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I must admit that I was taken aback when called upon to argue the case of the Bible. It has always seemed patently obvious. The Book of Books has stood the test of time for thousands of years, continuing to inspire multitudes irrespective of race, color or creed.

The inherent universal messages are conveyed with literary artistry and religious sensitivity. Words, the very rubrics of communication, discourse and understanding, contain fugues of meaning and cascades of nuances. Figures of speech dance before readers, igniting intellectual curiosity and evoking creative interpretation. The impressive collection of genres addresses fundamental questions of human existence including prayer, theology, philosophy, ethics, concern for others, and personal development. By confronting challenges, heroes and heroines in the narratives demarcate between good and evil. Whether they succeed or fail their decisions and behavior serve as powerful object lessons.

The Bible, a magnum opus like no other, directs the course of human history and provides the foundation of faith and inspiration for billions. It is both larger than life and a book to live by. It celebrates life and teaches us how to mourn. It fosters wonder and amazement. The Bible welcomes our endless questions and our search for answers. It helps us navigate our individual and collective quests for truth, inviting us to internalize ideas and make them our own. Soren Kierkegaard, in a journal entry encapsulates the significance of this endeavor:

“Truth that matters is truth that edifies for otherwise how near man is to madness in spite all his knowledge. What is truth but to live for an idea?” (Journals of Kierkegaard (1835), pg. 45)

Professor Shalom Carmy has contributed invaluable insights on the religious directives and goals of Bible study. He provides the bottom line: “The aim of Jewish Tanakh study is to encounter the word of God.” (Shalom Carmy, “Always Connect”,Conversations 15 (Winter,2013), p. 1)

Bible is my passion. I have had the privilege of teaching women Tanakh for 40 years. My area is biblical interpretation, a field which spans thousands of years. Intriguingly, biblical interpretation demonstrates the ability of Scripture to address contemporary issues of relevance, while shedding light upon perspectives which transcend time and place. I have taught in a vast array of contexts from Scotland to Vilna, New York to London, Troyes to Amsterdam, Stockholm to Portland, Moscow to Berkley. Today I teach Tanakh in the city of Jerusalem in Israel --the Land of the Bible. Many of my students, women from diverse cultures and walks of life, have trained as teachers in the Joan and Shael Bellows Graduate Program in Bible and Biblical Interpretation at Matan: The Women’s Institute for Torah Study. I have the ongoing pleasure of seeing the far-reaching ramifications of biblical education, and its awe-inspiring impact on communities, families and individuals.

Of late, women’s interest in exploring and mastering the study of Talmud and halakha has gained momentum. While I applaud advancement in every field, it saddens me to hear people relate to Bible study as “démodé”. Alfred North Whitehead once said that all philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. In like fashion, the rich legacy of Jewish literature is a series of footnotes to the Bible.

This article is directed to those who cherish Bible. It is for the curious and the scholarly. The challenge for those who teach Bible is to make the Tanakh accessible to all so that its influence radiates through concentric circles and women and men think, live and labor in its light .The enduring essence of the Bible presents a wealth of potentiality. Yet the task is far from simple. Mastering the art of the Bible is a spiritual, intellectual, and experiential endeavor requiring academic rigor, spiritual momentum, boundless creativity and discipline. The experience is a collaborative effort and a personal responsibility.

Professor. Nechama Leibowitz, perhaps the greatest woman Bible teacher of all times, notes in her article "How to Read a Chapter of Bible":

“When contemplating the title of this essay, I realize that it reflects a degree of foolishness, not merely because it is not my place to teach others how to read a chapter of the Bible since the keys to this book were not given to me. Rather, because it is highly doubtful whether any individual can determine for others how to read the book. Each and every individual much delve into their own reading, a reading that is compatible with his singular spirit and her unique soul. For their essence has never before been and will never again be. Therefore, their reading and understanding of the Bible is unique, totally their own, not mimicking anything that has ever been thought before.” (Lilmod ulilamed Tanakh, 1998, p.1)

The Rabbis portray the challenge of mastering the Torah as difficult even for Moses our teacher:

“R. Abbahu said the entire forty days that Moses spent on high, he learned Torah and forgot it. After forty days he said, ’Master of the Universe, I spent forty days and I know nothing!” What did God do? He gave the Torah to him as a gift.”(Shemot Rabbah 41:6)

Forty years later, in a moving poetic passage in the Book of Deuteronomy (30:11-14) Moses declares the clarity and accessibility of Torah even when it appears beyond our grasp.

“Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day
is not too difficult for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in
heaven, that you should say, "Who among us can ascend into heaven
and get it for us, and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" Neither
is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can
cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us,
that we may observe it?" No, the thing is very close to you, in your
mouth and in your heart, to perform it.”

In effect, Moses is saying that Torah is not an esoteric teaching intended exclusively for prophets, priests, and scholars. The words “lo bashamayim hi” have generated centuries of discussion about truth, authority, and interpretation. (We will return to that discussion later). Simply stated, the verses neutralize the daunting challenge of learning, 0understanding and upholding Torah - Lo bashamayim hi…ki karov eilecha hadavar meod bficha ublvavcha lasoto . It is not in heaven - No, it is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it.

I would like to suggest that as true as that may be, one can argue the opposite -- ‘kein bashamayim hi’ “it is in Heaven”. The study of Torah is a lofty enterprise, which elevates us heavenward.

The following stories illustrate this interpretation of Moses’ poignant and compelling words and implicitly and explicitly reflect passages from the Book of Books.

On January 16, 2003, Ilan Ramon became the first and only Israeli astronaut to enter outer space. He decided to take several treasured items on the Columbia Space .Shuttle. Among them was a miniature Torah scroll. He explained: "Being the first Israeli astronaut -- I feel I am representing all Jews and all Israelis. I am the son of Holocaust survivors (his mother and grandmother both survived Auschwitz). I carry the suffering of the Holocaust generation, and I am proof that despite all the horror they went through, we continue to move forward."

The small Torah scroll, merely four and a half inches high, represented a giant step for mankind. It was given on loan to Ilan Ramon by his professor of astrophysics, Yehoyachin Yosef. This Torah scroll had already embarked upon an amazing journey. Rabbi Shimon Dasberg, the chief rabbi of Groningen and Amsterdam, had brought it to Bergen Belsen and used it to prepare Yehoyachin for his Bar Mitzva. Yehoyachin celebrated his Bar Mitzva clandestinely before dawn on Monday March 31, 1944. After the ceremony, Rabbi Dasberg gave the Torah as a gift to Yehoyachin who protested, asking what he would do with a Torah. The Rabbi feared that he himself would not survive the war and requested of the young boy to share its story with the world.
Rabbi Dasberg died in Bergen Belsen. Yehoyachin Yosef was liberated in February 1945. He was 14 years old and weighed 42 lbs. Months later, he was reunited with his family and sailed to Palestine to become part of the a generation of refugees determined to build the Jewish state.

The Torah too survived the war and was kept in a small wooden ark in Yehoyachin’s office. During one of their many meetings, Ilan Ramon inquired as to the ark’s contents. Upon hearing the story, he fell silent and subsequently asked if he could take it into space, thereby illustrating the Bible’s ability to raise humanity from the abyss of despair to the pinnacle of hope. Yehoyachin consented. His family expressed their profound sense of joy in that the Torah had traveled the road to eternity. Yehoyachin exclaimed, ”I never could have imagined that I would be able to uphold my vow to Rabbi Dasberg to such an extent in this world and in worlds beyond.”

On January 2l, 2003, Ilan Ramon, the first Israeli astronaut, held the scroll aloft during a live teleconference aboard Space Shuttle Columbia,let it float, then took hold of it again and shared its transcendental message:

"This Torah scroll was given by a rabbi to a young, scared, scrawny, thirteen-year-old boy in Bergen Belsen. It represents more than anything else the ability of the Jewish people to survive and go from periods of darkness to periods of hope and faith in the future."

This moving statement was .Ramon's testimonial to kein bashamayim hi. For sixteen days he united the Jewish people and made them proud. He could have done it with the Israeli flag or his air force insignia. However, he chose something of universal value, an item of monumental significance, to communicate the message of unity: "We have to find a way to bring our people closer together, to show more patience and understanding," Ramon said.

The tragic end of the Space Shuttle Columbia took place eleven days later. The shuttle disintegrated on its reentry to the Earth's atmosphere, and Ilan Ramon and the other members of that crew did not return. Neither did the Torah. However, the story does not end there. Physics professor Henry Fenichel heard the news and immediately contacted Rona Ramon. A miniature Torah written by the same scribe had accompanied him throughout his horrific incarceration in Bergen Belsen. Fenichel offered the Torah to Rona Ramon who asked astronaut Steve MacLean to take it with him on Space Shuttle Atlantis, the next shuttle sent by NASA. MacLean's connection to the Bible stemmed from his Christian upbringing. He wholeheartedly agreed. For him, taking the Torah and returning it safely was completing Ramon's mission of hope.
. .
As astounding as the survival of the diary pages is, their content is even more remarkable. One page contained two biblical passages – one from the Book of Genesis, the second from the Book of Deuteronomy. Both are prayers which Ilan copied into his diary to recite in heaven. The first is the Friday evening Kiddush that ushers in the Shabbat:

"Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work He had been doing; so on the seventh day He rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it He rested from all the work of creating that He had done." (Gen.2:1-3)

In the biblical context these verses are God’s summation of creation. The Almighty surveys all His works that were completed in six days and arriving at day seven, “blesses and sanctifies it as the day of rest. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in The Sabbath its meaning for modern man (1995) explains the significance of the sanctification of time:

“Unlike the space-minded man to whom time is unvaried, iterative, homogeneous, to whom all hours are alike, quality-less, empty shells, the Bible senses the diversified character of time. There are no two hours alike. Every hour is unique and the only one given at the moment, exclusive and endlessly precious. Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year… One of the most distinguished words in the Bible is the word kadosh, holy; a word which more than any other is representative of the mystery and majesty of the divine. Now what was the first holy object in the history of the world? Was it a mountain? Was it an altar?

“It is, indeed, a unique occasion at which the distinguished word kadosh is used for the first time: in the Book of Genesis at the end of the story of creation. How extremely significant is the fact that it is applied to time: "And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy." There is no reference in the record of creation to any object in space that would be endowed with the quality of holiness.” (ibid.pp.3-9)

“One must be overawed by the marvel of time to be ready to perceive the presence of eternity in a single moment.” (ibid.p 76) Through reciting the Kiddush, Ilan Ramon blessed Divine creation, sanctified the day and all that is holy. The triumph of his spirit filled outer space. (Challal in Hebrew, the word for outer space, also means void). Ramon understood that Sabbath is the touchstone between man and the Creator. “The six days stand in need of space; the seventh day stands in need of man. “.(ibid. p. 52)

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel concludes his treatise with a soul-stirring passage: “There are few ideas in the world of thought which contain such spiritual power as the idea of the Sabbath. Aeons hence, when of many of our cherished theories only shreds will remain, that cosmic tapestry will continue to shine. Eternity utters a day. “(ibid. p.101)

The visceral shock of the sudden disappearance of Ilan Ramon and the crew of Columbia is palpable eleven years later. As a student of Bible I find solace in biblical text, in the unforgettable story of Elijah and the fiery chariot. It offers us

yet another image of “kein ba-shamayim hi.” That is, although Moshe assured us that it is readily accessible to each of us it contains additional registers that reach exalted heights.

“As they kept on walking and talking, a fiery chariot with fiery horses suddenly appeared and separated one from the other; and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind”. (2 Kings 2:11)

In his last hours on this earth, Elijah strolls with Elisha and passes on his mantle to him. They walk engrossed in discussion. What were they were discussing? The Rabbis (Yerushalmi Berachot 5:1) use the expression “walking and talking” (haloch vedaber) as an exegetical springboard and offer a variety of answers. They were talking Tanakh.
One suggestion in the Yerushalmi is that they were discussing the Creation; another view suggests they were discussing the vision of the throned Chariot of God. (Maaseh merkabah - Ezekiel Chapter 1) Very possibly, they were exploring the most sublime secrets of the universe – mysteries of the creation and the Creator. Before departing, the master disclosed these supernal notions to his protégé.

Yet another position is that the two were pondering prophecies of consolation, post-destruction (nechamot yerushalayim) .of Jerusalem. Elijah was sharing. a far-reaching vision of the end of days and the assurance that ultimately things would be right with the world.

The final midrashic opinion is that they were studying the Shema. The recitation of Shema Yisrael is the last religious act performed before death. The Rabbis cleverly interpreted the phrase “Veshinantem Levanecha VeDibarta Bam….Uvlechticha VaDerech“. (You shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them when…you go on a journey). Indeed the two, teacher and student, were deep in discussion as they traveled on their journey - Elijah’s last mile.

Perhaps there is a deeper meaning. At this critical juncture, Elijah was unpacking the fundamentals of religious dogma contained in the Shema. Elijah the master teacher reviewed with his student the new young leader these essential values.

Into his diary, on the same page as the Kiddush , Ilan Ramon copied the verse from Deuteronomy 6:4 and as the Columbia passed over Israel, he recited the declaration of Jewish faith: "Shema Yisrael – Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one”.

Why did Ilan Ramon recite the Shema at that moment of utmost solemnity? We will never know, however the prayer will reverberate forever.

“It is not in Heaven” (lo ba-shamayim hi), (Deuteronomy 30:12), refers to the cogent and accessible nature of Torah. It takes on additional significance in rabbinic Judaism in the celebrated story of "The Oven of Achnai" (tanur.shel achnai), found in the Talmud Bava Metzi'a 59a-b. The story makes a number of salient points about the nature of the Jewish legal system. For students of biblical interpretation, it is a wondrous demonstration of the outer -limits of the discipline.

The Talmudic dispute concerns Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkanus whose illustrious status as a rabbinic sage won him the title of Rabbi Eliezer HaGadol. He is in the beit midrash arguing over the purity of an oven with his rabbinic colleagues. Ovens and vessels generally transmit impurity. Broken vessels do not. The oven of Akhnai is made of broken pieces cemented together. Is it an oven, or is it a broken vessel? Is it pure or impure? R. Eliezer says it is pure. The rabbis disagree.

On that day R. Eliezer made all the arguments in the world which, however, the rabbis did not accept. He performs miracle after miracle without succeeding to win his case. Finally, logic and miracles having failed, R. Eliezer appeals directly to Heaven. And the Bat Kol -- a voice from Heaven declares: “Why are you disputing with R. Eliezer, for the Halakhah is in accordance with him everywhere”. Rabbi Yehoshua rose to his feet and said, “It is not in Heaven!”

That is the main story. There are several addenda. One explains R. Yehoshua’s retort: “Torah was already given on Mt. Sinai as it says; “Follow the majority ruling.”(Exod.23:2) Therefore, we do not obey voices from Heaven. Another reports that R. Natan met Elijah and asked what happened in Heaven at that time: God, he is told, smiled and said, “My children have defeated Me, my children have defeated Me.”

R. Yehoshua’s ruling was adopted; a public demonstration of the impurity of the food cooked in the oven was made, and R. Eliezer, despite his stature, was excommunicated for rebelling against the elders. The authority that promulgated the law had spoken. The text does not question the authenticity of the Bat Kol. which establishes unequivocally that R. Eliezar is right.

But the Oven of Akhnai case takes the opposite view. The biblical verse, “it is not in Heaven” is transposed rabbinically to mean that interpretation of Torah is by majority rule. R. Eliezer is deemed wrong because he insists on a particular result in violation of the basic procedural principle. This recognition

causes God to smile. His children have understood that the process is more important than the result. Maintaining the integrity of the interpretive system grounded in the Bible and cultivated through methodological debate and persuasion is far more important that whether or not the oven is kosher.

Interestingly, in a fascinating midrashic passage, the rabbis sketch a dynamic portrait of R. Eliezer and his reputation. By divine affirmation the claim of 'lo bashamayim hi' which brought calumny upon him is essentially rescinded:

"Rabbi Yossi the son of Rabbi Hanina said, when Moses ascended to heaven he saw the Holy One Blessed be He studying the portion of the red heifer quoting halakha in the name of R Eliezer…He said Master of the Universe all of the worlds [celestial and terrestrial life] belong to you and You are quoting halakha in the name of a mortal! He said to him " In the future there will arise a zaddik in my world whose name will be Eliezer and he will [solve the riddle] of the red heifer. .. Moses responded , "May it be Thy will that he issue forth from my loins, to which God responded indeed he will issue from your loins as it says "and the name of the one is Eliezer – the unique one is Eliezer."(Tanhuma B Hukkat 25)

On a simple level the midrash is predicated upon the verse relating to Moses' son Eliezer "and the name of the one .was Eliezer. for he said, "My father's God was my helper; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.(Exod. 18:4)."

Digging deeper it is noteworthy that the theme is the study of purity and impurity, the very issue that did Rabbi Eliezer in. God Himself is, as it were, studying the ultimate conundrum of purity and impurity of the red heifer, whose ashes purify the defiled and defile the pure. God employs the Torah of R. Eliezer to decipher the mystery. Moses is aghast until God affords Rabbi Eliezer unsolicited testimonial. Moses wishes that Rabbi Eliezer be his descendent. Playing on the words of the verse relating to Moses' son Eliezer, God tells Moses that his wish has been granted. A beautiful message emanates from this midrash – we are all Moses' spiritual children. Even the greatest of rabbis draw their spiritual grandeur from Moses, our teacher.

However, there is more. In the midrashic theater Rabbi Eliezer is vindicated. A tikkun takes place. The midrash makes a powerful statement "kein bashamayim hi!" The Torah is in Heaven. In the Yeshiva shel ma'ala, Rabbi Eliezer is right. There is absolute truth. It may be reserved only for a select few like Moses and Rabbi Eliezer. But there can be no denying it. The Holy One Himself confirms it.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik writes:

“ … Judaism considered the study of Torah as the most sublime kind of worship, a way of meeting God, of breaking through the barrier separating the Absolute from the contingent and relative. Human intellectual engagement in the exploration of God’s word, thought and law is a great religious experience, an activity bordering on the miraculous, a paradoxical bridge spanning the chasm that separates the world of vanity from infinity”. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik,Worship of the Heart :Essays on Jewish Prayer, (2003), p.5).

In a fascinating article about the oven of Akhnai, “The Coiled Serpent of Argument: Reason, Authority, and Law in a Talmudic Tale” [(2004), Georgetown Law Faculty Publications and Other Works. Paper 151, pp. 1-40)], Law Prof. David Luban analyzes the story from legal, humanistic, and philosophical vantage points and concludes with candor and humility:

“I cannot understand the Oven of Akhnai story at all. It is not written for me. It is written for readers within a tradition that I merely peer at from outside. I never studied Gemara or experienced the intellectual rigors of the cheder…To grasp the story is to realize that it concerns the impossibility of grasping it merely through reading. Akhnai tells us to disregard the bat kol and follow the majority. Those within the tradition understand that the story's real meaning is for members only. It does not disclose itself to modernist readers who privilege their own one-on-one relationship to the printed text over the many-on-many relationship between text and readers that makes up the form of life the text itself celebrates.”

Luban’s incisive comment on rabbinic literature can relate to the Bible as well. The study of Bible is an awe-inspiring enterprise of theological reflection and textual analysis that does not happen in a cultural vacuum. We develop a “one-on-one relationship” to the Bible, as well as a “the many-on-many relationship” We become part of the continuum of biblical interpretation linked through an unbroken chain to Moses. The challenge is overwhelming. The more we learn the more we are aware of what we know not.

We are humbled and encouraged by Moses’ reassurance that ‘lo bashamayim hi’, and urged toward due diligence by his student Joshua: “This book of Torah shall not depart out of your mouth; but you shall meditate therein day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then you shall be prosperous, and then you shall have good success.” (Josh. 1:8). Still and all, there is much cause for pause before undertaking such an overwhelming endeavor because, as we have tried to argue, “kein ba-shamayim hi”;

Prof Shalom Carmy offers us perspective. He eloquently explains, in the context of Torah study, the following lines from T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets.

"For language with which to speak of the daunting challenge of how to articulate authentically, in one's own voice, the dimensions of human existence in the face of a seemingly overwhelming burden of tradition, we again quote Eliot:

"And what there is to conquer
By strength and submission, has already been discovered
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
To emulate—but there is no competition—
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."

"The thinker of whom we speak is embarked on a spiritual quest, the search for a way of seeing and living, that can never be fully expressed, a Truth that cannot be mastered, a Love whose Name we cannot utter, though He possesses ours from Eternity." (Shalom Carmy, "To Get the Better of Words, An Apology for Yir'at Shamayim in Academic Jewish Studies" Torah Umadda Journal 2, (1990), pp 7-24).

Both in Israel and in the world at large there is serious need for outstanding teachers of Bible. Teachers, who not only transmit information, but also inspire by probing the mystique of Bible and teaching its lessons and values.

It is my hope that this article communicates my passion for Tanakh and encourages worthy students to enter the field and become inspirational teachers. The formidable task of teaching Tanakh requires embracing both courage and modesty- oz v'anava.
Courage will spur us to mine Scripture, again and again, to discover the many gems still waiting to be unearthed. It will enable us to develop a sincere, coherent and sophisticated approach to the content and contours of the Bible. Modesty will help guide us in how to share our spiritual odyssey with others.

Lest we despair that “kein bashamayim hi” we need only remember - “Ah but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp or what’s a heaven for?” (Robert Browning, Andrea del Sarto)

1 My sincere thanks to Rabbi David Shapiro for his valuable insights.