

How to Relate to the Obligation of Revelation

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PART A: The Philosophical Problem

1. The Philosophical Problem in the Talmud

Shabbat 88a	שבת פח.
The Torah says, "And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the lowermost part of the mount" (Exodus 19:17). Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: the Jewish people actually stood beneath the mountain, and the verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above the Jews like a tub, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial. Rav Aha bar Ya'akov said: From here there is a substantial caveat to the obligation to fulfill the Torah. The Jewish people can claim that they were coerced into accepting the Torah, and it is therefore not binding. Rava said: Even so, they again accepted it willingly in the time of Ahasuerus, as it is written: "The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them" (Esther 9:27), and he taught: The Jews ordained what they had already taken upon themselves through coercion at Sinai.	"וַיִּתְּצֵבּוּ בְּתַחֲתֵית הָהָר", אָמַר רַב אַבְדִּימִי בַר חָמָא בַר חָסָא: מְלִמֵּד שְׂכַפָּה הִקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עָלֵיהֶם אֶת הָהָר כְּגִיגִית, וְאָמַר לָהֶם: אִם אַתֶּם מְקַבְּלִים הַתּוֹרָה מוֹטָב, וְאִם לֹא — שָׁם תִּהְיֶה קְבוּרַתְכֶם. אָמַר רַב אֲחָא בַר יַעֲקֹב: מִכָּאן מוֹדְעָא רַבָּה לְאוֹרֵייתָא. אָמַר רַבָּא: אִף עַל פִּי כֵן הִדּוּר קִבְּלוּהָ בְיָמֵי אַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ, דְּכָתִיב: "קִיְּמוּ וְקִבְּלוּ הַיְּהוּדִים" — קִיְּמוּ מַה שְּׁקִיבְלוּ כְּבָר.

2. The Ethical Dimension of this Problem

Tosefta Bava Kamma 7:3	תוספתא בבא קמא ז:ג
Who is the greater thief – the one who steals, or the one who is stolen from? One must say, it is the one who is stolen from, who knows that they are being stolen from and is silent. For we find this situation when the People of Israel are standing before Mt. Sinai. They tried to steal the consciousness of the Divine, as it says:	מי גדול גונב או נגנב הוא אומר נגנב שיודע שנגנב ושותק וכן מצינו כשהיו ישראל עומדין לפני הר סיני בקשו לגנוב דעת העליונה שנאמר (שמות כ"ד:ז')

"Everything that God says, we will do and we will listen." (Exodus 24:7)	כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה ונשמע
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3. Definition of Historicism

historicism **noun** his-tor-i-cism | \ hi-'stôr-ə-,si-zəm , -'stär- \

Definition of *historicism*

: a theory, doctrine, or style that emphasizes the importance of history: such as

a: a theory in which history is seen as a standard of value or as a determinant of events

b: a style (as in architecture) characterized by the use of traditional forms and elements

i) Martin Buber

4. *I and Thou*

"What is essential is lived in the present, objects in the past." - p. 64

"Duties and obligations one has only toward the stranger: toward one's intimates one is kind and loving. When a man steps before the countenance, the world becomes whole present to him for the first time in the fullness of the presence, illuminated by eternity, and he can say You in one word to the being of all beings." - p. 157

- *What is Buber saying about what we should expect from those close to us? Do you see this playing out in your own relationships with those close to you?*
- *How would you apply this statement to God? Do you agree with his analysis?*
- *How are you best present in your relationships with others? Is it different or similar to how you try to be present with God?*

ii) Franz Rosenzweig

5. *"The Builders," On Jewish Education p. 85*

"Whatever can and must be done is not yet deed, whatever can and must be commanded is not yet commandment. **Law [Gesetz] must again become commandment [Gebot]** which seeks to be transformed into deed at the very moment it is heard."

6. *The Star of Redemption, p. 191*

“The love of the lover has no other word to express itself than the commandment. Everything else is already no longer immediate expression, but explanation - explanation of love...But the commandment in the imperative, the immediate commandment, springing from the moment and already on the way to being said aloud at the moment of its springing up - **for saying aloud and springing up are one and the same thing in the imperative to love - the “Love me” of the lover, this is the absolutely perfect expression, the perfectly pure language of love.**”

- *Do you feel like the term ‘commandment’ feels different than the term ‘law’? If so, why?*
- *Do you think in loving relationships there can be commandments?*
- *What is the purpose of a commandment? What do you think Rosenzweig suggests when he says a commandment “seeks to be transformed into deed”?*
- *What actions in your life help you do good deeds?*

iii) Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

7. God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism

“...[R]evelation signifies not some particular historical disclosure authenticated by miracles, but the **progressive self-revelation** which God makes of His existence and of His character in the divinest experiences of the human soul.” - p. 209

“Sacred history may be described as an attempt to overcome the dividing line of past and present, as an attempt ***to see the past in the present tense.***” - pp. 211-212

8. Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations

“It is clear that the intention was to determine that the understanding of Torah was entrusted to the Sages; that is, the Torah was not given exclusively from the mind of God; **it is refracted also through the interpretation of the Sages.**” - p. 660.

“We must distinguish between factual truths and eternal verities. Every fact depends on time, and when its time has passed, the fact disappears. Yet there are moments that are like eternity, and what happens in them transcends time. The passage of time brings forgetfulness; the present moment makes us forget the moment past. Two moments in time cannot coexist. They crowd each other out. But the opposite is the case with eternity, for there is not forgetting at the throne of glory, and for God, **past and future come simultaneously.** So the giving of Torah is past as a factual truth, but endures as an eternal verity. God’s voice, as it emanated from Mount Horeb, was never muted.” - p. 670.

- *Do you see yourself as part of the dynamic halakhic practice? If so, how so? If not, why not?*

- How does seeing Torah as law that we help create and practice affect your relationship to God?

iv) Mara Benjamin

9. *The Obligated Self*, pg. 7

“In the early days and months of first having a baby, the raw, immediate assault on my freedom - a freedom I had not even known I had previously enjoyed - struck me with overwhelming force. No sooner had this baby, this stranger, appeared than she held a claim on me. I was now responsible for addressing her needs and wishes, for seeking out the meaning of her unfamiliar body and its often cryptic language.

The obligation, the *ought*, was so powerful in those early days that it, more than delight, often took center stage in my psyche. Indeed, I longed for the simple fact of love I felt for her to lighten the load. It did not. At times, wonder and gratitude did temper the overwhelming sense of burden. But more often, the obligation to take care of the young creature preoccupied me to the exclusion of other emotions. I felt the terror of my power, of my vast and direct responsibility for this baby’s well-being. I was weighted down by the sheer inescapability of her.”

- How does Benjamin’s description of motherhood challenge our conception of obligation posed by the previous 3 thinkers?

PART B: Who cares?

10. Is Theology even Important?

Mishneh Torah, Foundations of the Torah 4:13	משנה תורה, הלכות יסודי התורה ד:יג
And I say that no one is deserving to promenade in the Vineyard unless [s]he be filled with intellectual bread and meat, that is to say: one must know what is forbidden and what is permitted and similar to these of the rest of the commandments.	וְאֵי אֹמֵר שֶׁאֵין רֹאֵי לְטִיֵּל בַּפֶּרֶדֶס אֲלָא מִי שֶׁנִּתְמַלֵּא בְּרִסּוֹ לֶחֶם וּבֶשֶׂר. וְלֶחֶם וּבֶשֶׂר הוּא לִידַע הָאֶסוּר וְהַמֵּתֵר וְכִיּוֹצֵא בָהֶם מִשְׁאֵר הַמִּצְוֹת.

- What is the “meat and potatoes” of Jewish practice in this analogy?

11. But maybe understanding obligation *is* important:

Tosafot on Kiddushin 31a	תוספות קידושין לא.
Greater is the one who is commanded - It seems that the reason why one who is commanded to do a mitzva and performs is preferred due to them worrying and being more concerned about violating than one who is not commanded, as they have “bread in the basket” that if [the one who is not commanded] wants, they can take.	גדול המצווה ועושה - נראה דהיינו טעמא דמי שמצווה ועושה עדיף לפי שדואג ומצטער יותר פן יעבור ממי שאין מצווה שיש לו פת בסלו שאם ירצה יניח:

- *What does this Tosafot say in light of how obligation affects how we do things?*

12. Eliezer Berkovits, *God, Man and History*, pg. 34

And a living God is one who stands in relationship to the world - that is, a God who not only is, but is also for man, as it were, who is concerned about man. We may know of the relationship only if it is real, if the divine concern is actually revealed to man. This is what we have called the encounter, which is the fundamental religious experience.

13. Professor Sam Shonkoff

“Revelation is just an excuse to talk about what’s really important.”

- *Do you ever feel a sense of having a vocation or mission in life?*
- *Have you ever felt overwhelmed with presence in a way that compelled you to action?*
- *How do you think thinking about the ‘why’ of your actions is helpful? Is it ever hindering?*

PART C: Putting it into Practice

14. Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement*, pg. 114-115

Halakha fosters and guides Jewish theological living amid the minutiae of the everyday, moment by moment. **It is the historical flowering of the Sinai covenant - as initially formulated in the words of the Written Torah, but significantly expanded and transformed by the pulse of ongoing life, generation after generation, as the disciples of Moses investigated what was inscribed and needed interpretation, and as they expanded the original norms through faithful living and ancestral practice.** Over time, the breath of the Oral Torah suffused the ancient text and **inspired it with new soul and sanctity**, extending the path of piety outlined in the initial covenant to the emergent patterns and particulars of everyday life. This path of covenant piety is the *halakha*; and insofar as this piety comprises the values of a God-centered life, *halakha* is living Jewish theology in word and deed.

15. Drew Lanham:

<https://onbeing.org/programs/drew-lanham-i-worship-every-bird-that-i-see/>

“Well, to me, there’s so much that’s simple out there, or that appears simple but that’s really complex. It’s sort of like the sparrow that appears brown from far away and hard to identify, but if you just take

the time to get to know that sparrow, then you see all of these hues. You see five, six, seven shades of brown on this bird. And you see little splashes of ochre or yellow or gray and black and white, and all of these things on this bird that at first glance just appeared to be brown. And so in taking that time to delve into not just what that bird is, but who that bird is, and to understand, to get from some egg in a nest to where it is, to grace you with its presence, that it's taken, for this bird, trials and tribulations and escaping all of these hazards. **And so I try to think about people as much as I can in that way — that each of us has had these struggles from the nest to where we have flown now, and the journeys that we're on. And so I think that's important.**"