

The Postmodern Piety of Rav Shagar The Language of Covenant (session 4)

1. Rav Shagar, "Al Sefat ha-Emunah," Shiva Raki'im, 20

The world in which we live is saturated with words. This refers not just to the words that surround us in writing, the internet, and different media channels but also in the words from which our world is composed. . . We don't see things as they are; rather, we see the words and definitions that encompass them. . . When we see a chair, we say to ourselves without speaking, "here is a chair." We don't see the chair in its details: seat, legs, back; we see a "chair." We see the chair in terms of its functional uses for us. We don't see the chair in itself, rather a chair that is possible to sit on and perhaps even stand on.

2. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, Likutei Moharan, 64

The creation came into existence by means of the spoken word, as it is written (Psalms 33:6) "By the word of God the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth their entire host [was created]." The spoken word contains wisdom, because the whole of speech is but the five articulators of the mouth. Through them all the things of the entire creation came into existence, as it is written (ibid. 104:24), "You created them all with wisdom."

The spoken word is the demarcation of all things. [God] circumscribed His wisdom in the letters, such that certain letters demarcate one thing, while other letters demarcate something else. But there in the Vacated Space—which surrounds all the worlds, and which is, so to speak, vacated of everything, as explained above—there is no spoken word at all, and not even intellect without letters, as explained above. Thus the conundrums that stem from there are in the aspect of silence. . .

For the Torah scholars create everything through their words, as it is written (Isaiah 51:16), "and I have declared to Zion: You are *ami* (My people)"—do not read *ami*, but *imi* ("with Me"). Just as I make heaven and earth through My word, so you do the same (Zohar, Introduction, p.4b-5a) .

3. Rav Shagar, Bayom Hahu, 287

The halacha not only internalizes the surrounding reality, but influences the way in which we experience reality, in a manner similar to the midrashic idea that 'God looked inside the Torah and created the world.'

4. Rav Shagar, "Religious Life in the Modern Age," Faith Shattered and Restored, 52, n. 23.

I used to live close to the bakery in Jerusalem's Beit Yisrael neighborhood. On Fridays, I would buy halla there for Shabbat. I once witnessed a man exit the bakery with a halla, which he proceeded to tear apart and devour. I was shocked. The very same holy Shabbat halla that we would cover during Kiddush, to spare it the humiliation of knowing it was not the first to be blessed was being raped! To me, the halla is not merely a loaf of bread; its context turns it into something entirely different – a Shabbat halla, one whose very flavor differs from that of commonplace bread.

5. Massechet Sofrim, 1:7

It once happened that five elders wrote the Torah for King Ptolemy in Greek, and that day was as ominous for Israel as the day on which the golden calf was made, since the Torah could not be accurately translated.

6. Rav Shagar, Le-Ha'ir et ha-Petachim, 149

Why was the use of the Greek language considered so dangerous? It is a problem of communication. Language is not a collection of signs; rather, it is the foundation of being at home. It is what enables a "home community." . . . The Torah receives its meaning from the fact it resides in both the community and the home. . . In the same manner, Wittgenstein taught us there can never be a "private language," and thus also no "private halakhah." An essential part of living a halakhic life is rootedness in a broader, comprehensive framework, and this is not possible for a person to do alone. . . Covenant is what makes the meaning of language possible.

7. Rav Zadok of Lublin, Likkutei Maamarim, 15.

The Maccabees' defeat of the Greeks during the time of the Second Temple was through the innovation and spread of the Oral Torah.

”וַיִּתְּצוּ בְּתַחֲתֵית הַהָר, אָמַר רַב אֲבִדִּימִי בַר חֲמַא בַר חֲסָא: מְלִימַד שְׁכַפְּהָ הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עֲלֵיהֶם אֶת הַהָר כְּגִיטָה, וְאָמַר לָהֶם: אִם אַתֶּם מְקַבְּלִים הַתּוֹרָה מוּטָב, וְאִם לֹא – שֶׁם תְּהֵא קְבוּרַתְכֶם. אָמַר רַב אֲחָא בַר יַעֲקֹב: מִכָּאן מוֹדְעָא רַבָּה לְאוֹרֵייתָא. אָמַר רַבָּא: אִף עַל פִּי כֵן הַדּוֹר קִבְּלוּהָ בְיָמֵי אַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ, דְּכָתִיב: ”קִיְמוּ וְקִבְּלוּ הַיְהוּדִים” – קִיְמוּ מֵהַ שְׁקִיבְלוּ כְּבָר.

8. Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 88a

The Torah says, “And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; **and they stood at the lowermost part of the mount**” (Exodus 19:17). **Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said:** the Jewish people actually stood beneath the mountain, and the verse **teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above the Jews like a barrel, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial. Rav Aha bar Ya'akov said: From here there is a substantial caveat to the obligation to fulfill the Torah.** The Jewish people can claim that they were coerced into accepting the Torah, and it is therefore not binding. **Rava said: Even so, they again accepted it willingly in the time of Ahasuerus, as it is written:** “The Jews **ordained, and took upon them,** and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them” (Esther 9:27), and he taught: The Jews **ordained what they had already taken upon themselves** through coercion at Sinai.

9. Pur Hu ha-Goral, 56

God compelled Israel to accept the Torah because only through such compulsion could their acceptance take on a level of essential necessity not given to any renunciation . . . the compulsion spoken of here needs to be understood not as mere external duress, but rather in the psychological sense of inner necessity. The Jew is bound to his Jewishness in a compulsive fashion and cannot escape it.

10. Shiurim al Likkutei Moharan, vol. 1, 367

It is easy to say, “I am a Jew because I was born a Jew, and I believe because I was born a believer.” However, the “because” is easily able to deny the objective truth value . . . of my faith . . . The challenge of covenant is to say, “I am a Jew because I was born a Jew,” and not due to pangs of conscience and feelings of guilt or bias. Rather, it comes from a place of brit that is personal wholeness and expresses the notion that “I am who I am” – accepting oneself in the deepest sense of the term.

11. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, Jewish Spirituality and Divine Law

I'm afraid, however, that votaries of current spirituality often tend to erode the status of yirah; and, together with it, the status of the very essence of Yahadut: kabbalat ol malkhut shamayim and kabbalat ol mizvot. In Israel today, in certain circles much is heard of hitḥabrut, as linkage, but little of hitḥayvut, as obligation. . . . Or to take a published example, what is one to make of the following affirmation by Rav Shagar, regarded as bearing affinity to current spiritual circles:

Belief in the halakhah, like the belief in the Sages in this connection, does not necessarily derive from being sure that these sages were the wisest. Rather, its source is a kind of intimacy: Torah and Judaism – this is It...

And to think that this exercise in narcissism is to be equated with kabbalat ol malkhut shamayim!

12. Le-Ha'ir et ha-Petachim, 55.

The problem with the situation we live in is that the inner subjective feelings of our lives lack intensity. It and our relationship to it are given to rising and falling . . . This is the reason why the Shulchan Aruch and not our inner subjective feeling, is the source of our religious obligation. It is the absolute point of our lives.

13. Rav Shagar, “Panim be-Panim”

Even if the source of revelation is man's soul and his inner self, it still will be experienced as transcending himself and his concepts.