**THOUGHTS ON THE PARASHAH**

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**The Book Written by God**

God threatened to destroy the Israelites for having worshipped the Golden Calf.  On the nation’s behalf, Moses pleaded for clemency.  “Now, if you will forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me from the book You have written (Exodus 32:32).”  God rejected Moses’ demand, insisting that punishment not be vicarious and that it be meted out specifically to those who deserved it.  “He who has sinned against Me, him only will I erase from my book (32:33).”

Moses’ ultimatum and God’s response presume that God is an author.  What book did He write?

Rashi posited that God’s book is the Torah.  Moses begged God to delete his name from the Pentateuch lest people say that he did not do enough to secure Divine mercy for the Israelites.  Rabbenu Bachya noted that despite God’s eventual decision to spare the Israelites from summary annihilation, Moses’ request to have his name removed from Sacred Writ was partially fulfilled in that his name is absent from Parshat Tetzaveh.

Siftei Chachamim noted the obvious difficulty with Rashi’s explanation: Scripture refers to a book written (past tense) by God.  Yet, at the time of the Golden Calf incident, the full Pentateuch had not yet been promulgated.  Siftei Chachamim explained away this anachronism by asserting that Moses had already written the Biblical text from Genesis through Exodus 20.  Alternatively, he suggested that the tense is imprecise (a point often made by scholars about Biblical Hebrew) and that Moses was speaking about the totality of the Pentateuch to be written in the future.  Siftei Chachamim then rejected those explanations.  The text speaks of a book written by God; the earthly Torah was written by Moses.  Accordingly, Siftei Chachamim theorized that Exodus 32:32 refers to the primordial Torah composed of fire by God Himself.

The notion of a primordial Torah was popularized by the mid-third century Amoraim of Eretz Yisrael.  Resh Lakish said that the Torah God gave to Moses comprised black fire engraved onto a background of white fire (Yerushalmi Shekalim 49d).  Resh Lakish claimed that this fiery Torah predated the creation of the world by two thousand years (Leviticus Rabbah 19).  Rabbi Joshua ben Levi dated the origins of the primordial Torah even earlier, claiming that it preceded man by 974 generations (Shabbat 88b).  The Midrash and later Kabbalistic writings say that God looked into the Torah to find the blueprint for creation (Genesis Rabbah 1; Zohar Terumah 161a).

The concept of a primordial Torah is, however, only of homiletic value.  Ibn Ezra, in the introduction to his commentary, considers the pre-creation Torah to be in the realm of סוד, or mystery, and certainly not literal fact.  There is no evidence in Scripture for its existence, nor is there any hint of God’s having functioned as an author in the universe’s early epochs.

The interpretation that Exodus 32:32 refers to the Torah is further undermined by the fact that throughout most of Tanakh, and consistently in its earlier books, the Torah is identified as “the Torah of Moses,” not as a work composed by God (Joshua 8:31, 23:6, II Kings 14:6, Malachi 3:22, Nehemiah 8:1).  These Biblical citations arguably support the minimalist view of revelation.  Yet, even if one wants to maintain the rigorously orthodox stenographic theory of revelation, one must acknowledge, as does Scripture, that Moses, not God, physically wrote the Torah.  Only in the chronologically late books of the Bible do we find the Torah identified as God’s book (Nehemiah 9:3, II Chronicles 17:9, 34:14).

During the early Second Temple period, there must have been a theological shift concerning the provenance of Torah.  One can discern this change in the parallel passages concerning Hilkiah’s discovery of the lost scroll.  In II Chronicles 34:14 the scroll is identified as the “Book of the Teaching of the Lord,” whereas in II Kings 22:8 the scroll is called simply “Sefer Ha-Torah.”  The one early reference to ספר תורת אלקים (Joshua 24:26) differs from Nehemiah and Chronicles in that it does not use the Tetragrammaton to identify the author or promulgator.  It is simply a Book of Divine Instruction.  Rabbinic literature identifies this book as the Torah, with Joshua’s contribution being the final eight verses (Makkot 11a).  According to some critical scholars, the verse alludes to the Hexateuch, purportedly an early version of Sacred Writ that comprised the Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua.

Scattered throughout Scripture are references to two types of heavenly books:

(1) There are celestial scrolls that foretell the destiny of the wicked and the righteous.  The Psalmist beseeched God concerning his enemies: “May they be erased from the book of life and not be inscribed with the righteous (Psalms 69:29).”  Similarly, the prophet prayed for the surviving residents of the holy city: “And those who remain in Zion and are left in Jerusalem, all who are inscribed for life in Jerusalem shall be called holy (Isaiah 4:3).”  It need not be God’s hand directly that writes in these books.  The task can be assigned to an angelic secretary: “Thus said the Lord: Record this man as without progeny (Jeremiah22:30).”

This view was common in the Ancient Near East and, later, wholeheartedly was adopted by the rabbis and Jewish liturgy.  Even the uneducated Jew is familiar with Rabbi Kruspedai’s depiction of three heavenly books open on the High Holidays, one each for wicked, righteous, and spiritually mediocre people (Rosh Hashanah 16b).  We fervently pray to be inscribed in the book of life as part of the Amida prayer during the Ten Days of Awe.

(2) There is a divine ledger for recording the merits and demerits accrued by man.  Concerning the shameful behavior of the unfaithful and the apostates of Israel, God warned: “See, this is recorded before Me, I will not stand idly by, but will repay (Isaiah 65:6).”  In the vision of the four beasts, the heavenly tribunal is depicted: “Myriads upon myriads attended Him; the court sat and the books were opened (Daniel 7:10).”  According to the sages, awareness of the existence of the divine ledger is supposed to have the salutary effect of improving behavior.  “Consider three things and you will not come into the grip of sin.  Know what is above you – a watchful Eye, an attentive Ear, and all your deeds are recorded in a Book (Avot 2:1).  The notion that God Himself writes a record of the behavior of each and every human being is most beautifully articulated by Rabbi Amnon (or Kalonimus ben Meshulam) in the Unetaneh Tokef prayer.  “True it is that Thou art judge and arbiter, discerner and witness, inscribing and recording all forgotten things.”

Pseudo-Jonathan identified the book described in Exodus 32:32 as written by God as the book of the righteous.  Rashbam identified it as the book of the living.  In effect, Moses was requesting that he die if God did not forgive the Israelites.  Rashbam adduced support for his interpretation by comparing Moses’ response to God’s threatened annihilation of the Israelites in the Golden Calf narrative with Moses’ reaction to the Murmurers in the wilderness.  “If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness (Numbers 11:15).”  In this later incident in Numbers, Moses wished death upon himself; so, too, should we understand Moses’ demand in Exodus.  Why did Moses want to die?  Because he despaired of achieving his goals as a leader and was tired of experiencing the spiritually crushing effects of failure.

The Talmud credits Moses for his willingness to give up his life in defense of the Israelites (Berakhot 32a).  The Amora Samuel cites Exodus 32:32 to support his thesis.  This fits neatly with the identification of God’s book as a celestial scroll foretelling the destiny of man – in particular, life for the righteous.  Ramban offers the novel approach that Moses was willing personally to take on the punishment due to the nation at large -- namely, death.  But as estimable and courageous as Moses’ offer may have been, God rejected it.

For Ibn Ezra, the book mentioned in Exodus 32:32 was to be understood metaphorically.  Just as earthly kings have books read and written by their courtiers, so does God have ethereal “books” in the Heavenly chamber.  Those books, as we know from Megillat Esther, were typically chronicles of the goings on in the king’s realm.  Not wanting to be associated with a nation that had fallen out of God’s grace, Moses hoped to spare his legacy through the erasure of his name from the account.  This approach hews close to Rashi’s.  But for Rashi the story is told not in some mysterious heavenly tome, but in the Torah itself.