

Biblical Commentators

Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno

by Rabbi Harvey Belovski, Golders Green United Synagogue

Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno (circa 1475–1550, Italy), affectionately known in Jewish literature as 'the Seforno', was a prominent Jewish philosopher and usually regarded as the greatest Italian Bible commentator. He lived at a time when Jewish life flourished in Italy; he studied medicine at the University of Rome and was able to move in influential circles with ease. He wrote commentaries on the Torah and other Biblical books, a philosophical treatise and a commentary on Ethics of the Fathers.

The Seforno's Torah commentary seems deceptively simple but is often profound. In my view, his most striking contribution to Torah study is his insistence on treating each verse as a complete unit as well as reading it in context. This approach yields interesting and innovative explanations. In this short series, I shall introduce the Seforno's approach by way of some brief examples.

G-d informs Moses that the people have manufactured the Golden Calf and 'pros-

trated to it and sacrificed to it' (Shemot 32:8). Having begged for their survival, Moses descends to confront the people: *Moses turned and descended from the mountain, the two tablets in his hand... (ibid. 15)*

The Seforno is troubled that Moses is still holding the tablets, since they represent the revelation that the people have rejected by building the Calf. Indeed, just four verses later, Moses smashes the tablets. The Seforno answers his difficulty quite neatly: *He thought that when he returned to them, they would repent, but if not, he would smash them before their eyes... so that they would repent. (Seforno ad loc.)*

In this pithy observation, Seforno reads the verse in context. Since Moses knew that the people had sinned, the only purpose in bringing the tablets down with him was to encourage them to repent – either by showing them to the people, or, as a last resort, by smashing them.



A Lifetime's Work

by Rabbi Pinchas Hackenbroch
Woodside Park United Synagogue

We are a nation that has had many lows as well as highs over the course of the millennia. But perhaps the most tragic and incomprehensible in Jewish history is the *chet ha'egel*, the sin of the Golden Calf, especially when we bear in mind the context within which it occurred.

Israel had only recently emerged from the servitude of Egypt and had witnessed the miraculous ten plagues. They had seen firsthand the greatest spectacle in mankind's history in the splitting of the Reed Sea. The nation reached its zenith in experiencing Divine revelation at Mount Sinai when they heard the Ten Commandments and G-d Himself proclaim "I am the Lord your G-d who took you out of the land of Egypt".

With G-d's presence being clearly felt, how could they so quickly turn aside and worship a Golden Calf, proclaiming it to be "the god of Israel who brought you up out of Egypt"?

Rashi attempts to mitigate the severity of the transgression by putting most of the blame on the *erev rav*, the mixed multitude who were Egyptian converts that joined the Israelite nation prior to its departure from Egypt. Yet the question is equally valid concerning the *erev rav*. Did they not also experience the miraculous events at the Reed Sea and Mount Sinai?

The key to understanding this issue can be found in the words of our sages describing the miraculous events surrounding the splitting of the sea. The midrash states that

"a maidservant was able to perceive the Divine on a level that even the prophet Ezekiel was unable to grasp."

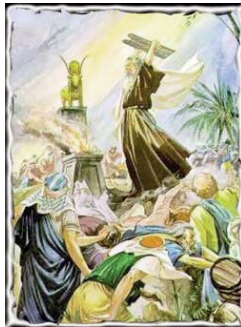


Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz (1902-1979), the head of the *Mirror Yeshiva*, asks a fascinating question: if indeed a maid servant was capable of such lofty understanding, why is she still referred to as a maidservant and not a prophetess? He answers that revelations and wonders do not create prophets. A person may experience a lofty vision of the Divine yet remain the same person.

Their knowledge and awareness may not necessarily result in a transformation of their persona. Genuine prophets reached their stature through a lengthy and arduous process of character development and self-perfection. The ability to have divine visions was but a manifestation and climax of their efforts and therefore it became an integral part of their personality.

With this we can appreciate why the mixed multitude turned so quickly aside to idolatry following the monumental events they had witnessed. They were essentially idolaters who had lived through miraculous events which had left no lasting impression.

In our high tech generation, where the buzz word is "instant" and the focus is on the here and now, the lesson of the *erev rav* is a timely reminder of the correct outlook and approach we should adopt. One's character development and spiritual growth are a gradual process – a lifetime's work.



Yigdal – Principle 3:

G-d has no bodily form (incorporeality)

by Rabbi Philip Ginsbury

"He has neither bodily form nor substance; his holiness is beyond compare."

The entire Jewish faith revolves around the acceptance of a personal G-d – not some blind force or fate that we cannot relate to, but a G-d to whom we can turn and pray at any time, just as our ancestors did.

Indeed, many verses in the Torah even describe G-d as possessing human characteristics – watching with His eyes, listening with His ears, stretching out His arms, speaking with His mouth.

The third principle therefore warns us that none of these expressions are to be understood literally, because G-d has no physical form whatsoever. They are merely used to help us understand a 'part' of the (infinite) 'personality' of the Divine.

PARAPHRASE

The Aramaic Targum Onkelos, one of the oldest and most authentic of the translations of the Torah, is at pains to paraphrase these expressions, using terms such as "the glory of G-d" or "the Divine presence". Indeed, the Torah itself warns against ascribing human features to G-d: "Take good care, for you saw no manner of form on the day the Lord spoke to you at Sinai" (Devarim 4,15).

Maimonides in particular warns us that such expressions must be understood as metaphors. Speaking of G-d in human terms is the only way our limited intelligence can understand Him.

ANIM ZEMIROT

A good example of this idea is the *Shir Ha-*

kavod, sung beautifully on Shabbat but little understood. It contains the verse: "I will relate Your glory, though I have not seen You; I describe you with metaphors though I have not known You".

The song uses numerous allegorical terms, mostly based on Biblical imagery, to describe the glory of G-d as He appeared to Biblical characters.

When Moses asked G-d to "show him His ways" G-d replied "No-one can see Me (i.e. fully understand Me) and live". Instead G-d revealed the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy ("... והנון רחום והנון...") which help us to understand His ways and qualities of boundless mercy and kindness, His willingness to forgive those who have erred but display contrition.

DISTANT – YET ACCESSIBLE

All agree that we can only imagine G-d by ascribing to Him human attributes. Otherwise we could not understand Him at all.

The unique feature of our relationship with Him is that on one level, He remains infinite, unfathomable, unique in His holiness (separate from the world and totally independent) and incomparable, a totally spiritual Being without any corporeal properties or bodily characteristics. At the same time, this is the G-d of Israel and of our forefathers to Whom we turn thrice daily in prayer, Who listens to our pleas – and Who never fails to respond to those who call on Him with sincerity.



Help us turn your old mobiles into matzah!

Candice Woolfson, Project Chesed Director, United Synagogue
LSJS Susi Bradfield Fellow

"We were slaves to Pharaoh...and had not G-d brought our fathers out from Egypt, we, and our children and grandchildren would still be enslaved, and thus no matter how wise and learned we may be, we are still obligated to speak out the story of leaving Egypt." (Passover Haggadah)

On Seder night, everyone is commanded to speak out. In fact, speech plays such a vital role on Pesach that our sages tell us that even if one is alone at the seder, one is still obligated to relate out loud the story of the Exodus as though there were others present. (Talmud Pesachim 117a)

Speech is bound up with freedom. Slaves cannot speak out and cannot raise their voices to tell their story.

Our latest collection binds together speech and Pesach. We are collecting old mobile phones and turning them into matzah! The phones will be re-used where possible, and if not, recycled. The great news is that for

every old phone you give us, we'll get money back that will be invested in Pesach food parcels. These parcels help members of our communities struggling with the extra costs of Pesach.



There are about 50 million mobile phone subscribers in the UK and the average user replaces their handset once every 18 months. It is estimated that there are close to 90 million phones hiding in drawers and cupboards across the UK! If you have any old mobile handsets lying around, here is your chance to put them to good use.

Many shuls have offered to be collection points. Look out for posters or call or email me to find out your nearest drop-off on 020 8343 5688 or chesed@theus.org.uk

Our old mobile phones, which once carried our stories – our speech – can be transformed into matzah for the Seder table. Please support this collection if you can.

United Synagogue Daf Hashavua Produced by the Rabbinical Council of the United Synagogue **Editor:** Rabbi Baruch Davis

Editorial Board:

Rabbi Yisroel Fine Rabbi Emanuel Levy Rabbi David Lister Richard Marcus Rabbi David Mason Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Available also via email. US website www.theus.org.uk ©United Synagogue

To sponsor Daf Hashavua please contact Charlotte Hotter on 020 8343 5658, or chotter@theus.org.uk

If you have any comments or questions regarding Daf Hashavua please email rabbidavis@theus.org.uk