

## Human Participation with G\_d in Perfecting Creation: Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah*

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### Abstract

Shai Held's two-volume work, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (2017), is a model of articulate Jewish theologizing grounded in specific biblical texts. This article interacts with Shai Held's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *The Heart of Torah* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego, CA, November 2019.

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It is a pleasure for me to review these two volumes of *The Heart of Torah* by Shai Held. I first met Shai in 2004 when we were both fellows at the Inaugural Session of the Summer Institute for Modern Israel Studies sponsored by the American Jewish Committee and Brandeis University. He is the son of Moshe Held, the late and renowned scholar of Hebrew and Semitic Studies at Columbia University, who passed from this life much too early. But Shai need not rely upon his father's laurels; he has emerged as a leading and innovative scholar in his own right in the fields of Rabbinic studies and Jewish thought. His work displays deep understanding of Bible, Rabbinic literature, and Jewish thought in general, and it is innovative in that it deliberately engages non-Jewish as well as Jewish scholarship in an effort to open dialogue between Judaism and the wider realm of public religious, social, and cultural discourse in the United States, Israel, and beyond.

*The Heart of Torah* focuses on the annual series the Parshat ha-Shavua, the weekly Torah portion read in synagogue for each Shabbat of the year and studied by Jews for each occasion. For each weekly Torah reading, Held presents a D'var Torah that identifies key issues in the text and applies them to concerns apparent in the modern world of both Jewish and non-Jewish life. A few samples should illustrate both the depth and breadth of Held's work.

### The Complexity of Being Human

I begin with Held's first D'var Torah on Parshat Bereshit (Gen 1:1–6:8), which recounts the creation of the world and of humanity within it. Held titles his

discourse, “What Can Human Beings Do, and What Can’t They? Or, Does the Torah Believe in Progress?”<sup>1</sup> He begins by summarizing the Torah’s account of human cultural progress, but he reminds his readers that although Genesis takes human initiative seriously, it does not call for simpleminded celebration of human cultural or technological progress. Such a concern is especially evident in the aftermath of the Shoah in which Germany, one of the allegedly most-advanced nations on earth, deliberately engaged in an attempt to murder the world’s Jewish population—as well as others who were deemed undesirable—and received the cooperation of many in Europe who shared the Nazi’s views. Held states that “Genesis pulls the cord at both ends” by also taking the time to examine the human propensity for violence, as illustrated by Cain’s murder of his brother Abel, and Lamech’s murder of a boy who had somehow wounded him.<sup>2</sup> Here he notes how the Lex Talionis, “an eye for an eye,” was intended to limit violence only to an equitable punishment for a crime rather than to launch an unending blood feud that would spin out of control and consume the parties involved.<sup>3</sup>

The Torah’s intent is to reject one-dimensional understandings of human potential and instead embrace the complexity of human life in the world. The Torah refuses to assume that people are so irredeemably sinful that we are incapable of accomplishing anything, but it also recognizes that we are not simply good-natured beings who would readily attempt to get along together and sing “kumbaya.”

Human beings must accept moral responsibility in the world and act upon it with our eyes open, recognizing that such responsibility is often hard to recognize and that the progress is elusive. Although we might like to have a Messiah to perfect the world for us, we are in fact responsible for completing and perfecting the world in which we live until such time as the Messiah will come. Such an understanding of human responsibility thus expresses Judaism’s view that human beings exercise free will and thereby must assume responsibility for their actions. It also underlies the rest of Held’s work.

### Critique of Conformity

Held’s D’var Torah on Parshat Noah (Gen 6:9–11:32) then takes the focus on human responsibility one step further when he addresses the meaning of the Tower of Babel narrative.<sup>4</sup> He rejects common suppositions that the narrative is a morality

1 Shai Held, Bere’shit #1 (Gen 1:1–6:8), “What Can Human Beings Do, and What Can’t They? Or, Does the Torah Believe in Progress?” in *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 1:3–6.

2 Held, Bere’shit #1, 1:4.

3 Held, Bere’shit #1, 1:5.

4 Held, Noah #2 (Gen 6:9–11:32), “People Have Names: The Torah’s Takedown of Totalitarianism,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:16–20.

tale concerning a human attempt to climb to heaven and displace G-d or a primitive allegory about an insecure and vindictive G-d who is so threatened by human achievement that G-d therefore wreaks havoc on human beings in self-protection. Instead, Held reads this narrative as an account that challenges notions of human conformity and instead lays the foundations for the recognition and validation of human uniqueness.

Such a reading directly challenges those religious traditions, such as Christianity and Islam, that demand and expect that all human beings must accept and adopt their own religious teachings so that the world will be redeemed and world peace will be achieved. Instead, the narrative posits that all human beings were alike in speaking the same language and striving for the same goals, but G-d's action in scattering human beings throughout the world and in giving them different languages gave us the opportunity to learn to understand the world and express ourselves from differing standpoints and worldviews, thereby assuring diversity within the human realm that promoted human uniqueness and thus the basis for learning that not everyone in the world thinks or acts in the same way. Such a perspective then becomes the basis for understanding and accepting the other as a Levinasian Other and not simply as a pale reflection of ourselves. Non-conformity then helps to ensure that there will those who say that the emperor has no clothes, and thereby awaken the recognition that the majority is not always right.

### **Abraham's Dialogue with God**

Held's second treatment of Parshat Va-yera' (Gen 18:1–22:24) focuses on Abraham's encounter with G-d prior to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.<sup>5</sup> Here, many, including myself, note the role that Abraham plays in giving voice to the ethical imperative by asking if G-d will destroy the righteous with the wicked. When pressed by Abraham as to whether G-d will destroy the cities if there are fifty righteous in the city or even ten, G-d always answers, "No."

Held challenges Brueggemann's view that Abraham instructs G-d in moral perception and action, and argues instead that G-d humbles G-dself to stand before Abraham and patiently waits for Abraham to learn the lesson that such action is not only immoral, but contrary to the character of G-d.<sup>6</sup>

Here I think that both Brueggemann and Held have missed a key point. The point is not that Abraham has to teach G-d morality—G-d already knows, as indicated by the divine responses—nor is it to teach Abraham about G-d's character—Abraham's portrayal throughout the Genesis narrative indicates that Abraham recognizes G-d's character. Rather, the narrative is constructed to teach the reader

5 Held, Va-yera' #2 (Gen 18:1–22:24), "In Praise of Protest, Or: Who's Teaching Whom?" in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:35–39.

6 Held, Va-yera' #2, 1:37.

about both, in that it highlights what has been evident all along, namely, that both Abraham and G-d are ideal characters—although it takes longer to recognize that point in relation to the portrayal of G-d and the divine promise to make a great nation out of Abraham and Sarah despite Sarah's barrenness—and that the reader must learn to understand this and emulate both. The reader of the narrative is always party to the events and conversations depicted within, and at this point—and of course many others—the didactic character of the Torah narrative becomes evident.

### **The Wisdom of Gentiles**

Held's first treatment of Parshat Yitro (Exod 18:1–20:26), which recounts Jethro's instruction to Moses on how to build a system of justice in Israelite society, makes some key points concerning Israel and its relationship with foreigners.<sup>7</sup> Earlier, in his exposition of Parshat Lekh Lekha (Gen 12:1–17:27), Held made the point that becoming the elect or chosen people of G-d did not entail moral or religious triumphalism. Rather, Israel's election calls for the recognition that gentiles also require moral treatment by G-d and human beings alike.<sup>8</sup> Here in Yitro, Held makes the point that Jethro, the priest of Midian, is the one who instructs Moses in the means by which justice and the ethical imperative might be advanced by setting up a court system of judicial authority to decide matters of law within human society. Right before the revelation at Sinai, Israel is taught a lesson by a gentile about the administration of justice, thereby indicating that Torah alone will not ensure justice in the world; there is wisdom among the gentiles as well, and that wisdom should be taken seriously. Indeed, that point was recognized long ago by Ahad Ha'Am, one of the major theoreticians of modern Zionism, who noted that Jews must live in both a Jewish state and in the Diaspora. He argued that while the Jewish state will build Jewish identity, the Jewish Diaspora will help to ensure that the wisdom of the world will also play a role in building both Judaism and the world at large.

### **Human Partnership in Sanctifying Creation**

Held's combined exposition of Parashat Va-yak'hel (Exod 35:1–38:20) and Parshat Pekudei (Exod 38:21–40:38) addresses texts that recount the building of the wilderness tabernacle and disclose G-d's choice to establish the ideal holy presence both within the human world and beyond it.<sup>9</sup> Held agrees with Brueggemann

7 Held, Yitro #1 (Exod 18:1–20:26), "Does Everyone Hate the Jews? And, Is There Wisdom Outside of Torah?" in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:165–68.

8 Held, Lekh Lekha #1 (Gen 12:1–17:27), "Are Jews Always the Victims??" in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:21–25.

9 Held, Va-yak'hel #2 (Exod 35:1–38:20) and Pekudei #1 (Exod 38:21–40:38), "(A) Building with Heart," in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:217–20.

that G-d does not want a holy habitation forcibly built by human beings. Rather, G-d desires generosity of the heart as the motivation for humans to build the sanctuary; Israelites are to bring their gifts so that Bezalel and Ohaliab could build a sanctuary by means of the heart, thereby ensuring that the holy presence would be established within.

Readers sometime turn away from Leviticus because its focus on ritual is often alien to the way in which some moderns view their lives, but Held takes special pains in his exposition of *Va-yikra* (Lev 1:1–5:26), which provides instruction on the presentation of offerings at the temple, to draw out the parallels between Leviticus 1, which recounts the presentation of the whole burnt offering, and Genesis 1.<sup>10</sup> Genesis 1 does not teach the principle of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing), as so many presume. A correct reading of the Hebrew demonstrates that G-d takes pre-existing chaos and makes order out of this chaos.

Leviticus calls for human beings to do much the same, insofar as the rituals of Leviticus call for human beings to make distinctions in the world—especially between the holy and the profane—and thereby bring order into a chaotic world through holy action, such as the daily presentation of the whole burnt offering and the other offerings detailed in the Parashah. Such a proposal gives voice to the teaching that human beings, especially (but not exclusively) Jews, are called upon to act as partners with G-d in completing and sanctifying the creation that G-d has initiated.

### Why Are Moses and Aaron Barred from Entering the Land?

In his exposition of *Hukkat* (Num 19:1–22:1), Held misses an opportunity to build upon the importance of sanctification when he discusses Moses's sins in striking the rock that yielded water in the wilderness, thereby prompting G-d to bar him and Aaron from entering the promised land of Israel (Num 20:22–29).<sup>11</sup> He rehearses the usual attempts at solution, namely, Moses's improper address of the people as rebels; his impatient question, "shall we get water for you from this rock?" (Num 20:10); and striking the rock instead of speaking to it—none of which has ever succeeded in explaining G-d's decisions.

But the preceding narrative had emphasized that the Levites would serve as priests, that those defiled by the dead must purify themselves, and that Miriam had just died and been buried without Moses and Aaron having purified themselves prior to standing before G-d as priests; that is why they were banned. The

10 Held, *Va-yikra* #1 (Lev 1:1–5:26), "Order and Chaos: Connecting to Leviticus," in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:3–8.

11 Held, *Hukkat* #1 (Num 19:1–22:1), "When Everything Starts to Look the Same: Moses's Failure," in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:146–51.

narrative teaches that even those of the highest standing—even Aaron and Moses—are obligated to observe G-d's expectations of holiness.

### **The Revision of Law in the Torah**

Finally, Held's exposition of Re'eh (Deut 11:26–16:17) examines the differences between Deuteronomic halakhah concerning the treatment of the poor and women with the laws of Exodus 21–23.<sup>12</sup> He notes that Deuteronomy gives greater rights to the poor and to women, in that the poor are given money by their master upon their release from debt slavery and women are allowed to go free on the same basis as men. Although some argue that Exodus and Deuteronomy take up very different legal situations, Held recognizes the dynamic principles in the articulation of biblical law, indicating the willingness to go back, reexamine, and even revise earlier law in an effort to achieve the justice that the original law was intended to achieve. The Torah's system of laws builds in the potential for progress, and thereby shows itself to be a living system of law that was intended to ensure that both justice and holiness could be achieved in Israelite and Judean society. But it also shows that we human beings have the moral responsibility to ensure that such justice is done.

In sum, Shai Held has presented us with an exposition of the weekly Parshot ha-Shavua that highlights the imperatives for moral and holy action on the part of human beings within the world of creation. Such an exposition emphasizes that study and application of the Torah is just as necessary in the modern world as it was in the ancient world, and it points once again to our own responsibility to serve as partners with G-d in ensuring the completion and sanctification of creation.

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12 Held, Re'eh #2 (Deut 11:26–16:17), "Women in Deuteronomy—and Beyond," in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:235–39.