Angel for Shabbat--Parashat Devarim

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by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The great Israeli writer, S. Y. Agnon, has a story in which a sofer (scribe) writes a beautiful Torah scroll. Wishing to glorify God, he veered from the halakha that requires a Torah to be written entirely in black ink. Instead, every time God's name is mentioned in the Torah the sofer wrote it in golden ink.

When he completed his work, he brought the Torah to the sages. Without hesitation, they declared the Torah to be invalid and ruled that it had to be stored away never to be used.

Of course, the sages were correct according to the halakhic rules pertaining to Torah scrolls. But what about the sofer's feelings? Assuming that his pure intention was to glorify God, mightn't the sages have bent the rules a bit to allow use of the beautiful Torah scroll with golden names of God?

Again, the answer is no. If the sages accepted the validity of this Torah scroll, this might lead other scribes to make their own innovations and "improvements" by adding different colored inks to highlight people or events. All Torah scrolls—including all mentions of God's name—must be only in black ink.

But this begs the question: why, in fact, does the Torah have to be written only in black ink? Yes, we have an ancient tradition that this is the rule, but what might be the underlying reason for this? Why should God's name be written with precisely the same ink that is used to write every other name, event and law?

Perhaps this ancient tradition is teaching something important about how we relate to God.

Philosophers and theologians remind us that God is Eternal, infinitely beyond our comprehension. Rabbis remind us that God must not be—and cannot be—represented by any physical entity i.e. idols, pictures. If God is so vastly remote and beyond visualization, how are we to connect with God?

The law requiring black ink for the Torah—including God's name—suggests an answer. God is to be perceived as part of the ongoing texture of life, not as a Being remote and beyond us. God's presence is woven into the everyday fabric of our lives. God is to be sought primarily within our own experience. God's name is written in black ink, not gold ink; God is part and parcel of the reality in which we live.

In this week's Torah portion, Moses begins his concluding remarks to the Israelites before he is to die. We are told that Moses provided explanations of the Torah (Devarim 1:5); and yet, he proceeds to give a historical review of the Israelites' experiences. Moses's explanations do not focus on theological principles or legal rulings; rather, he points out how God's providence was manifested in historical events, in the everyday life of the people.

Psalms (16:8) teaches: "I have set (shiviti) God before me always." Kabbalists created a design known as "Shiviti", often hung in synagogues and homes. The message is: God isn't just Eternal and Infinite, Unseen and Unseeable: God is also ever-present.

It seems, then, that God's name in black ink is more powerful and more profound than God's name in gold ink.