

This is from R. Chipman:

*How To Look at Torah*

This week's *Zohar* includes a lively parable about the nature of Torah and the reason for its often deceptively simple surface. *Zohar* III. 152a:

רבי שמעון אמר: ווי להווא בר נש דאמר דהא אורייתא אתא לאחזאה ספורין בעלמא ומלין דהדיוטי. דאי הכי, אפילו בזמנא דא אנן יכלין למעבד אורייתא במלין דהדיוטי ובשבחא יתיר מכלהו. אי לאחזאה מלה דעלמא, אפילו אינון קפסירי דעלמא אית ביניהו מלין עלאין יתיר. אי הכי נזיל אבתרייהו ונעביד מנייהו אורייתא כהאי גוונא! אלא כל מלין דאורייתא מלין עלאין אינון ורזין עלאין.

תא חזי: עלמא עלאה ועלמא תתאה בחד מתקלא אתקלו. ישראל לתתא, מלאכי עלאי לעילא. מלאכי עלאי כתיב בהו "עושה מלאכיו רוחות" (תהלים קד, ד). בשעתא דנחתין לתתא, מתלבשי בלבושא דהאי עלמא, ואי לאו מתלבשי בלבושא כגוונא דהאי עלמא, לא יכלין למיקם בהאי עלמא ולא סביל לון עלמא.

ואי במלאכי כך, אורייתא דברא להו וברא עלמין כלהו וקיימין בגינה על אחת כמה וכמה. כיון דנחתת להאי עלמא, אי לאו דמתלבשא בהני לבושין דהאי עלמא לא יכיל עלמא למסבל. ועל דא האי ספור דאורייתא לבושא דאורייתא איהו. מאן דחשיב דהווא לבושא איהו אורייתא ממש ולא מלה אחרא, תיפח רוחיה, ולא יהא ליה חולקא בעלמא דאתי. בגין כך אמר דוד "גל עיני ואביטה נפלאות מתורתך" (תהלים קיט, יח)—מה דתחות לבושה דאורייתא. Rabbi Shimon said: Woe to the human being who says that Torah presents mere stories and ordinary words! If it were so, we could compose a Torah right now with ordinary words, and better than all of them. And if it is [written] to present worldly matters? Even the rulers of the world possess words more sublime. If so, let us follow them and make a Torah out of them! But rather, all the words of Torah are sublime words, sublime secrets!

Come and see: The world above and the world below are perfectly balanced. Israel below, the angels above. Of the angels it is written, "He makes his angels spirits" (Ps 104:4). But when they descend, they assume the garment of this world. For if they were not to assume a garment befitting this world, they could not endure in this world, and the world could not endure them.

If this is so with the angels, how much more so with Torah, who created them and all the worlds, and for whose sake they all exist. In descending to this world, if she did not on the garments of this world, the world could not endure.

Hence, the story of the Torah is the [external] garment of Torah. Whoever thinks that the garment is the real Torah and not something else—may his spirit deflate! He will have no portion in the World to Come. That is why David said: "Open my eyes, so I can see wonders from your Torah" (Ps 119:18)—what is beneath the garment of Torah.

תא חזי: אית לבושא דאתחזי לכלא, ואינון טפשין כד חמאן לבר נש בלבושא דאתחזי לון שפירא, לא מסתכלין יתיר. חשיבו דהווא לבושא גופא. חשיבותא דגופא נשמתא.

כהאי גוונא אורייתא. אית לה גופא, ואינון פקודי אורייתא דאקרון גופי תורה. האי גופא מתלבשא בלבושין דאינון ספורין דהאי עלמא. טפשיין דעלמא לא מסתכלי אלא בההוא לבושא דאיהו ספור דאורייתא, ולא ידעי יתיר ולא מסתכלי במה דאיהו תחות ההוא לבושא. אינון דידעין יתיר לא מסתכלן בלבושא אלא בגופא, דאיהו תחות ההוא לבושא. חכימין עבדי דמלכא עלאה אינון דקיימו בטורא דסיני לא מסתכלי אלא בנשמתא, דאיהו עקרא דכלא אורייתא ממש. ולעלמא (ולזמנא) דאתי, זמינין לאסתכלא בנשמתא דנשמתא דאורייתא. תא חזי: הכי נמי לעילא: אית לבושא וגופא ונשמתא ונשמתא לנשמתא. שמיא וחיליהון אלין אינון לבושא, וכנסת ישראל דא גופא דמקבלא לנשמתא, דאיהו תפארת ישראל, ועל דא איהו גופא לנשמתא. נשמתא דאמרן, דא תפארת ישראל דאיהו אורייתא ממש. ונשמתא לנשמתא דא איהו עתיקא קדישא וכלא אחיד דא בדא.

ווי לאינון חייביא דאמרי דאורייתא לאו איהו אלא ספורה בעלמא, ואינון מסתכלי בלבושא דא לא יתיר. זכאין אינון צדיקייא דמסתכלי באורייתא כדקא יאות. חמרא לא יתיב אלא בקנקן, כך אורייתא לא יתיב אלא בלבושא דא. ועל דא לא בעי לאסתכלא אלא במה דאית תחות לבושא, ועל דא כל אינון מלין וכל אינון ספורין לבושין.

Come and see: There is a garment that is visible to all, and when those fools see someone in a garment that seems superior, they look no further. But the essence of the garment is the body; and the essence of the body is the soul.

So it is with Torah. She has a body: the commandments of Torah, that are called “the body of Torah” [*gufei Torah*]. This body is clothed in garments, which are the stories of this world. Fools of the world only look at that garment, the story of Torah, and they know nothing more, and do not look at what is beneath that garment.

Those who know more do not look at the garment, but rather at the body under that garment. The wise ones, servants of the King on high, those who stood at Mount Sinai, look only to the soul, the root of all, the real Torah. In the time to come, they are destined to look at the soul of the soul of Torah.

Come and see: so it is above. There is garment, body, soul, and soul of soul. The heavens and their host are the garment; the Communion of Israel is the body, who receives the soul, the Beauty of Israel [*i.e., Tiferet*], So she is the body to the soul. The soul we have mentioned is the Beauty of Israel, the real Torah. The soul of the soul is the Holy Ancient One. All are connected to one another.

Woe to the wicked who say that Torah is merely a story. They look at this garment and no further. Happy are the righteous who look at Torah properly! Just as wine must be in a container, so must the Torah be within this garment. So look only at what is under the garment. All those words and all those stories are garments.

—Translation based on that of Daniel C. Matt in *The Essential Kabbalah* (San Francisco Harper, 1996), 135-137

The central point of this parable is that Torah must be read in a subtle, symbolic or metaphorical manner; reading it only on the *peshat* level, that of its literal meaning, is not only superficial, but is wrong; the external, literal meaning is no more than a garment for a deeper and more complex level.

This passage draws two comparisons. First, it compares the Torah to angels, who take on the guise of ordinary human beings in order to speak to men—this was the case of the three messengers who came to Abraham, and even partook of the meal he prepared (yogurt/cream and beef and all); or, more interestingly, Manoah and his wife regarding the angel who came

to herald the birth of Samson. (Manoah was particularly thick-headed and slow to understand whom the angel was; until he did clearly supernatural things, such as ascending in the fire, he didn't realize there was anything out of the ordinary. James Kugel has discussed this issue in his *God of the Fathers*: that there are many scenes in the Bible where mysterious characters slide between being an ordinary human being, an angel, and God himself.)

All this is necessary, because human beings don't ordinarily perceive spiritual things. Hence, the angel (or even the Divine Presence?) must dress himself in something that can be comprehended. Ultimately, all Torah may be understood that way. Even the most subtle, esoteric teachings must be embodied in human language—its level, to be sure, is higher and more complex than laymen's language, but ultimately it is still not "the essence," the Thing itself—because no man can understand God as He is. Theologians and philosophers are just a bit more sophisticated in their non-comprehension.

Unfortunately, our culture is one that is particularly plagued by superficiality—by physical appearance, by popularity or "rating" (a current example: the sad story of Dudu Topaz), or even judging people by titles or university degrees. (One of the wisest, most learned and insightful people I know, a teacher of others, recently told me that he does not even have a high school diploma. Many people would, at first blush, doubt that such a thing could be possible.) People have a far shorter attention span than in earlier times; indeed, many people have criticized my writings here because they are "too long." Yet Torah study, almost by definition, involves complexity, the slow, gradual and thorough development of ideas; it cannot be broken into 30-second or 3-minute "sound bites" or slogans.

Another interesting point in this passage: that Torah is seen as higher than the angels; it is an apotheosis of God Himself: that which created the world or through which the world was created. The Zoharic concept would seem to be that Torah is part of the Divinity, or perhaps the Name of God. (This is an important point of disagreement with certain streams in Judaism)

The second comparison drawn here is the analogy to a garment: to the garment clothing the human body, where the body is the essence (lovers wish to touch the beloved's uncovered body—and not only for sexual reasons, but because the nude body as such is the essential physical being of the person; cf. the centrality of the nude in the plastic arts); but the body is in turn the home of the soul—and beyond that there is the "soul of the soul."...