Off the Shelf: Discussing Torah

By Rabbi Rachel Esserman

One of the joys of Torah dialogue is to have someone suggest an idea about the text that had never occurred to you. Almost everyone has something to add from their personal or professional expertise and their lived experiences. Even someone who has never studied the biblical text before can offer interesting and challenging ways to understand its meaning because they don't have the same preconceptions as those who are more learned. The idea that people of different backgrounds can challenge and inspire each other was behind the "Parsha in Progress" podcast sponsored by Tablet magazine, which features Rabbi Dov Linzer, an Orthodox rabbi, and author Abigail Pogrebin, a Reform Jew. Their dialogues were recorded and are now the source of a new book of Torah commentary, "It Takes Two to Torah: An Orthodox Rabbi and Reform Journalist Discuss and Debate Their Way Through the Five Books of Moses" (Fig Tree Books).

"It Takes Two to Torah" offers commentary on the first five books of the Bible. Pogrebin and Linzer focus on one or two specific concepts in each parasha (the section read each week). The chapters range from three to six easy-to-read pages because the work is a transcript of their discussions. Between each section is a short paragraph or two offering the basic ideas and plot details of the parasha so those unfamiliar with the text will be able to better understand what is discussed. What makes reading their conversations so much fun is that they disagree on everything from the meaning of the characters' actions to the laws given by God and how they should be followed. Their differences are made clear, but so is the way they listen to each other and try to respectfully understand the other's point of view.

The difference in their approach to Judaism is made clear in their discussion of parashat Bechukotai. They take a detour to talk about Tzom Gedalia (the fast of Gedalia), a minor fast day not found in the Torah that commemorates the assassination of Gedaliah, a governor of the Kingdom of Judah. While Pogrebin doesn't fast because she does not find the practice meaningful, Linzer declares that finding meaning in a particular ritual practice is not relevant to his observance. He notes that, "at the end of the day, I'm committed to halacha, and there's no question that I'm going to fast, and that's where I find meaning. I'd like to find the meaning you talk about, and I often do, but if, in the end, the only meaning is because of my observance and commitment to halacha, that's sufficient."

However, in their discussion of Lech Lecha, Linzer notes that there are limits to allowing the biblical text to have the final word for observance: "Even if you believe that God promised the land [of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham], that does not give you license to act in ways that violate morality and halacha. I think that's a core message of traditional Judaism: we're not biblical Jews. We're Rabbinic Jews, or halachic Jews, and that means we do not live in a world of divine promises. We live in a world in which we are responsible for our actions." Pogrebin also has difficulties with the divine promises, but doesn't see herself bound by halacha; rather, she looks for meaning in her observance and is willing to reject or not practice what she finds meaningless or offensive to her sensibilities.

Linzer and Pogrebin often differ when it comes to laws that deal with women. She looks for fairness in the law, which Linzer admits isn't always possible. One example is the sotah ritual, when a woman undergoes a humiliating ritual because her husband is jealous. Linzer believes that the ritual was set up in a way that the woman would never be found guilty of adultery, leaving her to live peacefully with her husband afterward, something that Pogrebin answers with a sarcastic, "I'm glad he feels better." She does admit the alternative – dying from the ritual – would be horrible. Linzer asks Pogrebin how she understands difficult passages like this. She notes she has a very different way of viewing the text: "I'm interested in unpacking [the difficult verses] and discussing them, but I am not wrestling with whether to live by them. It feels like you are pretzeling yourself to accept a text as holy that is offensive to you." That is a fundamental difference between the two: he feels the need to accept the text as God's word and live by the rabbinic version of it, while she doesn't feel the need to accept the parts of Jewish tradition that do not speak to her.

"It Takes Two to Torah" works because readers will be able appreciate the approaches of both writers/speakers, while grappling with their own ideas about the text. The respect the two show each other is impressive, as is the way they really listen to and challenge each other. My only quibble is the book's title: it's reminiscent of the phrase "it take two to tango," which strikes me as frivolous since Linzer and Pogrebin take their discussions seriously. However, that does not negate what the work offers to readers. Those who enjoy learning Torah will want to join the authors on their Torah journey.

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