

The Forest and the Trees - Parashat Yitro

Rav Hanan Schlesinger

What would you do if, after making the arduous climb up Mt. Sinai at the behest of God Himself, you found the Master of the Universe not quite ready for His audience with you? According to one Rabbinic tale commenting upon God's giving of the Torah to the Jewish People, this is exactly what happened when Moses' arrived at the rendezvous point at the peak of the mountain. The greatest of all prophets enters into the presence of the Divine, and sees Him tying crowns to the letter of the Holy Torah. "What's holding you up?" he asks. "There will be a man in a future generation," replies the Master of the Universe, "and Akiva ben Yosef will be his name, who will expound upon these crowns and generate heaps and heaps of laws." "Show him to me," requests Moses, and he is told to turn around, at which points he finds himself flung forward through time to the study hall of Rabbi Akiva. Sitting himself down in the last row, Moses is unable to comprehend the complicated lesson that Rabbi Akiva is expounding before his students. The prophet is distraught, beside himself with frustration, until in the course of the lesson they reach one law concerning which a student challenges Rabbi Akiva: "What is the source for that exposition?" inquires the student, and Rabbi Akiva answers that it is a law given to Moses at Sinai. Moses lets out a sigh of relief as if a weight is lifted from his chest, and returns to God, satisfied.

This may be a story about the relationship between the forest and the trees. Moses is a man of the forest; he is concerned with the big picture, with man's ultimate relationship with the Master of All. He has encountered the Divine more than once in his career, and he knows that It is the pinnacle of life and the purpose of it all. But Rabbi Akiva does not seem to recognize this grand truth. This Talmudic scholar seems to be lost among the trees, devoting all his energy to the minutia of the Law, to the fine points of obligations and prohibitions. He is buried in heaps and heaps of rabbinic laws. Moses thinks to himself that, having lost sight of the Grand Ground of All Meaning, Rabbi Akiva has distorted and perverted the Torah. This mistaken perception of Moses changes when



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‘they reach one law.’ According to the Hasidic master Rav Mordechai Yosef of Izbich, the ‘one law’ is the Lore of the One. Rabbi Akiva acknowledged the forest, he took note of the purpose of these ‘heaps and heaps of laws’. He tied everything back to the One Master of the Universe and His original theophany at Sinai.

Moses is taught a lesson and so are the students in the study hall: The man of the Grand Tapestry was impatient with all the little details. He was unable to see why they are necessary. And Rabbi Akiva taught him that you can’t have a forest without the trees. One cannot go straight to God, unless perhaps your name happens to be Moses. The rest of us need process, with have to work through the details, the nitty gritty minutia of the Law. Such is the path to God. It’s hard work, hard work that pays off in the end, but only in the end. The students on the other hand, learn not to mistake the forest for the trees, the means for the end. The details of Rabbi Akiva’s exegesis are not for their own sake, the purpose of Judaism is not details for details sake. You have to see the big picture; the fine print is a means towards the One Writ Large.

And we the Jews of this generation must learn both the lesson taught to Moses and the lesson impressed upon the students of Rabbi Akiva. We must walk a tightrope and keep our balance. God is to be reached through the path of the halacha; there really are no shortcuts to spirituality, and on the other hand we must never lose sight of the end, the purpose of it all; the halacha is meaningful only as a means to the Final End.



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