

## Vivien Solomons Memorial Lecture

### And He Kissed him and They Wept-Emotion, the Unconscious and Ethics in the Writing of Torah

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I will have to begin this lecture with a sincere apology, I am the wrong person to be here, in fact I have a disadvantage in being able to speak about Torah in the sense that this lecture is calling for, because I have the real disadvantage of my rabbinic thinking. I hope that I will not embarrass Marc Michaels by thanking him. His thinking about Torah, and what I was and indeed am planning to speak about, have taught me the see, perhaps for the first time, the very real limits of the tradition I have been trained in. It's actually a shock to think that this training is so complete, so absolute, that I wasn't really aware of what it means until Marc and I spoke. Since then, I have to thank him for setting up, in my mind, a sort of internal dialogue, between his way, as a scribe. And mine as a rabbi, of how we see Torah, and the actual physical real text, in the deepest sense, what it means.

But actually, first I want to say that any sort of difficulty about what Torah means is also inherent, in it; ambiguity is part of what Torah actually is. Remember this, the horror moment for any bar or bat mitzvah child, when they ask that innocent question...will there be any vowels? The same is true for the aspiring adult...what will I see when I open the scroll. It's as obvious to us as breathing, but they are expressing a fear of encounter, of reading a text whose vocalisation is not set in the Torah itself. That means for them, a fear of making mistakes. But it is also an invitation. Every word of Torah calls out to us because it offers inherent ambiguity of meaning. With no vowels until the later action of the Masorettes, who in layers and over three generations, in Eretz Yisrael in the 7-8<sup>th</sup> century, write down vowels, add cantillation marks, and go some way toward fixing that those ambiguous words really mean. But more than this, there are so many many places where even with vowels, and punctuation, it remains impossible. Torah will always be inherently free, I would say, as a rabbi, because it invites us to read into and out of it meanings that have come to be woven into its words..., sometimes because these words themselves ask us to explain them, and more often than that because the language is like a net, tangled up with other stories, other meaning, like seaweed or fish. Some of these fish have swum in from distant places, and have become so tangled up with the Torah as it is, in our own minds and in our reading culture, that we think they are part of what the Torah actually is. Marc Michaels taught me, that as a scribe, his loyalty to being able to actually write out this text means that he must clear away these fishes, this seaweed, these tangles of meaning, to focus on the Torah as it actually is. And I am the opposite, I read her through a rabbinic lens, with the voices of thousands of years of meaning in my ears. I am interested in those fishes, and in the tangle of those nets. This is why I am grateful to Marc for teaching me.... because isn't it right that here, of all places in this lecture, we should allow Torah to be present as it is, as it were to speak for herself?

In this; lecture, I am going to focus on a series of scribal marks.... I will not call them extra markings, because their tradition is so long and so deep that they are always now written, they have become part of what the Torah actually is. I am never going to escape from my own net, the rabbinic tradition that calls me to read those marks as my ancestors have, as signifiers of meaning. But, I am going to listen as well to the scribal voice, and try to very carefully consider this scribal point of view...and I will argue that the very physicality of the Torah herself, written on skin, stitched together with sinew, on sharply scored lines, and with the very careful preparation of the specific quill and ink, this physicality, and those specific scribal marks, add up to the Torah as a distinct physical and metaphysical presence, that stand back from my meaning, and the ways of reading that I inherit, and that challenge me to listen to her voice. These scribal marks, the letters that are *nakud*, that I will be talking about, are literally points where there is an intersection of meaning. I think that there is a danger that this unvocalized text, as we might think, this silent text, is silent in the face of our way of reading and thinking about her. Those scribal marks remind me of the history of writers, long silent perhaps, but who have the power to speak back. Today I will argue that those extra marks are speaking to us, and their message literally points to questions of power.

What do I mean? Firstly, that we are Jews, and we do not, like the Karaites, believe in absolute fidelity to Torah as it is...we are descended from the rabbis, who gave us Oral Torah, who taught us to turn it and turn it, to be like the students of Akiva, who even used to find meaning in the writing, and and the crowns themselves. But the crucial ethical question is this, when we read a meaning into the Torah, are we forcing our meaning into something that is not there.... are we, in a philosophical sense, binging our own total sense of meaning, a certainly that we can 'know' her, and is this a way of doing violence to the text? Ought we to be like the scribes, to listen to her as she is?

Since this is scarcely even possible, we have a dilemma. Every text, is not only because of us, but because of what every text is, an intertext. Every piece of writing, Torah more than any other, weaves in other meanings, other stories. Sometimes these are words or phrases that are quotations from elsewhere...the Torah is simply full of them...and some of them are not even from the Israelite tradition, such as the Hammurabi Code, which is re-written in *Mishpatim*, or the Ancient Near Eastern Flood epic, which appear woven throughout the story of Noah and the flood. No, even more subtly than this, are words and phrases from elsewhere in our writings making subtle appearances here and there, creating resonances of new meanings. And even more powerfully than this, are the stories, songs, poems, and ideas which the Torah only hints at, which perhaps even lets us know about, but keeps mostly hidden. These are the stores, ideas and meaning which the midrash so loves, because it is in the midrash opens up Torah in a spectrum of meaning, showing stories that are barely hidden. We can come to know these stories as that they themselves get tangled up in our Torah nets. Today I am going to argue that something very interesting might be taking place. Perhaps those scribal marks are pointers to suppressions of meaning, to dynamics of power. And perhaps when we point to the dynamics of power, we are

beginning to think about our relationship with Torah itself, perhaps this hidden voice, the voice of the scribe, which we hear in their special markers, might ask us to think about them, those writers, as a silent creative voice.

Today, I am going to take the **ten** examples of the special letters, so called nakud, dotted letters, and the images I will use are taken from our scroll here at Sha'arei Tsedek.

Genesis 16:5

This is our first example, here Sarai, furious with Avram, because Hagar is now pregnant, cries out *yishpot Adonai beini v'veinecha*.

Now the very first assumption we have to make is in line with the view in Avot d' Rabbi Natan, that this is a scribal point to show that this is a possible place of error. The claim there is that in around the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, Ezra (who by the way is described as a scribe), returns to Eretz Yisrael, and in this new setting, there is a decision to make about the correct spelling. Avot d'Rabbi Natan explains that Ezra places these dots above these words where there is some sort of a question, and rather than change them for good, he will wait until Elijah comes.

This is the first assumption we will make, that the dotted letters indicate places where there is a question of correctness, they are place holders for error. Is this possible? The answer is yes, as Sarai is speaking to Avram, then the correct Hebrew does not need that extra yud, it should read *u'veincha*. This extra *yud* opens the door to a fertile place of imagination..Rashi suggests, in line with the midrash<sup>1</sup> that the correct reading is *u'veinaich*...she is not speaking to Avram but to Hagar. May God judge between me and between you, spoke to a woman, her rival. The midrash says that this is the look of the evil eye. I would call a special sort of textual misogyny, a look which even causes Hagar to miscarry. Other thinkers deny that this miscarriage actually happens, but none of them can resist the idea that this extra yud calls into question who Sarai is speaking to, even though some even say that she is appealing to Hagar not to become her enemy.<sup>2</sup> Untangling ourselves from this fascinating net of meaning, I want to ask the simple and plain text based questions...could this dot indicate a mistake?

I think the answer is 'yes', leaving aside the midrash, if Sarai is speaking to Avram, there is no place for it here. But if it points to a submerged meaning, what might that be...what might this say about an unspoken meaning...where is there an unspoken point being made about power. Between these two women, mirrors of each other, both, potential mothers of own man's children. Let's listen for a moment, to that hidden voice.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen Rabbah 45:5

<sup>2</sup> Avot d'Rabbi Natan 34:5

The next example of a letter that is nakud is, here from Genesis 18:9

Sarai and Avram, are in their tent, and the 3 angels arrive, the three strangers. These three seemingly normal men ask Avram, *va'yomeru, eilav, ayei Sarah ishtecha*. They said to him where, is Sarah your wife? Rashi again says that where the dots are significant, they demand an extra effort of interpretation. These dots appear above the letters aleph, yud and vav...and Rashi, quoting Rabbi Shimon b. Eliezer, says these words read **eiyo**, where is he? But why would those angels say, to Avram, where is he? It is Rabbi David Kimchi, Radak, living in 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century Narbonne, who says that saying 'where is he' means they are speaking to Sarah as well. There is some very strange interpretation around gender to unpick here. While Rashi chooses to bring in midrash that claims that they know where she is, but they don't speak to her because they respect her gender...women, after all should never be addressed by men outside the family. And Sara, as our mother and our ancestor, is the epitome of modesty and would never ever want to be spoke n to by a man...both of them agree, the angels must know where she is. They speak to him because they are speaking to her.

So thinking about the scribal test, do we really think that these dots on these letters are marking a mistake? Could it be that this word should not be there...how might it read instead...*va'yomeru, aye Sarah ishtecha*? I think that might be right. Could it be that he is an unnecessary intermediary? How might it be if angels speak to women, how much more is her passivity pointed out by this extra word in the text...might these nakud letters then, be hinting perhaps at what actual happens when she is present in silence, passive, 'modest' hidden...I think we can follow this meaning. And even consider the bigger theological dimension. This is our second nakud letter, and once again it points out power relations, here between the angels an Avram and Avram and Sarah. It is a moment of silencing that the rabbis who know the midrash say is somehow a maker of the merit of the ideal woman.

Our third example also speaks about the behaviour of women, we find it in the story of Lot and his daughters after the destruction of S'dom and Gemorrah. I am not sure how significant it is that each of our examples so far centre so closely on the experience of women. We will need to think about what the meaning is, in this story of power and suppression, of women in the text, and how this might be a model or a paradigm for us in our relationship with God, as Israel, or in our relationship with Torah. But here in Genesis 19 we see one of the least spoken about passages in Torah...I sincerely wonder how often this part of Genesis makes its way into our lectionary of Torah readings. Here are Lot and his two daughters, who like so many women in Torah, have no names., survivors of the destruction of S'dom and Gomorrah. They run away to the hill country, and believe themselves to be the only survivors of the cosmos, or at any rate, this is how their own cosmos ends and is about to begin. The older daughter tells the younger that they will encourage their father to drink wine, and when he is drunk, she the elder, will lie down with him and have sex with him. The younger will do the same. They both become pregnant, and the eldest daughter gives birth to Moab, the father of the Moabites, and the younger daughter will have a son called Amon, the father of the Ammonites. As a peoples' creation myth, there is so much we could

say here, but our interest is in the one scribal dot about the *u've'kumah*,<sup>3</sup> he did not know, meaning Lot did not know, when she lay down and when she got up. This phrase repeats in this story [next slide], because when the daughter lies down with her father, the word is written *chaser* [not in the full orthography]. Here we then have two spellings of the same word...*uv'kumah*. One full, in the case of the older daughter, and one *chaser*, in the case of the younger. Remember by the way, that these are the girls that Lot offers to the, men of Sodom in his effort to protect the angels from sexual assault. I'm not sure I have seen that point made in any of the classical commentaries, so we might ask ourselves how and why such close readers as the medieval thinkers are so silent on that point. Now, taking the scribal test, we must ask, could this dot point to as mistake? And the answer once again is probable yes. We have ample evidence of a variety of ways of writing Hebrew words either *maleh* or full with the vav, or in the shorter form, with the vowel *kubbutz*. This might mean that the classical commentaries are wrong...In fact how can they not be wrong when they hold different views? Rashi says that the dot over *uv'kumah* must surely mean that the father did know when the older daughter arose, meaning that he knew, but somehow he did not use this knowledge to stop himself when he repeats his action with his younger child. But we find in Avot d'Rabbi Natan, our source for so many of these scribal explanations, the very opposite, that the dot over *ve'kumah* means that he only really knows when the younger daughter gets up. This dot then, points to a certain kind of knowing and unknowing. How strange it is that once again it points to the silent voice of women, and for the first of the next set of examples, of siblings. Again, we ask ourselves, how we would we read this text if these dots were not there? I think we would miss the subtle difference in this repetition, we would not think about the real difference in their experience. An older sister and then a younger, a father who sleeps with them both, the damage that is done to them and to their bond. They are silent, there are no names, does this one dot point out to us, their possible pain? Women who were handed to the mob, are now described as handing themselves over to their own father? What is their story? What is their selfhood, and, quite fascinatingly, in this story in particular, who has power?

Can it be a coincidence that the next example of a work that is *nakud* is also about siblings, and also about power? In Genesis 33:4, perhaps the most famous example of all, here we see Jacob, about to see his brother Esau once again. Escaping in his youth, here is his return, with two wives 4 women in all, 12 children, and so much wealth. But Esau is powerful, and he holds power in Canaan, Jacob is going home. Facing him again, they meet at the border. The four dots here are almost thorns which draw in nets full of meaning. The earliest layer of these, in the Sifrei, an early rabbinic text, which Rashi believes explains it, is that this kiss is ambivalent, he Esau kisses Jacob, but without real feeling, but on the other hand as Rashi says, the Sifrei says perhaps it was an outpouring of emotion, the dots display an excess of emotion! Ibn Ezra, reading the Torah as the intertext that she is, points out that this is a moment of recognition, like Joseph has with his brother, for Ibn Ezra, then, the dots are a textual hyperlink, to another moment where siblings experience a rush of once suppressed meaning. I particularly love the words of Rabbi David Kimche, Radak, quoting Shimon Ben

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<sup>3</sup> Gen 19:33

Eliezer <sup>4</sup> saying that Esau wanted to bite Jacob's neck, and fakes his embrace. But in saving moment. God makes Esau's teeth as soft as wax and Jacobs neck as hard as ivory. I would like to suggest that we too need to take care not to leave our bite marks on our Torah. Perhaps these delicious interpretations are also warnings to resist our willingness, our desire, to bite, nibble, and shape Torah to our own will. Once again we take the scribal test, and we must ask...do these dots who that this word does not belong here at all? What would happen if it was actually absent?

Adding the word makes Esau more present...when he sees him in the picture, we picture his agency. I began by thinking that this is a kiss of reconciliation...but the complex web of meaning mean I am less than certain. But I do know this. Esau, and his kiss, is now present. He brings with him layers of visible and submerged meanings. Again, the dots speak of the unspeakable, they point to difficult moments of power, and again, there are siblings.

Our final example in the book of Genesis is also about brothers.

Genesis 37:12. Here we are at the beginning for the story of Joseph and his brothers. He is the dreamer, and he has dreamed his two dreams. The first as you remember has him in the circle of sheaves, and the second has him in the centre of the cosmos, with suns, moon and stars bowing down to him. His father Jacob, challenges, him, his brothers are angry, and his father keeps the matter in his heart. *V'y kanu vo echav, va'aviv, shamar et ha-davar*. His brothers set out to pasture their father's flocks at Shechem, and here we see the fifth example of those extra dots, two over the sign of the direct object, the *et* that joins the word for pasturing, or accompanying flocks, to the words for the flock itself. A first clue to how to read this is her in the cantillation marks themselves. **[see slide]**

We see that the Masoretes read this as two separate clauses, they went to pasture, and the flocks of their father are at Shechem Lets remember the earlier claim that dots represent works that might not or should not be present. This reading supports the structure that the Masoretes say is here in this verse. If the word *et* is not present, then they go to pasture by themselves. Or rather, to pasture themselves. Both Rashi, and Bartenura [15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century Italy and Jerusalem] both see the meaning as exactly this, they are pasturing themselves. In Bartenura's words, they go to feed themselves with food and with drink, they go to be pastured. Others (Radak, Chizkuni) see this as an attempt to distance themselves from their father 's flocks, even to look after their own flocks, to find better grazing land, while they leave their father's flocks in Shechem not forgetting of course, that Shechem is that very place where e short time before they kill the men for the rape of Dinah. *Et*, the sign of the direct object, is connecting word, its existence is purely a function, to join an object to a subject. We have already seen how this reads when it is not there...its absence suggest that these boys do not rely on a parent to accompany, protect and look after them. There is a suggestion that they are already abandoned by their father's silence. *Va'aviv shamar et ha-davar*. Is this an unconscious expression of their reaction to abandonment? Why is it that these dots appear on just the very word that functions as a connector, and why, again, is it

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<sup>4</sup> Ber Rabbah 78:9

here in this space where there is such unspoken and desperate enmity, such painful silence, between siblings? What is being suppressed? Or is this dot, like Esau's kisses, and the division between Lot's older and younger daughters, like a stab of unspeakable pain?

Can it really be true that these scribal marks are only place markers for error? Why, of then ten in Torah, and I think, that is a significant number, only two of them are on a word that has any relation to halachah, law, and not narrative or story. And as we shall see, even that word, the ninth of ten, might be a sort of pun on the idea of ten.

The next three of our dots are in the book of Numbers. Here in Numbers 3:39, again marks out a sibling. This is the great census of the Tabernacle gathering, 22,000 who set out to carry it forward in the beginning of the book of Numbers. Is Aharon to be absent from this great act of counting, of appointing and recording? Must he be there, as the source of the priesthood, in Priestly version of this book, since the priests, the real historical priests were surely also writers? What does it mean for Aharon, the father of the priests, to be present or absent in this counting? And how much power does Aharon really have? All, or none?

Further into the book of Numbers, [9] when any of the Israelites are in a journey and are unable to bring the Passover sacrifice, because of ritual impurity, or being far away, they will bring it on the second month. Here is our first dot on a text concerning any sort of law. Let's accept the scribal tradition that this is a place holder for a possible error. If the *h* is a mistake, then why not amend it? Would this change its meaning? Should this be a *derrch rachok*, a masculine noun and a masculine adjective? In the book of Deuteronomy, the answer is yes. But in the book of Exodus and sometimes in Numbers, *derech* is feminine noun as well. Less often it is true. Since the sofrim knew this, why did they need to point it out for us? Rashi claims that the dot limits the meaning of *rechoka*, it need not be so far. But if this is true, why place the dot on the letter *hey*, that makes this noun read a feminine? Ramban, my favourite thinker of all time, who curiously has nothing whatsoever to say about any of the dots, and actually does address this one. He says that somehow this dot draws a distinction between the man who is far away, and the one who is ritually impure. The ritually impure male can never offer the Pesach sacrifice, but the simply distant can choose to offer it on the first Pesach or the second one. I find that this doesn't explain what seems to be a pointing out of a feminine parallel potential universe. This is a normal variation in the sense of understanding the word *derech* as either masculine or feminine. Why then did the sofer leave this mark? And as this is the first strictly halachic, legal, non-narrative text where we see this mark, because all of the others are stories, what kind of space is it there to hold? Is this as silent place, and if so. What is this silent feminine? Is it Torah herself, who we suppress when we with such creative effort read meaning into her, and do not, like the sofrim, approach her with a straightforward openness and fidelity to her words? Is this the how she makes her silent presence felt.

Our seventh example is even more mysterious. Here in Numbers 21:30, a victory song by Moses and the Israelites, once they destroy Moab and the Amorites in battle and claim that they have utterly destroyed their lands. There is commentary explain that the dot over the letter *r* in the word *asher* describes how different this victory is from others (Chizkuni saying that this means that they utterly lay waste), but more interesting I think is not a

commentary on the dot, but some comments from Isaac Abarbanel, a 15<sup>th</sup> century biblical commentary and philosopher, who fascinatingly says that the songs in the Torah, did not get there through an act of pure transmission to Moses, but are divinely inspired. Moses, and Miriam, and the other singers in the Tanach *know* these songs, and they literally write them in in an act of inspiration. It's like a sort of early form criticism. Abarbanel says that the clue is sometimes in the spelling. The spelling here is not in question, but this is a song.

Our last example from the book of numbers is the ninth of the ten in Torah, and I think its interesting that it appears on the word for tenth, anticipation perhaps that we might make something of the completeness of these ten special marks. We see it here in Numbers 29:15. It is a description of the sacrifice for Sukkot. One tenth of a measure of meal offering is for every one of the 14 lambs. Here, in the ninth of ten places, it seems pretty clear to me that *isaron* is an extra word.

Finally, to what seems to be an extra entire verse, somewhere that comes from another place, in Deuteronomy 29:28. I have a special personal relationship with this *pasuk* because last year I taught this parashah to a woman who had grown up in the United Synagogue and had never had a bat mitzvah. This was her parashah, *Nitzvaim*. Here in Deuteronomy, we are standing ready to hear the while, the entire story and future as it spreads out before us. We feel ourselves to be there in the widest and most historically far reaching sense, we, even we women, our children, everyone who ever will be with us, we listen to these words. Here come the dire warnings, the threat of idolatry that grows in our midst, like a wormwood, a root that will grow in secret, and will tempt us to imagine that we can carry on these idolatrous thoughts in secret. When I was learning with this member of my previous community, she was into the sense of blessing and curse, but I kept drawing us back to this verse,

Read the verse on the sheet. In the context of what comes before, it feels as though this *pasuk* is a kind of extra insertion, because it is almost a denial of the idea that both the hidden and the overt acts are real, that they have equal impact. What appeals to me, and what kept drawing me back again and again as the contrast between what is hidden and what is revealed. *Nistarot* and *niglot*. There feels to me as though this *pasuk*, which inserts itself in this place of blessings and curses, and speaks of the opposite sense of open and secrets, invites me to think about which of these actions, conscious or unconscious, have the most posterity. I do not believe that these eleven dots reveal words that do not belong, because without them the verse would make no sense. Perhaps, marking as they do, the centre of the verse, they mark out a thought that might not really belong here, in Deuteronomy's utterly certain and clear cut view of reality. It would be so easy to reach for a midrash to think about them, but instead I prefer to think about the scribal invitation to engage with Torah as she is.

And this is where I think we can see an invitation to think about ethics. As Jews, we can wrap ourselves up in Torah, get tangled up in the many nets, weaving new stories into our readings. We can, in an unconscious way, even lay claim to her. Because every time we claim we know her, that we have understanding of her and the language in which she speaks, by which I mean a sort of superior knowledge that comes from learning, we overlay

her with our meanings. What a difference it is to take a step back and simply be open to her voice. And when I speak of a voice, I now know what the opportunity to speak to you today had given me...an understanding that her voice is, to a very powerful extent, visual. That feels like a totally un rabbinic thing to say, almost sacrilegious. But I learn from the scribes that we only have this text because of their fidelity to the open plain, and uninterpreted sense. An ethical relationship with Torah must mean then that we allow her to speak, and we decide to listen. I believe that the special markings in our text are a sort of silent point of resistance, that in every place in Genesis at least, say something about this balance of power, where there is a deep and powerful bond, between human beings, where there is a deep family tie, but also a radical imbalance of power. Is this too how Torah feels in relationship to us?