he gets very little in the way, of kudos. But it's like that for a lot of leaders. There's a lot of aggravation and ingratitude, absolutely. But I think there are still some significant markers of Moses's status. First of all, the text says that after he came down from Mount Sinai, they saw that his face glowed, and they were afraid to draw close to him. That's not exactly recognition or gratitude, but it's a type of awe. There's clear realization of who he was.

AP: But that's not enough. He worked all his life to get to this point, and he deserved to enter the Land. He got a raw deal.

DL: Do you think Moses should have gone in even if he wasn't the right leader?

AP: I think he should have at least been able to see it.

DL: He did see it. God took him up to the mountaintop and showed him.

AP: Taste it, feel it.

DL: What if that would have compromised Joshua's ability to be the right leader, living in the shadow of Moses?

AP: This is what it was all for, and he should have the peak moment. A chance to take it all in and feel the earth beneath his feet and taste the milk and honey. He earned that. It's not just recompense, it's also right for the people that he go with them. That bothers me as well.

DL: But you agree that, if it weren't right for the people, it might make sense for him to be denied?

AP: But who decides that? Who's determining that?

DL: Well, in the Torah, it's God.

AP: We know God is not always fair. We know God's not always right.

DL: What happens when an individual suffers, and it isn't fair, but ultimately, it's for the greater good?

AP: Why does it hurt the people for Moses to go?

DL: Because any future leader will always live in Moses's shadow. He is a larger-than-life figure, and if he enters into the Land with them, their narrative about building a new society is going to start with Moses.

AP: Or maybe what you're getting at is that as long as Moses is with them, their story in the Promised Land will always start with slavery. We need to think like free people now; we have to remake ourselves as liberated people, and he reminds us too much of our oppression.

DL: Exactly, and if you buy into that—which I'm not saying you do—you find a way to live with the fact that he might have to suffer some unfairness.

AP: I'll have to think about that.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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