

## Jewish Interpretation of the Torah

**Ekev Parasha** (Portion) Deuteronomy 7:12-11:25

Moses describes the land of Israel as *erezt zavat chalav udvash* 'a land flowing with milk and honey,' (Deut. 11:9) and stresses the goodness of the Promised Land (the phrase 'a good land' appears ten times in Deuteronomy). The Seven Species of produce from the land of Israel are enumerated (Deut. 8:8). These important agricultural products are among the most ancient cultivated crops, and are a symbol of the land's bounty and fertility. The famous phrase: 'man does not live by bread alone' also appears in this week's portion (Deut. 8:3).

The familiar phrase '*erezt zavat chalav udvash*' serves as a fabulous example of how even a simple phrase can be probed for layers of meaning. The phrase appears almost twenty times in the Bible, and serves as the description, par excellence, of the land of Israel. Only once, is it used insultingly by the Israelites, who complain to Moses, "You took us *from* a land (ie. Egypt) flowing with milk and honey into this desert!"

This phrase can be understood at many levels. As Rashi (The most important commentator on the Torah) quoting Psalms (62:12) says on his commentary for Exodus 20:7, 'God has spoken once, but I have heard two [things]'. this means that different interpretations can all exist simultaneously. Our sages even say the Torah has 70 'facets'. One popular way to look at four of these facets, is '**PaRDeS**' an acronym that stands for Pshat, Remez, Drash and Sod.

**Pshat**- The simple meaning: A land flowing with milk and honey. The milk is probably goat's milk. Honey is bee honey. For the generation in the desert, this description portrays a land filled with lush fields, with flowers, and goats grazing on the grass growing between the rocks.

**Remez**: In Numbers, we read that the scouts return with pomegranates, figs and grapes as a confirmation that it is a land 'flowing with milk and honey,' yet they brought back no dairy products. We can therefore assume that the expression can be understood also to mean: a land of abundance and fertility. The Rabbis often use 'gematria' (where letters have numerical value) to find alluded meanings. Here, for example, *halav*, (milk) has the value of 40, hinting at the 40 days Moses spent on the mountain to receive Torah.

**Drash**: The Rabbis also note that milk and honey are among two of the substances that the Torah is compared to. In Shir HaShirim (The Song of Solomon), we read, 'milk and honey are under your tongue' (Song of Songs 4:11). The idea that the 'land' is actually a kind of Torah can also be seen by the unusual phrase in our parasha: "A land which the Lord your God looks after..." (Deut. 11:12) using the hebrew verb '*doresh*' which we typically associate with what we are doing; namely making a midrash. We can then understand the 'land of milk and honey' in an entirely new way, that Torah is not talking about a physical land, but to the 'land of Torah.' When we live in a world where Torah is real to us, then we are living in the place God wants.

**Sod**: This is the mystical level. The Zohar (Book of Splendor, Jewish Book of mystically), associates honey with the Oral Torah, and the *Sephirah* (emanation) of *Malkhut* (which is also associated with the Land of Israel)! *Chesed* (compassion) is white like mother's milk. Milk is also associated in some texts with the Oral Torah/Malkhut.

What can we learn from all this? Torah is like the land of Israel and like milk and honey. Accordingly, this means that Torah is sweet and nourishing. But more than that, Torah is understood at multiple levels, and like the land which was unique for each tribe, each person understands Torah in their own unique way.

**PaRDeS**, an acronym formed from the first letters of the four levels means 'orchard' in Hebrew. (The English word Paradise is derived from the same Persian root).

פִּשְׁט

**Pshat**: often inaccurately translated as literal, Pshat comes from the root which means simple, although Pshat is sometimes anything but simple! Pshat correctly means the intended meaning (the opposite of Drash! see below). The problem is, one person's pshat is another person's drash!

רָמַז

דְּרַשׁ

סוּד

**Remez**: alluded meaning (reading between the lines). Remez in modern Hebrew means hint. Traditionally, remez referred to methods such as gematria (word-number values)

**Drash**: drawn out meaning. Homiletical or interpretative meaning. The word 'midrash' is from the same root. The drash is an interpretation that is not explicit in the text, in other words, not pshat.

**Sod**: (lit. secret). The mystical or esoteric meaning.

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