From Black Fire to White Fire: Conversations about Religious Tanakh Methodology

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> Rabbi Pinehas says in the name of Rabbi Shimon b. Lakish: The Torah that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to Moses was given to him from white fire inscribed by black fire. It was fire, mixed with fire, hewn from fire and given by fire, as is written, “From His right a fiery law to them.” (J.T. Shekalim 6:1, 25b, quoting Deuteronomy 33:2)

This mesmerizing Midrash, so emblematic of Jewish thought, captures the life force of Torah. It is not merely dry ink written on dead parchment. Its words live, and the silent white parchment beneath the black ink represents the non-verbal depth and sanctity underlying God’s revealed word.

How can we mediate between the infinite word of God and our own finite understanding? How do we balance different approaches to biblical study? When teaching Tanakh to undergraduate students at Yeshiva University, I introduce several major issues in methodology early in the semester, and then my students and I continue the dialogue throughout the term and beyond. What follows is a survey of the main issues addressed in that methodology class.

In his introduction to the Song of Songs, Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel, 1809–1879) addresses the religious imperative to begin all learning with *peshat* and only then to move to deeper levels:

> Most interpretations [of Song of Songs] … are in the realm of allusion and *derush* (homiletics); distant from the settlement of *peshat*.… Of course we affirm that divine words have 70 facets and 1,000 dimensions. Nonetheless, the *peshat* interpretation is the beginning of knowledge; it is the key to open the gates, before we can enter the sacred inner chambers of the King.

If we attempt to penetrate the deeper levels of Tanakh without examining its words in their context, we will end up staring at blank parchment. Alternatively, if we focus on the words without seeing them as a means to the higher end of encountering God, we are left with ink but no fire.[2]

When studying Torah, we struggle to balance rigorous analysis and religious experience. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein touches on this balance in a broader analysis of Modern Orthodoxy:

> I believe that the sin lurking at the door of the Centrist Orthodox or Religious Zionist community, the danger which confronts us and of which we need to be fully aware, is precisely the danger of *shikhecha* [forgetfulness]. Unlike other communities, this is a community which is not so susceptible to *avoda zara* [idolatry] in its extension—attitudes the Rambam battled against, such as superstition and gross or primitive conceptions of God—because it is more sophisticated intellectually, religiously, and philosophically. Unfortunately, however, it is very, very susceptible to extended *kefira* [heresy] or *shikhecha*, lacking the immanent sense of God felt so deeply, keenly, and pervasively in other parts of the halakhically committed Jewish world.[3]

Another ever-present struggle relates to the degree of our reliance on the talmudic Sages and post-talmudic rabbinic commentators for guidance. They were truly exceptional religious scholars who viewed the biblical text as the revealed word of God, and therefore they serve as our ultimate teachers.

Simultaneously, we must consider them as our “eyes to the text” rather than as substitutes for the text.[4] We try our utmost to learn Tanakh in the manner that our *mefarshim* (commentators) did. We need our *mefarshim* to teach us how to learn and think, but we also need to distinguish between text and interpretation.

Much has been written to define the term *peshat*, and I prefer the working definition that *peshat* is the primary intent of the author.[5] Our goal is to allow the prophetic words in Tanakh to transform us, rather than imposing our logic and values onto the text. On many verses, however, there is debate about the primary intent. How should we proceed if even our greatest interpreters are uncertain? Addressing this critical issue, Ramban (Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, 1194–1270) stresses that Torah study is not an exact science and is subject to strands of interpretation that require careful evaluation:

> Anyone who studies our Talmud knows that the arguments between its interpreters do not have absolute proofs.... It is not like mathematics.... Rather, we must exert all of our efforts in every debate to push aside one of the views with compelling logical arguments... and consider most likely the view that fits the smooth reading of the text and its parallels along with good logic. This is the best we can do, and the intent of every wise and God-fearing person studying the wisdom of the Talmud. (Introduction to *Milhamot Hashem* commentary on the Talmud)

More emphatically, Rabbi Abraham b. HaRambam (1186–1237) maintains that the blind acceptance of one view over another on the basis of authority as opposed to critical evaluation is against the Torah’s supreme value of truth:

> One who wishes to uphold a known view and to elevate the one who said it, and to accept his view without analysis and evaluation whether this view is true or not—this is a bad trait. It is forbidden according to the Torah and according to logic. It is illogical, for it indicates inadequate comprehension of what needs to be believed; and it is forbidden according to the Torah for it strays from the path of truth.... The Sages do not accept or reject views except on the basis of their truth and proofs, not because the one who says them is who he is. (*Mavo ha-Aggadot*, chapter 2)

Note that Rabbi Abraham b. HaRambam wrote these words in his introduction to aggadah (non-legal texts), *not* halakhah (legal texts). In the realm of halakhah, there is a system of authority and weight of precedent. Halakhah operates primarily under the principle of *issur ve-hetter* (what is forbidden and what is permitted), whereas aggadah operates primarily under the principle of *emet ve-sheker* (truth and falsity).[6] In halakhah, talmudic passages are intended as literal and generally accepted as binding.[7] In aggadah, talmudic passages often are intended as allegorical. Even when they are understood literally, later commentators reserve the right to disagree with them.[8] This distinction is self-evident to Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Heller (1579–1654), author of the *Tosafot Yom Tov* commentary on the Mishnah, who extends the argument to the arena of theoretical halakhah, that is, when there are no practical consequences. After observing that Rambam's reading of a halakhic Mishnah differs from that of the Gemara, Rabbi Heller explains why Rambam feels free to disagree with the Talmud even in halakhic matters (I have added several clarifying points in brackets):

> Since there is no practical legal difference, permission is granted to interpret [the Mishnah in a manner different from the Gemara's interpretation]. I see no difference between interpreting Mishnah and interpreting Scripture. Regarding Scripture, permission is granted to interpret [differently from how the Gemara interprets] as our own eyes see in the commentaries written since the time of the Gemara. However, we must not make any halakhic ruling that contradicts the Gemara. (commentary on Mishnah Nazir 5:5)

Some within the Orthodox world adopt only half of that truth at the expense of the other. One side dogmatically adopts talmudic and midrashic teachings as literal, and insists that this position is required as part of having faith in the teachings of the Sages. Another group dismisses the talmudic traditions as being far removed from biblical text and reality. The first group accuses the second of denigration of the Sages, whereas the second group accuses the first of being fundamentalists who ignore science and scholarship.

The truth is, this rift has been around for a long time. Rambam lamented this very imbalance in the twelfth century in his introduction to *Perek Helek* in Tractate Sanhedrin. He divided Jews into three categories. The first group piously accepts all rabbinic teachings as literal:

> The first group is the largest one…. They understand the teachings of the sages only in their literal sense, in spite of the fact that some of their teachings when taken literally, seem so fantastic and irrational that if one were to repeat them literally, even to the uneducated, let alone sophisticated scholars, their amazement would prompt them to ask how anyone in the world could believe such things true, much less edifying. The members of this group are poor in knowledge. One can only regret their folly. Their very effort to honor and to exalt the sages in accordance with their own meager understanding actually humiliates them. As God lives, this group destroys the glory of the Torah of God and says the opposite of what it intended. For He said in His perfect Torah, “The nation is a wise and understanding people.” (Deuteronomy 4:6)

Such individuals are pious but foolish. They misunderstand the intent of the Sages and draw false conclusions in the name of religion.

Misguided as this first group is, it is preferable to the second group, which also takes the words of the Sages literally but rejects their teachings as a result:

> The second group is also a numerous one. It, too, consists of persons who, having read or heard the words of the sages, understand them according to their simple literal sense and believe that the sages intended nothing else than what may be learned from their literal interpretation. Inevitably, they ultimately declare the sages to be fools, hold them up to contempt, and slander what does not deserve to be slandered…. The members of this group are so pretentiously stupid that they can never attain genuine wisdom…. This is an accursed group, because they attempt to refute men of established greatness whose wisdom has been demonstrated to competent men of science.

The first group is reverent to the Sages, whereas the second group is open to science and scholarship but rejects the Sages and their teachings. Both groups fail because of their fundamental misunderstanding of the Sages.

Rambam then celebrates that rare ideal scholar, who combines those two half-truths into the whole truth:

> There is a third group. Its members are so few in number that it is hardly appropriate to call them a group…. This group consists of men to whom the greatness of our sages is clear…. They know that the sages did not speak nonsense, and it is clear to them that the words of the sages contain both an obvious and a hidden meaning. Thus, whenever the sages spoke of things that seem impossible, they were employing the style of riddle and parable which is the method of truly great thinkers.[9]

In addition to Rambam's insistence on the fact that the Sages did not always mean their words literally, we must add that the greatest *peshat* commentators, from Rabbi Saadiah Gaon to Rashi to Ibn Ezra to Ramban to Abarbanel and so many others, venerated the Sages without being bound by their non-legal comments. These rabbinic thinkers combine reverence for the Sages with a commitment to scholarship and integrity to the text of the Torah.[10]

This discussion leads to another balance, one between *hiddush* (novel interpretations) and time-honored understandings of the text. It can be difficult to reevaluate traditional interpretations even when attractive alternatives present themselves. Rashbam, citing his grandfather Rashi's paradigmatic integrity in learning, teaches that the infinite depth of Tanakh necessarily means that we can never exhaust its meaning:

> Rabbi Shelomo [i.e., Rashi], my mother's father, the enlightener of the eyes of the Exiles, interpreted Tanakh according to its plain sense. And I, Shemuel the son of Meir, his son-in-law of blessed memory, debated with him in his presence. He admitted to me that were he to have more time, he would have had to compose different commentaries in accordance with the new interpretations that are innovated each day. (Rashbam on Genesis 37:2)

Abarbanel writes similarly:

> And even though the hearts [i.e., minds] of the ancients are like the opening of the *ulam* [the great open area in front of the temple]… and we

> are nothing,[11] still we have a portion and inheritance in the house of our Father, and there are many openings [to advance fresh insights] for us and our children forever. Always, all day long, a latter-day [sage] will arise… who seeks the word of the Lord—if he seeks it like silver he will… find food for his soul that his ancestors did not envisage; for it is a spirit in man, and the Lord is in the heavens to give wisdom to fools and knowledge and discretion to the youth. (*Ateret Zekenim*, p. 3)[12]

Simultaneously, it is worthwhile to ask cautiously *why* nobody has thought of a particular novel idea. If there are fifteen proposed answers to a problem, there is room for a sixteenth; but it serves us well to consider and evaluate the earlier fifteen before reaching any conclusions.

Perhaps the most challenging road to navigate pertains to the use of non-Orthodox scholarship.[13] On the one hand, our tradition's commitment to truth should lead us to accept the truth from whoever says it. Rambam lived by this axiom,[14] and many of the greatest rabbinic figures before and after him similarly espoused this principle.[15] On the other hand, it is difficult to distinguish between knowledge and theory. Theory almost always is accompanied by conscious and unconscious biases, some of which may stray from traditional Jewish thought and belief.

This tension is expressed poignantly in an anecdote cited by Rabbi Joseph ibn Aknin. After noting the works of several rabbinic predecessors who utilized Christian and Muslim writings in their commentaries, he quotes a story related by Shemuel Ha-Nagid:

> Rabbi Mazliah b. Albazek the rabbinic judge of Saklia told [Shemuel Ha-Nagid] when he came from Baghdad… that one day in [Rabbi Hai Gaon's] yeshivah they studied the verse, "let my head not refuse such choice oil" (Psalms 141:5), and those present debated its meaning. Rabbi Hai of blessed memory told Rabbi Mazliah to go to the Catholic Patriarch and ask him what he knew about this verse, and this upset [Rabbi Mazliah]. When [Rabbi Hai] saw that Rabbi Mazliah was upset, he rebuked him, "Our saintly predecessors who are our guides solicited information on language and interpretation from many religious communities—and even of shepherds, as is well known!"[16]

In a sense, true learning is unsettling, since it is difficult to maintain a view passionately when at any moment we may learn a new opinion that challenges our conviction. At the same time, precisely this energy is one of the most invigorating aspects of Torah study. When kept in balance, the tensions that confront us in traditional study afford constant opportunities to learn from the past wealth of interpretation. This enables us to forge ahead in our attempts to enter the infinite world of Tanakh, so that we may encounter God in His palace.

[1] This article appeared in Hayyim Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 1–18; reprinted in Angel, *Peshat Isn't So Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2014), pp. 11–27.

[2] See especially R. Shalom Carmy, "A Room with a View, but a Room of Our Own," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), pp. 1–38; R. Shalom Carmy, "To Get the Better of Words: An Apology for *Yir'at Shamayim* in Academic Jewish Studies," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 2 (1990), pp. 7–24; Uriel Simon, "The Religious Significance of the *Peshat*," *Tradition* 23:2 (Winter 1988), pp. 41–63.

[3] *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God*, based on addresses by R. Aharon Lichtenstein, adapted by R. Reuven Ziegler (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2003), p. 195.

[4] See Hayyim Angel, "The Paradox of *Parshanut*: Are Our Eyes on the Text, or on the Commentators, Review Essay of *Pirkei Nehama: Nehama Leibowitz Memorial Volume*," *Tradition* 38:4 (Winter 2004), pp. 112–128; reprinted in Angel, *Peshat Isn't So Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2014), pp. 36–57; *Conversations* 21 (Winter 2015), pp. 127–144.

[5] Surveys of traditional understandings of the term *peshat* can be found in R. Menahem M. Kasher, *Torah Shelemah*, 17 (1956), pp. 286–312; David Weiss-Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 52–88; Moshe Ahrend, "Towards a Definition of the Term '*Peshuto Shel Mikra*'" (Hebrew), in *HaMikra BeRe'i Mefarshav: Sara Kamin Memorial Volume*, ed. Sara Japhet (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1994), pp. 237–261.

[6] For criticism of those who blur these boundaries, see, e.g., R. Jonathan Sacks, *One People? Tradition, Modernity, and Jewish Unity* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993), pp. 92–100; Marc Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), pp. 139–146.

[7] While later rabbinic commentators generally defer to the halakhic rulings of the Talmud, that principle is not universally adopted. See, e.g., Marc B. Shapiro, "Maimonidean Halakhah and Superstition," in *Studies in Maimonides and His Interpreters* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2008), pp. 95–150. Shapiro documents many examples where Rambam deviated from talmudic halakhic rulings (or simply ignored them) when he believed them to be based on superstitions. Given the reservations post-talmudic commentators generally have in disregarding talmudic rulings, Shapiro concludes that Rambam was "unprecedented and courageous" in taking those positions. His conclusion highlights how unusual Rambam's stance was among halakhic decisors. While fascinating and important in its own right, this topic takes us well beyond our point of discussion.

[8] See, e.g., R. Marc D. Angel, "Authority and Dissent: A Discussion of Boundaries," *Tradition* 25:2 (Winter 1990), pp. 18–27; R. Haim David Halevi, *Aseh Lekha Rav*, vol. 5, resp. 49 (pp. 304–307); R. Michael Rosensweig, "*Elu va-Elu Divre Elokim Hayyim*: Halakhic Pluralism and Theories of Controversy," *Tradition* 26:3 (Spring 1992), pp. 4–23; Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 1–20; R. Moshe Shamah, "On Interpreting Midrash," in *Where the Yeshiva Meets the University: Traditional and Academic Approaches to Tanakh Study*, ed. Hayyim Angel, *Conversations* 15 (Winter 2013), pp. 27–39.

[9] Translation from the Maimonides Heritage Center, https://www.mhcny.org/qt/1005.pdf. Accessed March 15, 2016.

[10] See further in R. Marc Angel, “Reflections on Torah Education and Mis-Education,” *Conversations* 24 (Winter 2016), pp. 18–32; R. Amnon Bazak, *Ad HaYom HaZeh: Until This Day: Fundamental Questions in Bible Teaching* (Hebrew), ed. Yoshi Farajun (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2013), pp. 349–431; R. Nahum E. Rabinovitch, “Faith in the Sages: What Is It?” (Hebrew), in *Mesilot Bilvavam* (Ma’alei Adumim: Ma’aliyot, 2014), pp. 103–114.

[11] Abarbanel is playing off of Eruvin 53a.

[12] Translation in Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel’s Stance Toward Tradition: Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001), p. 63.

[13] See Hayyim Angel, “The Use of Non-Orthodox Scholarship in Orthodox Bible Learning,” *Conversations* 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 17–19; R. Nathaniel Helfgot, “Reflections on the Use of Non-Orthodox Wisdom in the Orthodox Study of Tanakh,” in *Where the Yeshiva Meets the University: Traditional and Academic Approaches to Tanakh Study*, ed. Hayyim Angel, *Conversations* 15 (Winter 2013), pp. 53–61.

[14] In his introduction to *Pirkei Avot* (*Shemonah Perakim*), Rambam writes, “Know that the things about which we shall speak in these chapters and in what will come in the commentary are not matters invented on my own.... They are matters gathered from the discourse of the Sages in the Midrash, the Talmud, and other compositions of theirs, as well as from the discourse of both the ancient and modern philosophers and from the compositions of many men. Hear the truth from whoever says it.” Translation in *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, Raymond Weiss and Charles Butterworth (New York: Dover, 1983), p. 60.

[15] See, for example, Ephraim E. Urbach, “The Pursuit of Truth as a Religious Obligation” (Hebrew), in *HaMikra VaAnahnu*, ed. Uriel Simon (Ramat-Gan: Institute for Judaism and Thought in Our Time, 1979), pp. 13–27; Uriel Simon, “The Pursuit of Truth that Is Required for Fear of God and Love of Torah” (Hebrew), ibid., pp. 28–41; Marvin Fox, “Judaism, Secularism, and Textual Interpretation,” in *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice*, ed. Marvin Fox (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), pp. 3–26.

[16] *Hitgalut HaSodot VeHofa'at HaMe'orot*, ed. Abraham S. Halkin (Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1964), pp. 493–495. In Hagigah 15b, God Himself initially refused to quote R. Meir in the heavenly court since R. Meir continued to learn from his teacher Elisha b. Abuyah, though the latter had become a heretic. However, Rabbah rejected God's policy, stressing that R. Meir carefully sifted out the valuable teachings from the "peel." Consequently, God reversed His policy and began quoting "His son" R. Meir in the heavenly court.