The ancient rabbis spoke of Torah as “black fire on white fire.” The black fire refers to the printed letters, the white fire to the spaces between and around them. Both fires are to be read and interpreted. We read the black fire by asking “What does Torah say?” We read the white fire by asking “What does Torah mean?”

Like actual fire, the letters and the spaces between them are alive, dancing, active, and impossible to pin down. There is no final reading of Torah, only the next one.

Torah scrolls contain no vowels, and the act of reading is a therefore creative and even interpretive. For example: Leviticus 19:18: Veha’aratet rayehecha k’mocha/Love your neighbor as yourself, can also be vocalized as Veha’aratet et rahecha k’mocha/Love your evil as yourself. Both are legitimate readings, giving rise to very different torahs (literally, instructions).

HOW MANY MEANINGS ARE THERE?

According to Jewish tradition each person present at Sinai received his or her own understanding of Torah—the text is the same, but the meanings differ for each person. Limiting ourselves to adults we are told that 600,000 men were present; double that to include women. So 1,200,000 meanings were given. Add to that the “fact” that each Torah has 72 faces and each face has four dimensions (PaRDeS), and we have 345,600,000 legitimate interpretations of any given letter, word, or verse. And this still doesn’t count the kids!

With so many legitimate meanings, it is inevitable that incompatible and paradoxical interpretations will abound. Jewish pedagogy values your capacity to entertain conflicting ideas without choosing between them. The operative guide is “Elu v’elu divrei Elohi Chayyi,” these words and those words, no matter how contradictory, are both the words of the Living God.”
SABBATICAL AND JUBILEE YEARS

PESHAT

Lev. 25:1 ¶ The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying:
Lev. 25:2 Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the LORD.
Lev. 25:3 Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; Lev. 25:4 but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard.
Lev. 25:5 You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land.
Lev. 25:6 You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers who live with you;
Lev. 25:7 for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food.

REMEZ (What is the problem with this text?)

DRASH (How might you “solve” this problem?)

SOD (What mystery, if any, is revealed to you?)

Lev. 25:8 ¶ You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years.
Lev. 25:9 Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land.
Lev. 25:10 And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.
Lev. 25:11 That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines.
Lev. 25:12 For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.
Lev. 25:13 ¶ In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property.
Lev. 25:14 When you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not cheat one another.
Lev. 25:15 When you buy from your neighbor, you shall pay only for the number of years since the jubilee; the seller shall charge you only for the remaining crop years.
Lev. 25:16 ¶ And you shall observe my statutes and faithfully keep my ordinances, so that you may live on the land securely.
Lev. 25:17 The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live on it securely.
Lev. 25:18 You shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the LORD your God.
Lev. 25:19 ¶ You shall observe my statutes and faithfully keep my ordinances, so that you may live on the land securely.
Lev. 25:20 The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live on it securely.
Lev. 25:21 Should you ask, What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?
Lev. 25:22 I will order my blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it will yield a crop for three years.
Lev. 25:23 When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating from the old crop; until the ninth year, when its produce comes in, you shall eat the old.
Lev. 25:24 The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.
Lev. 25:25 Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.

REMEZ (What is the problem with this text?)

DRASH (How might you “solve” this problem?)

SOD (What mystery, if any, is revealed to you?)