# Always Connect

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Shalom Carmy teaches Jewish Studies and philosophy at Yeshiva University and has frequently taught interdisciplinary courses in other departments. He is also Editor of Tradition. He studied under Rabbis Aharon Lichtenstein and Joseph Soloveitchik, who recruited him as one of the editors of his posthumous works. His theological contribution is distinguished by preoccupation with the way religious doctrine and practice express themselves in the life of the individual. In Bible he coined and is identified with the "literary-theological" approach. This article appears in issue 15 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

**I**

The aim of Jewish Tanakh study is to encounter the word of God. There are, of course, other motives for studying Tanakh: It provides information about ancient Hebrew and Aramaic of use to linguists, and information about ancient history for specialists in that field; familiarity with the Bible is essential background for the study of Western culture and modern Hebrew literature and thus pertinent to a good liberal arts education; it serves those secularists who are curious about religious belief; not least, the Bible provides a subject of conversation and an opportunity to display one's cleverness. From a religious perspective, however, such motives are ancillary, helping one to get at the meaning, or trivial distractions from the meaning. If you received a passionate message and contented yourself with analyzing the style, commenting on the grammar and typography and social mores, while keeping your distance from the person addressing you, you would be mocking the author. To do the same in the study of Torah is a mockery of religious commitment.

"The days of our lives are seventy years and with strength eighty years," says the Psalmist. Our current life expectancy, though finite, is a bit longer than the biblical life span, yet our days are still frightfully brief and fugitive. How we allocate the few hours we devote to Torah, which includes Talmud, halakhah, Jewish thought *inter alia*, and within that harsh budget, what to do with the portion for Tanakh, must be governed by our goal in that study. One consideration is how best to pursue the primary goal of encountering God. A secondary question is how to benefit from the ancillary disciplines such as Semitics, archaeology, and the like when our time and attention are so severely limited.

Unfortunately, what is viable for the full-time *talmid hakham* (Torah scholar), in this regard, is not what is good for the layperson. Those of us who can devote the bulk of our time to Torah study have an advantage. Not only do we know more, we are also preoccupied with Torah, day and night, to a degree that others have difficulty achieving. At home with a significant range of text, context, and tradition, much of which is kept constantly in use, we can aspire to carry our learning lightly, and thus we may hope, with relative ease, to integrate different kinds of knowledge, traditional and secular, and to harness different kinds of insight from within Torah and from our life experience. There are days when the sun stands still, and despite everything, we seem to have time for everything.

Naturally I am speaking now for the scholar who holds paramount the religious dimension of Torah study. In an age of specialization and secularization, academics engaged in Jewish studies, even those who are nominally practicing Jews, are liable to misplace their sense of priority. Sometimes the result is heresy or indifference to normative belief, and/or a flippant, even cynical attitude toward religious conviction and religious reverence. Otherwise the compartmentalization of religion and scholarship declares itself in a bizarre alienation between one's professed religious orientation and one's actual full-time intellectual life. This troubling phenomenon of disconnect between the human being who aspires to edify himself or herself through the study of Torah in the service of God and the bleached soul of the neutral or cynical practitioner of academic studies, is a warning to us all not to take for granted the proper integration of intellectual activity and life.

The layperson, however sincere, generally cannot acquire the mastery required to control substantial areas of learning and to keep them in permanent repair. (I am not even mentioning the many intelligent men and women whose language skills are deficient.) There are exceptions, non-professionals who are able, through commitment of will and nurturing circumstance, to "hold in" learning, as they say in the *yeshivot*. It is a sign of vigor in our community, when such an individual makes a contribution to the community, even to the point of producing material worthy of publication. It is an even more wonderful mark of wholesomeness when such productivity grows out of *yirat Shamayim*, the genuine fear of Heaven, and not merely as a highly skilled avocation. Our concern here is with those who are not so proficient or fortunate, at least not yet.

Should the Torah education of the layperson, be it via lecture or solitary reading, stress accumulating information, or should it prize creative engagement? Information is necessary for knowledge, but if the goal is religious reading, surely active study is far superior to passive reception. The problem is how to respond actively without sufficient knowledge and, even more important, without the continuous preoccupation that brings with it the ability to distinguish important questions from trivial ones, the ready command that makes it possible to apply what one knows to the question at hand and to avoid being overwhelmed by unfamiliar data.

If our goal as educators is to encourage active, thoughtful religious reading, our teaching must exemplify active, thoughtful religious reading. The primary orientation of our teaching should not be conveying information alone, nor should it be reporting our original contributions, however important. We are not fulfilling our main task unless we communicate information and ideas and modes of reasoning in a manner that enables our audience to think along with us. If we succeed in doing so, our listeners are likely to engage in religious reading with us, and they are likely to develop the habits of thought and feeling, the analytic aptitude and the sensitive reverence that will enable them to encounter the text on their own, if they have the minimal literacy.

What is involved in communicating our engagement in religious reading? As we are preoccupied with the disciplined study of Tanakh in the light of traditional Jewish approaches, from Hazal down to the present, so must the non-professional student. That is one facet of our task. As we utilize information, insight, and sometimes theoretical constructions from other sources, we should make available the same for the non-professional as well. That is another facet of our task. Regarding the former, the major gap to overcome is one of knowledge and training within the traditional literature of Torah.

Regarding the latter, there is another difficulty: Given the pressure of time, how does one make room for such sources without undermining the balance between ancillary informational instruments and the encounter with God to which they are subservient?

## II

The primary texts of Jewish Bible study are available in almost every synagogue and school; many are found in the average home: the standard rabbinic sources; the commentators in the various *Mikra'ot Gedolot* editions; the major figures of modern times. In her volumes of studies on the Torah (and even more so in her *Gilyonot*) the twentieth century's master teacher, Professor Nehama Leibowitz (who preferred to be known simply as Nehama), showed how these texts can be deployed educationally: what it means to read a commentator carefully, to notice what motivates his remarks, how and why he differs from other commentators, and so forth. If you are searching on your own for a viable *derekh ha-limmud*, a way to study Tanakh, one that will link you to the chain of Jewish understanding, then prolonged exposure to her work remains the royal road to religious reading. Assuming the validity of her position, let me append some pedagogical notes, and address one question of intellectual substance.

The approach I advocate here, one that Nehama illustrates, privileges analysis over interpretation or thesis-mongering. By that I mean that the goal of teaching is not to communicate conclusions alone, but to make transparent the way conclusions are reached. This can be justified on academic grounds: What is more honest than making one's considerations transparent, showing the alternatives not chosen, and enabling the listener to assess your choice? Here I am making the educational point. If you want your audience to be engaged in your study and to encourage them to do likewise, the only way to do it is to convene the commentators you have studied and allow your students to participate in your dialogue with them.

This sounds obvious to me. There is, however, a tendency among some teachers to present interpretations in which the give and take with the traditional literature is either absent or very well concealed. Often practitioners of this approach have done their homework but are wary of inflicting it on their audience; they fear that burdening their listeners with a blow-by-blow account of their transactions with their predecessors, trailing clouds of footnotes, is liable to prove a distraction rather than a boon. Sometimes they are so taken by the freshness and the compelling power of their insight that they can do without such dialogue. Long experience makes me sympathetic to the concern about over-documentation and the "weariness of making citations without end"; writers and lecturers should take the trouble to be selective. Long experience also tells me that enthusiastically pushed interpretations produced in a vacuum are usually not as brilliant or as plausible or even as original as their champions presume. However that may be, the danger I perceive on the educational front is that those who hear these interpretations are liable to go and do likewise, with predictably arbitrary or whimsical results that do not honor the best among those who inspire them.

The corpus of Jewish biblical exegesis includes many topics and arguments that do not promise moral-religious edification: for example, lengthy discussions of grammar and vocabulary, geography, as the exegetes grasped it, even some of the sections dealing with halakhah. If the goal of Tanakh study is to bring us into closer relationship with God, such matters would seem to be of less relevance to the non-specialist student. Indeed, it is evident that Nehama chose her topics and her selections from the commentators with an eye to moral and religious edification. On one occasion, when a young teacher told her she had been assigned the opening chapters of Leviticus, dealing with the order of the sacrifices, Nehama expressed strong disagreement. In her opinion, the portion of *Kedoshim* (chapters 19–20) should be highlighted in Leviticus, not the details of the sacrifices, because the former has greater moral value. Of course, Torah is Torah; moreover, in the right context, the passages describing the manner in which God enables human beings to come close to Him through the various offerings is surely not religiously indifferent. Nonetheless, it seems odd and unbalanced to struggle with esoteric halakhic subjects, to discuss, for example, the subtle interaction between *peshat* and *derash* (the

"plain" meaning of a verse and the interpretation handed down or elaborated through the oral tradition) when students do not yet control sufficient information to appreciate the debate, or to invest disproportionate time in clearing philological underbrush at the expense of more directly relevant religious factors.

**III**

The major criticism of Nehama's program is that it substitutes the study of the commentators for the study of Tanakh. Her method achieves insight into Rashi or Ramban's understanding of the biblical text but does not ask what the biblical text means on its own. This criticism has two aspects: one is that an approach devoted entirely to classical Jewish works, from Hazal through the medieval literature through the *parshanut* (interpretation) of the last 200 years omits consideration of new discoveries, be they linguistic or archaeological; the other is that her approach ignores questions that may be important for us today but are not addressed systematically by the classical *mefarshim* (commentators).

Nehama vigorously opposed R. Yoel Bin-Nun's attempt to revise the Bible curriculum in Israeli high schools to make room for non-exegetical data such as geography. On grounds of intellectual integrity he was surely right. Ramban rejoiced when he reached the land of Israel, where he gained a better grasp of her geography and saw with his own eyes the Paleo-Hebrew script he had only read about. If we are indeed Ramban's disciples, it ill behooves us to ignore such realia as become available to us. As we have seen, the educational question is not so clear. How much time, and how much emphasis, should such information merit?

To keep our discussion simple, let's limit ourselves to cases where the pertinence of the new information is undeniable:

1. I Samuel 13:21 mentions *ha-petzirah pim*. Traditional commentators say this refers to an implement with two edges (*pim* as plural of *peh*=mouth). We now know that *pim* is the name of an ancient unit of weight. The verse is saying that the Israelites were charged a *pim* to fix their *petzirah* (sharpening). The new explanation is uncontroversial. Assuming that communicating it does not take an inordinate amount of attention away from religiously significant matters, there is no reason not to adopt it.
2. Ezekiel 14 refers to three righteous men—"Noah, Danel, and Job." Traditional commentators had no choice but to identify Danel with the biblical Daniel, despite the slight difference in spelling. We now believe that Danel, king of Keret, who is known from Ugaritic literature, fits the context better. If this view is accepted none of the three righteous men are Jewish. This affects the theological message of the chapter, which deals with righteous individuals in a corrupt society. While the traditional identification is still of value for our study of the history of exegesis, there is no reason not to adopt the new one, and adjust our reading of the prophecy accordingly.
3. II Kings 18:13–16 reports a confrontation between Hezekiah and Sennacherib that ends with Hezekiah's submission. This is followed by further demands by the Assyrian king's representative culminating in the almost capture of Jerusalem that is aborted by a plague among the Assyrians. Ralbag (on Kings) held that the text records two separate episodes: the second confrontation occurred when Hezekiah rebelled years later. Abarbanel believed there was only one confrontation: Hezekiah's capitulation was deemed insufficient. Which view we adopt affects our assessment of Hezekiah's strategy, his courage and his trust in God. Sennacherib's Annals have been recovered: scholars have debated the One Campaign vs. Two Campaign theories based on these records which depict the king's successes but carefully avoid ascribing victory to him in the siege of Jerusalem. Here the Annals can make a real difference in determining which medieval *parshan* came closer to the historical truth. Again the only question is how much

attention and emphasis this discussion deserves given the limits on time and the primacy of the religious motive for study.

4. Rambam (*Guide* III:48) proposed that the prohibition of "cooking the kid in its mother's milk" is to be understood against the background of idolatrous practices of the time. When the Ugaritic archives were unearthed early in the past century, a line of poetry was deciphered to imply that cooking meat and dairy together was indeed part of Northwest Semitic rite, thus confirming Maimonides. For the past four decades this reading has been dismissed, so we are back where we started, though the word has not yet reached some popular Orthodox and non-Orthodox authors and lecturers, who continue to parade this example.

These examples demonstrate the potential relevance of "outside" information; the last demonstrates what happens when pathways once welcomed become dead ends. How are laypeople (or scholars who are not always up to the minute on every question) to keep abreast of these developments? How many journals can even scholars plow through? For some purposes the twentieth-century *Da'at Mikra* commentary on Tanakh (Mossad HaRav Kook) is a reliable source of information. But these works are not infallible and they age. I have no solution to this problem, which has its parallel in all other liberal arts. The point is that contending with it cannot take priority over our fundamental commitment to religious reading. If we take Ramban's multifarious interests as a model, we must be sure to look to his sense of religious priorities as well.

**IV**

The second criticism of the exegesis-centered approach was made by R. Mordekhai Breuer. Take the Documentary Hypothesis, which maintains, among other things, that apparent redundancy in the Torah is evidence of multiple authors. Thus the creation story of Genesis 1, in which God is called *Elokim*, was written by a different author than the creation story of Genesis 2, where He is called by the Tetragrammaton. In *Lonely Man of Faith* R. Joseph Soloveitchik listed many thematic differences between the two chapters, regarding humanity's place in nature, the relations between the sexes, and God's mission for humanity. R. Soloveitchik concluded that the juxtaposition of the two stories does not reflect multiple authors, but rather a complex view of the human condition. On his own, R. Breuer had arrived at a similar methodology—that God speaks in multiple voices, so that grasping the Torah's message requires us to examine each section alone, but also in the context of other sections. Along these lines he studied the Torah systematically against the backdrop of one version of the Documentary Hypothesis. He believed that the questions raised by the critics helped to incubate his awareness of this complexity in the Torah's narrative and legal portions. Thus thinking about these questions is valuable for Orthodox Bible study in our time.

According to Breuer, Nehama rejected his program. When R. Soloveitchik did it, it was legitimate in her eyes. But the Rav's rabbinic license did not extend to others. Again, from a purely intellectual perspective R. Breuer is right. If some of the questions raised by the critics are valid, and if, as I hold, R. Breuer's approach is on the right track (regardless of criticisms I have made elsewhere), then we understand Tanakh better by considering them; Breuer would also insist that by doing so we gain much for our analysis of the classical commentators and again I agree with him.

By the same token: If Rambam was right in thinking that knowledge of the cultural background of Tanakh could add something of worth, then, in principle, we are justified in examining that cultural background in whatever depth and breadth we are capable of. At the same time, the explosion of knowledge in the field of ancient history makes it impossible for all but the few to engage it actively. It is one thing, for example, to read Sennacherib's Annals in translation; it is a another to consider whether there was something distinctive about the cult of Assur that affected the confrontation between Assyrian religion and Israelite faith in God. It is one thing to contrast Hammurabi's Code with *Mishpatim*, as was commonly done a hundred years ago during the "Bible-Babel" affair. It is another to

weigh several Near Eastern law codes and to consider which is more pertinent to the background of biblical law and why.

Once again: if our goal in studying Tanakh is to encounter the word of God, then it is not only *what* we learn that is important but *how*. R. Breuer carries on his massive project of appropriating what he finds valuable in the questions of the Bible critics. It is instructive that he does so while hardly ever mentioning their solutions. The questions are important; debating against heretical positions is a distraction from that task. It profits us less than nothing if we gain a whole world of scholarly tools and lose our souls. This is true of the scholar of whom the Mishnah states that "he whose knowledge precedes his fear of Heaven, his knowledge is not sustained." Even more is it true of the person whose time is husbanded and who must therefore be more anxious to employ it in a balanced and well-integrated way. We who teach must both communicate the truth and exemplify it.

**V**

What kind of background information is to be presupposed in our study of Tanakh is not set in stone. Nehama herself did not shy away from calling upon European literature or literary criticism to further her analysis, occasionally she used non-Jewish or non-traditional Bible translations to illustrate various options, and she took from Martin Buber or Benno Jacob what she needed and could not learn elsewhere. The goal of her study, however, could not be mistaken, and neither can ours. I have already warned of the danger posed by the putatively sophisticated disconnection between academic activity and the encompassing intellectual-religious response demanded by Judaism. This is due not only to increased flirtation with orthopraxy, in the narrow sense of the word, with its rejection of normative belief and indifference to the cognitive dimension in the Jew's personal relationship with God, but also, perhaps even more so, it is associated with a studied irreverence toward God and Torah that borders, if it does not pass over into vulgarization, and undermines that personal relationship. It is also the error of those within Orthodoxy who define intellectual deviance only in terms of propositional heresy, regarding *Torah mi-Sinai* or the integrity of *Torah she-be'al Peh*, without taking into account debunking attitudes that stop short of propositional heresy.

Many are lured by these siren songs, not only through the desire to assimilate the indifference and mild contempt for the intellectual content of religious belief that is prevalent in influential circles and is attached to the prestige enjoyed in some circles by academics, but also due to the absence of a visible alternative. We have outlined a *derekh ha-limmud* along the lines practiced by Nehama, supplemented perhaps by *talmidei hakhamim* such as R. Mordekhai Breuer or R. Yoel Bin-Nun, who bring the tradition into interaction with new questions, or guided by masters such as R. Joseph Soloveitchik, who took what he wanted from modern scholarship only to concentrate relentlessly on the human condition, as Judaism illuminates it, and the personal experience of God and Torah. All too often, these models are ignored by rabbis and teachers.

One factor is no doubt the fact that many of our communal functionaries have not been exposed to serious study of Jewish exegesis at all, or sufficiently to internalize a genuine *derekh ha-limmud*. Perhaps for that reason, they may deem their own homiletic concoctions and sermonic strains, where the text of Tanakh and the work of the classical commentators serve as pretext without context, more worthy of the ear of their classes and congregations than a careful, patient and submissive thinking along with Ramban or Netziv. Perhaps they regard studying the classical texts less important than whatever "message" or exhortation they wish to communicate to their attentive flock.

Much can be attributed to the moist gabbiness and intellectual shallowness characteristic of the talking professions. Once rabbis and teachers were expected to teach; now they are called upon to preach. As Ann Douglas has shown, Christian preaching in the United States once had hard intellectual content, and only in the nineteenth century did the Protestant sermon lose its cognitive substance. Perhaps this is another aspect of liberal American culture that has infiltrated our Jewish life. Or perhaps we have been brought to believe that only Talmud is intellectually for real, while the study of Tanakh is a game

of tennis without a net, and the main goal is to have a good time.

Perhaps what I perceive as intellectual indolence and self-indulgence on the part of our professionals is no more than their adapting to what the congregations and the parents prefer. As someone told me after I delivered an earlier version of this talk at several Orthodox synagogues: Orthodox audiences enjoy hearing about the Holocaust, about acrimonious incidents in Jewish history, or about controversial halakhic rulings; they are not interested in talking about God and their relationship to Him. Yet amid the silence and conviviality, there are listeners who learn that the discussion of Tanakh in our community is an occasion for whimsy or an excuse for political or communal exhortation, and that if one is to study Tanakh seriously, the outlook of academic sterility is the only game in town.

Whether the approach adumbrated here is likely to prove popular should be a matter of indifference. If, as I hope, there is an appreciative audience for an approach to Tanakh that is intellectually serious and fosters active engagement in the encounter with God and with His revelation, then it is a privilege to minister to that thirst. If, as we are sometimes assured, it is an uphill battle, then it is an even more urgent obligation to subvert that indifference and convert it to connection.

*Further Reading:*

S. 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.

S. Carmy, “A Room with a View, But a Room of Our Own,” *Tradition* 28:3 (1994), pp. 39–69. Also in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996), pp. 1–38.

S. Carmy, “Homer and the Bible,” *Tradition* 41:4 (2008), pp. 1–7.

S. Carmy, “A *Peshat* in the Dark: Reflections on the Age of Cary Grant,” *Tradition* 43:1 (2010), pp. 1–6.

S. Carmy “Cold Fury, Hidden Face, the Jealousy of Israel: Two Kinds of Religious Estrangement in the Torah,” *Tradition* 43:4 (2010), pp. 21–36.

S. Carmy, “Concepts of Scripture in Mordechai Breuer,” in *Jewish Concepts of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Benjamin D. Sommer (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012), pp. 267–279.