

Reflections on the Use of Non-Orthodox Wisdom in the Orthodox Study of Tanakh

[View PDF](#)



Nathaniel Helfgot is Chair of the Departments of Bible and Jewish Thought, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School and on the faculty of the SAR High School in Riverdale, NY. He is the rabbi of Congregation Netivot Shalom in Teaneck, NJ. He serves as the associate editor of The Meorot Journal. He recently published a volume of studies on Bible entitled *Mikra and Meaning: Studies in Bible and Its Interpretation* (Maggid Publishers, 2012). This article appears in issue 15 of *Conversations*, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Introduction

In the mid-1980s when I was completing my undergraduate studies at Yeshiva University, Thursday became a weekly highlight for many students in the Bet Midrash. On that day of the week at the end of his regular Talmud discourse, one of the popular Talmud instructors would give a *hashkafah* or *mussar* talk on some contemporary topic. A good number of students from other *shiurim* (Talmud classes) would often attend to hear these talks. On one occasion, I recall that the rabbi spent a good portion of his time strongly critiquing the works of Professor Nehama Leibowitz *zt"l*. While recognizing that Nehama was a learned woman and sincere, he was extremely disturbed by the fact that she would quote quasi- and fully non-Orthodox thinkers and scholars such as Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Yehezkel Kaufmann, Umberto Cassuto, Shemuel D. Luzzatto, Benno Jacob, and others. He urged his students to refrain from using her material and to stick to books that were written *al taharat ha-kodesh* (in holy purity).

This presentation shook me greatly at the time, for it flew in the face of my deep engagement and love for the works of Nehama. As a high school student, I had become involved with serious Tanakh study primarily through hearing *shiurim* from Rabbi David Silber and being introduced to the work of Nehama Leibowitz by my high school principal and my synagogue rabbi. Reading Nehama's books and various essays in the late 1970s and early 1980s had expanded my knowledge and appreciation of *parshanut ha-Mikra* (biblical exegesis). It was also my first introduction to concepts such as close reading of texts, chiasmic structure, and the important idea of *milah manhah*—the key or guiding word in a section. My experience with the works and ideas of Nehama had been one of expanding my

knowledge and love of Torah and *parshanim* (commentators), adding to my sense of the sacred, insight, and creativity of the *parshanim*, and increasing my *yirat Shamayim* (fear of Heaven). This sense became sharpened when I had the great privilege to hear Nehama in the early 1980s at a few public lectures in Israel. It was solidified even more when Nehama came to visit Yeshivat Har Ezrion in the early 1980s (where I was then studying), and I witnessed the great respect and deference that were shown to her by the *rashei yeshiva* and other teachers during her visit and *shiur*.

As time went on and I researched the topic more fully, I came to understand the more conservative approach and its sources, even as I did not adopt that point of view in my own learning and writing. It is clear that the overwhelming majority of the Hareidi, semi-Hareidi, and right-wing Modern Orthodox world both in the United States and in Israel, subscribe to the more restrictive point of view and strongly educate toward that perspective.^[1] From my perspective, that is unfortunate as it limits the opportunities of the *lomdei ha-Torah* in those communities to fully enhance their engagement with the word of God.

This short article is not a scholarly treatment of both sides of the issue. Rather, it contains some reflections on the topic, some of which are adapted from portions of an essay in my recently published volume *Mikra and Meaning: Studies in Bible and Its Interpretation* (Maggid Publishers, 2012).^[2] Before we turn to the heart of the issue, it is also important to note that our treatment does not only concern the use of non-Orthodox Jewish scholarship in the study of Tanakh. The discussion goes beyond that and must also address the use non-Jewish scholarship in its various forms.

Kabbel et ha-Emet mi-Mi she-Amaro

Today it is becoming more and more clear that one of the sharp dividing lines between the methodology used by the Hareidi, semi-Hareidi, and religious-Zionist Hareidi (popularly referred to in Israel as *Hardal*) worlds on the one hand and the Modern Orthodox world on the other is the willingness to make use of non-Orthodox and non-Jewish scholarship in the study and teaching of Tanakh. The “traditional” position articulated by leading thinkers of that camp argues that our belief in *Torah min ha-Shamayim* (Torah from Heaven, i.e., Revelation) precludes citation of any comments or suggestions, even in neutral matters, from the pens of those not committed to that tenet. They assert that the ideas presented by these scholars are tainted and one is not permitted to use their teachings in any form. Moreover, a number of thinkers suggest that by citing the comments of non-Orthodox scholars or ideas derived from the Anchor Bible or the International Critical Commentary series alongside the comments of the *parshanim*, one is blurring the distinction between *gedolei olam* (our great rabbinic thinkers) and secular scholars, unwittingly setting up an equivalence between them that may lead students to adopt the secular scholars’ positions and attitudes in other, more controversial areas.

Elements of this debate go back to antiquity, with the *locus classicus* being the famous episode of R. Meir’s continued study with R. Elisha ben Avuya after the latter’s abandonment of traditional life and dogma. The Talmud formulates the dilemma as a question of the legitimacy and applicability of “eating the fruit and discarding the peel.” Our discussion is somewhat different; in religious settings, we are not discussing direct contact with non-observant or non-Jewish scholars, but rather exposure to their written works and ideas. This issue has agitated various rabbinic writers throughout the ages and continues to be a fault line until today.

Embedded in the notion of *dibberah Torah be-leshon benei adam* (the Torah speaks in the language of humans) is, of course, the result that insight into the text can be fathomed not only by observant Jews, but by any and all human beings who seriously study the text. The question of at what age and at what

stage of intellectual and religious development a teacher should present insights from those writers is an educational one. In general, the Modern Orthodox world and its leading lights of Tanakh study, such as Prof. Nehama Leibowitz, the authors of the *Da'at Mikra* series, R. Yoel Bin-Nun, R. Shalom Carmy, and many others, have generally adopted the approach articulated most forcefully by Maimonides in the introduction to *Shemonah Perakim* in his defense of his citation of Aristotle and others in his commentaries: “*kabbel et ha-emet mi-mi she-amaro*—Accept the truth from wherever it originates.”

That this concept was not a Maimonidean innovation is evident from the fascinating tradition cited by R. Yosef ibn Aknin in his commentary to the Song of Songs:

We find in the books of R. Hai Gaon...that he made recourse to the words of the Arabic scholars...and made use of the Quran... and such was the custom of R. Saadyah before him in his Arabic commentaries... In this regard, the Nagid describes in his book... after citing many comments of the Christian scholars that R. Matzliah b. Albazek...told him upon his arrival in Bagdad...that one day they were discussing the verse “*shemen rosh al yani roshi*” (Ps. 141:5) in the yeshiva, and a debate ensued as to its meaning. R. Hai directed R. Matzliah to go to the priest of the Christians and ask him what he knew about the meaning of the verse, and it was evil in his eye. And when R. Hai saw that R. Matzliah was distraught over this, he reprimanded him and said that the forefathers and the early pious ones, who are for us exemplars, would inquire of members of other faiths about the meaning of words and interpretations.^[3]

This openness to the use of non-traditional scholarship can be seen in the writings of other great *parshanim* in our tradition. R. Abraham Ibn Ezra is well-known for challenging many Karaite interpretations of the Bible. At the same time there are numerous instances sprinkled throughout his commentaries where he cites Karaite commentaries of specific words or phrases without any opprobrium, and in some instances quite positively. This attitude is also reflected most famously in the writings of Don Isaac Abarbanel, who frequently cites Christian interpreters, quite approvingly, in his commentary on Tanakh.

In the more recent past, the monumental commentaries of R. David Zvi Hoffmann are a modern example of this approach. While vigorously engaging in battle with Bible critics of his day, he did not hesitate to use the full panoply of Jewish-traditional and non-traditional as well as non-Jewish scholarship to arrive at his understanding of *peshuto shel Mikra*—the plain sense of Scripture. Moreover, there is no doubt that great towering figures of the recent past, such as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zt”l* and *yibadel le-hayyim tovim* (may he be separated for good life), my revered teacher Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein were strongly influenced in their readings of biblical texts by the works of Kierkegaard, Shakespeare, Milton and other thinkers.

Nehama herself articulated her philosophy on this topic in a letter written over thirty years ago:^[4]

It is true that I cite the words of people who are not observant of the mitzvot, if their words seem correct to me, and can reveal the light of Torah and display its greatness and holiness to the student. [I work] according to the principle: “Accept the truth from wherever it comes.”

What can I say? Benno Jacob was an extreme Reformer, who served in the Sontag Gemeinde^[5] and certainly transgressed an enormous portion of our holy Torah’s mitzvot (in addition to the fact that he was an anti-Zionist, etc.). Yet, I learned from his books (*Aug um Auge* has excellent proofs that “an eye

for an eye” according to the simple meaning refers to monetary compensation; *Quellenkritik und Exegese, Genesis, Exodus* is a forceful work against the Documentary Hypothesis) more than from many books written by bona-fide God-fearing Jews. His claims against biblical criticism and his proofs of their frivolousness and their errors—no one has ever written things better than them, even Rav David Hoffmann, ז”ל (as difficult as it is to mention the name of this gaon together with B. Jacob) as well as Yissachar Jacobson, א”ח and Dr. Muriel who wrote a work on the Torah. Many of my friends—among them, Rabbi David Carlebach ז”ל who for many years taught with me in the Seminar in Jerusalem—also learned from his works. He opened our eyes to see things which we had not seen before, and [therefore] toward a true understanding of the Torah.

Prof. [Umberto] Cassuto ז”ל, who was God-fearing and scrupulous regarding the mitzvot, said a number of things that are very far from my belief in *Torah mi-Sinai*, and I won’t be part of their dissemination. And therefore I will not pay heed to who said it, but only to what is said.

There is no need to say that [Martin] Buber was not a “good Jew”—according to the normal understanding of this concept. I knew him—and he was not in any way a man after my heart! Absolutely not...But what can I do, as I and many religious teachers learned many correct things from him in Tanakh, especially the whole concept of the key word, *Leitwort*, and the deep meaning that its application in Torah hints to, and although our Midrash also recognized this principle (“*ne’emar kan . . . ve-ne’emar sham*,” and similarly “*midah ke-neged midah*” and more), it is nevertheless the merit of Buber, and even more so Rosenzweig, that they expanded this concept and revealed several places that I have not found in any early sources. I will not withhold this good from students by hiding this from them.

In truth, even non-Jews, at times, (though in my opinion, rarely) offer an interpretation that is good and sharp and proper to present, and even Abravanel in select places brings the words of a Catholic bishop, and accepts his opinion over the opinions of Radak and Ralbag.

Several times, I showed *talmidei hakhamim* details from Benno Jacob’s important book, *Aug um Auge*, and they thanked me and rejoiced as if discovering a great treasure.

Should I then hide the name of the author? This I cannot do. “Who are those whose waters we drink and whose names we don’t mention?” This is my opinion, which I have held to my entire life.

The Educational Dimension

A forceful and vigorous defense of this more open approach with an emphasis on some of the educational issues at stake was penned by the noted Israeli Bible scholar and educator, Dr. Moshe Ahrend ז”ל in 1968.^[6] After presenting the essence of the conservative critique of citing non-traditional scholarship he writes:

As great as the level of the sharpness of this critique, is the potential danger and mistake inherent in them. First, let us not be so hasty to disqualify! It is not simple to decide who is or is not a “heretic”?...Those who today disqualify Mendelssohn, Weisel, and Shadal [from citation] may tomorrow disqualify Ibn Ezra, the *Moreh*, Rashbam, the *Arukh* and many others who wrote things that do not neatly correspond to the literal sense of what Maimonides wrote in *Hilkhos Teshuvah* (3:8) [as to the definition of the heretic]...

We cannot ignore that most people, who are part of the modern world, cannot abide by such extremism...they want to know what has been discovered in every field that helps us understand the Bible: Semitics, archeology, the study of the ancient Near East, the geography of the land of Israel, epigraphy, literary criticism, etc. They see no obligation to close themselves and ignore the discoveries [in these fields]...just as our ancients did not hesitate from using the results of the inquiries of the scholars of their day and age... We must admit that in essence and regarding the very meaning of entire sections of our holy Torah we are not actually able to understand them in any meaningful way without the assistance of the modern scholars...

Of course, caution must be taken in selection of the commentaries. However, without intellectual caution all the words of the commentators are dangerous, and the words of the Bible itself are seven-fold more dangerous. The distinction between the truth itself and the people who discover and present it, is a primary demand from anyone who aspires to understand and reach an independent spiritual life. It is only with the second critique [of Nehama] that we are fully obligated to identify with: It is necessary to clearly distinguish between the words of Torah sages, medieval as well as later ones, who are a lodestar for our behavior as well, and those scholars who we know led lives that were corrupted by sin or were consumed with the religious doubts of the era [in which they lived].[\[7\]](#)

Based on anecdotal evidence as to what actually goes on in the Modern Orthodox religious frameworks in which recourse is made to non-Orthodox sources, this issue does not seem to be one that causes a diminution of *yirat Shamayim* or *ahavat Torah*. On the contrary, the ability to integrate the best and most insightful comments to achieve a richer and more profound understanding of the text is often appreciated by students and helps to solidify the notion that one is seeking truth and honesty in the intellectual pursuit.

At the same time, I appreciate the concern that we should not inadvertently give students of high school or college age the sense that Nahmanides and M. Segal are on equal footing in our eyes as religious role models. The best way to avoid this problem is through two simple moves, both of which, I believe, are generally employed.

First, it is important that the use of these materials be integrated into a holistic context —careful study of the text and extensive use of Hazal and *parshanim*, only then supplemented by other resources. Indeed, a Genesis class in which the only positions quoted are those of M. Buber and F. Rosenzweig or H. Gunkel and Y. Kaufmann would present a skewed focus and lead to some potentially troubling results. But that is not what actually happens on the ground. For opponents of the use of this material, however, even one citation of a non-Orthodox source in a book of 600 pages is deserving of censure and calumny.

Second, it is important to maintain some distinctiveness between the *parshanim*, whom we view as reflecting our ultimate religious commitments and those who do not, especially in teaching younger adults. This can be accomplished either through the classical “*le-havdil*” formulations or by noting biographical and ideological information about the particular scholar under discussion. An example that I have used in my own teaching from time to time is: “The following solution to our problem is suggested by Benno Jacob, a modern Bible scholar who was a Reform rabbi, and many of whose beliefs and practices are, of course, in sharp conflict with our worldview. At the same time, it must be noted that he waged a fierce battle with the Bible critics in his day, was a close and excellent reader of the *Humash*, and often has very important comments that help us understand the Torah more profoundly.

This is one model of both appreciating and making use of “the best that has been thought of and written” (to borrow Matthew Arnold’s famous formulation) in our study of the word of God while maintaining our commitment to our bedrock principles. The seal of God is truth and we follow in His

ways when we pursue truth, which we believe is the essence of the Torah which *is Torat Emet*. As Rav Kook taught us so many decades ago, we live in an epoch that requires *emunah gedolah*—a broad and encompassing faith that can hold and nurture many competing ideas and see the beauty and holiness emerging out of the complexity. An educational approach that is too restrictive and narrow will stifle our students and ourselves with the resulting bitterness and alienation that has the potential to lead many of our students to drop out of engagement with *devar Hashem*.

Notes

[1] For a representative example of this perspective see Y. Copperman, *Al Memkomo shel Peshuto shel Mikra be-Shelemut ha-Torah u-Kedushatah* 1:15–20 (Jerusalem, 2002).

[2] For a more in-depth discussion of much of the halakhic material related to the topic see N. Gutel, “*Ben Kabbalat ha-Emet mi-Mi she-Amarah le-Ven Kabbalatah mi-Malakh Hashem Tzeva’ot*” (Hebrew), in *Havanat ha-Mikra be-Yamenu* ed. Leah Frankel and Howard Dietcher, pp. 129–158.

[3] Joseph Ibn Aknin, *Hitgalut ha-Sodot*, ed. Abraham S. Halkin, (Jerusalem, 1964) p. 495.

[4] The following is an excerpt of a Hebrew letter written by Nehama in response to a letter from Rabbi Yehuda Ansbacher z”l (1908–1988), who served as the rabbi of the Ihud Shivat Zion community center on Ben Yehuda Street in Tel Aviv for many decades. It originally appeared in *Alon Shevut-Bogrim* no. 13 and was translated by R. Avidan Freedman and printed in *Milin Havivin* (Vol 1, 2005), the Torah journal published by YCT Rabbinical School.

[5] A Reform congregation that held prayers on Sunday rather than on Shabbat.

[6] Many decades later, Dr. Ahrend became a close friend and co-author of an important two-volume work on the methodology of Rashi with Nehama herself.

[7] *Ha-Katuv Tzarich Iyyun*,” *Besdei Hemed* 11:1-2 (1968), pp. 30–37.