Teachers Talk about Introducing Academic Bible Study Methods in Their Classrooms

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During my first teaching experience (it was the Frisch School in 1983) I was asked by one of the parents at a Parent-Teachers meeting why Biblical Criticism was not included in my curriculum. The parent argued that his son would surely encounter the questions raised when he was in college, and it would be important to discuss the ideas in a traditional Jewish framework.

I do not recall what I answered at the time, but Biblical Criticism was not part of my teaching repertoire.

In an article that appeared in the Journal of Jewish Education, Dr. Susan Tanchel argues that teaching the Documentary Hypothesis is an essential part of her school's curriculum.
Do you have it in yours?

I raised this question on the virtual pages of Lookjed, an online discussion aimed at Jewish day school educators. In 1999, when high-speed internet could only be dreamed of and modems that connected to

the internet were rarely found in private homes, the Lookstein Center of Bar-Ilan University launched this ongoing conversation. Today more than 3,500 teachers, administrators, lay leaders, and even occasional students weigh in and debate topics of current, and, occasionally, recurrent interest. Threaded archives of those conversations appear at http://lookstein.org/lookjed/.

The subject of academic Bible study has been discussed in Lookjed on a number of occasions. In the course of a conversation about how to teach "the strange *malon* story" (when Moses stopped at an inn en route to Egypt, see Exodus 4:24–26) a reader suggested that James Kugel's *How to Read the Bible* might be used to shed light on the matter. This led to a heated discussion on the place of such works in a Day School library. At some point the conversation turned to whether college-age students in a yeshiva environment should be studying Biblical Criticism, and, indeed, whether the invitation tendered to Professor Kugel by one of student clubs at Yeshiva University should have been rescinded by the administration.

In this brief article I do not intend to discuss theories of Biblical Criticism, which can be found elsewhere. The focus here is on attitudes toward the introduction of modern literary and academic methods to the Tanakh classroom, as expressed by classroom teachers, administrators, and educational leaders. Although much of this information is based on the discussions that took place in Lookjed, I will also devote a few words to the "parallel universe" of Day School education, that is, the *mamlakhti dati* religious public school system in Israel.

The brief quotations that appear in this article are all taken from the Lookjed discussions. I am sharing them here without attribution, but their sources can be found in the online threaded discussion archives. [1]

The question of teaching Biblical Criticism is one that depends on the outlook and affiliation of a given school, its mission, and its constituency. In most cases the responses that came to the list identified the type of school in which the writer worked. The Lookjed list, reflecting the values of The Lookstein Center, is open to a multiplicity of voices. Although many of the Day School educators who participate in these online discussions come from an Orthodox perspective, in this particular conversation, whose beginnings were rooted in an article about a Community School setting, contributions were received from across the ideological spectrum.

Once of the first replies that I received commented in strong terms on the appropriateness of raising the question in the manner that I did. It read:

I am a little shocked at the rather offhand way you threw out a question about Biblical Criticism: "In an article that appeared in the Journal of Jewish Education, Dr. Susan Tanchel argues that teaching the Documentary Hypothesis is an essential part of her school's curriculum. Do you have it in yours?"

You could be asking about whether our school uses indirect lighting, or shares a certain math program, rather than striking at the absolute essence of what it means to be a believing Jew. "Do I have it in mine?" . . . Do I relish systematically undermining the faith of my students to pay homage to the modern god of "pluralism?" Um, no.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that if the authorship of the Torah is undermined, all observance falls like a house of cards. Inoculating college-bound students against Biblical Criticism is responsible if done properly. Destroying their faith so we can pretend we are intellectually honest and enjoy splashing in the shallow waters of heresy is quite another.

Although this respondent rejects the possibility of systematic study of Bible Criticism in school, he does allow for the possibility that in the context of preparation for the challenges that are found on

college campuses, a presentation of the tenets of Biblical Criticism would be appropriate. This response was echoed by a number of educators affiliated with Orthodox Day Schools.
A Yeshiva University professor wrote to affirm that when teaching Torah "belief in *Torah mi-Sinai* is fundamental to Orthodoxy. Adopting a neutral position on the subject is equivalent to adopting a neutral position on the divinity of Jesus." He allows that for a student today to understand the writings of twentieth-century Orthodox thinkers such as Rabbis David Zvi Hoffmann, Mordechai Breuer, or Yoel Bin-Nun, it is necessary to have some familiarity with elements of Biblical Criticism. Nevertheless, he laments
Unfortunately, the vast majority of high school students do not have the basic knowledge of Tanakh to master these thoroughgoing, profound controversies. Very simply—how many know the Torah well? How many know the rest of Tanakh well? Without such knowledge can one follow the back-and-forth debates? Can one easily discuss how different versions of a story or a legal theme appear in different sections of the Torah if the basic material is not yet familiar, if one has no familiarity with the thousands of years of tradition and analysis that precede the modern period?

One Orthodox high school administrator described where modern literary methods fit into his school's curriculum:

Our Tanakh curriculum is certainly informed by modern scholarship, but does not teach the Documentary Hypothesis.
We began a program where we explore a variety of topics in symposium-style discussions. This is aimed to prepare the students for different challenges of life after high school, and to stimulate intellectual curiosity by making learning exciting without tests. We refer to it as either the Senior Seminar, or the Lishma *program.*
It is in this context that we discuss higher and lower criticism, and the insights these methodologies have uncovered. We also, of course, discuss why we can still faithfully maintain our belief in Torah Mi-Shamayim. *It has always been a well received unit in the senior seminar.*

In fact, the general approach of Day School educators, even in non-Orthodox settings, was that the introduction of a class on Biblical Criticism as a systematic course of study would not be welcome in their schools.
One long-term administrator from a Solomon Schechter school rejected the suggestion that such a course be introduced for a number of different reasons, among them:

- Educators must focus on the ultimate goals of Tanakh study, which he argued should be "to equip students with the text-access and text-analytical skills they need to be confident, independent, and resourceful students of Tanakh." The introduction of a year-long course in Biblical Criticism will ultimately raise many serious theological questions that will force a teacher to talk "about the text" rather than focus on the text itself.
- Invoking James Fowler's *Stages of Faith*, he argued that introducing the Documentary Hypothesis to adolescents "is likely in many cases to produce an explosive reaction at an age at which non-traditional perspectives should be at most gently and tentatively introduced," concluding that it is, therefore, both risky and unnecessary.
- Why must students of Tanakh be taught the intricacies of how the Documentary Hypothesis works any more than computer users need to understand the coding of the software that they use or drivers the wiring of their automobiles?

Rather than rejecting "non-traditional" study out of hand, the author makes suggestions of what should be taught in order to prepare students for "more advanced study," suggestions that he attests are used in

the schools where he has worked. These include the following:
1. Training in identifying literary features such as repetition, irregular structures, parallel passages, enigmatic expressions, and non-linear chronology
2. Training in using textual evidence to propose their own explanations of, or commentaries on, problematic literary features
3. Exposure to multiple commentaries that explain literary anomalies differently, ideally including both classical and modern voices

All of this is to be introduced in grades 1 through 8. Beginning in high school, two additional features are introduced to students:
4. Aspects of biblical society and culture in the context of surrounding societies and cultures
5. Reference materials, including biblical atlases, encyclopedias, primary and secondary historical sources, and archaeological artifacts, as additional ways—over and above the classical and modern commentaries—to deepen understanding of Tanakh

The author concludes,

It should be noted that, on this model, the aim of introducing modern commentaries and understandings is in service of the text, in order to uncover its rich and layered meaning. The nontraditional beliefs and assumptions underlying these perspectives are never in the spotlight, never the focus of study, but are rather the nearly always unarticulated background and context of student learning.

An individual who teaches Tanakh in the Abraham Joshua Heschel School, a non-denominational Day School in New York City, weighed in on this discussion, stating at the outset that "the Documentary Hypothesis is an exercise in theology, not Bible." He argued that introducing the Documentary Hypothesis to students in high school—as is done in the Heschel School—requires the students to have not only advanced text skills but also "a meta-textual mindset and background: significant substantive experience grappling with one's own approach to Tanakh study; exploration of the tenuous and often shifting boundaries between subjective and objective readings; separation between self and text in order to recognize where they meet; and aptitude in distinguishing between facts and conclusions, between weak and strong interpretations."
He writes that as taught in his school, this is a course

…for students who have already come face to face with their own conception of God, who are accustomed to pushing at theological comfort levels, and who welcome tension, encountering the Documentary Hypothesis creates a climactic moment: How does my conception of Torah, of God, of religious studies, withstand, absorb and react to its stiffest challenge? As such, reacting to the Documentary Hypothesis is not the portal into these questions, an early overt foray into one's theological and religious identity; it is the capstone.
As such, the Documentary Hypothesis is introduced in his school not as a value in and of itself, but as part of a course whose goal is to explore what it means to learn Torah. To accomplish that, Biblical Criticism is presented in the context of other approaches that offer a variety of possible entrances to its study:

To that end, students engage with four differing approaches: classical commentary highlighting the peshat-derash divide, modern literary analysis, archeology, and biblical scholarship.

In explaining the rationale for this he writes:

[The theory of] multiple authors is not the only answer. It may be the best—it may not—but that's irrelevant if it is presented on its own, with no alternatives as part of a dialogue. The question is not 'here is the Documentary Hypothesis, how do you react?' but 'here is a problem with a range of approaches, how do they fit with the rest of your complex understanding of the book that is the most important to your religion?"

It is interesting to note that when I shared the Lookjed discussion about *How to Read the Bible* with James Kugel, he responded by saying that the book was not intended for high school students—for that matter it may not be appropriate for all adults—and that he was unsure whether it had a place in a Day School library. He did share his own thoughts about an appropriate high school curriculum in Tanakh, writing:

I do have my own curricular ideas for high school, mostly based on my own kids' sometimes disappointed reaction to classes [in Tanakh]. I think it's fine for very little kids to do Humash *and Rashi the way they do in elementary school. But I think I've noticed that by the time these kids get to high school, if you keep teaching them the same way they were taught in elementary school, the best of them soon develop a strong interest in chemistry or social studies. Although they don't often formulate the idea in words, I think what bothers them is the disconnect between what the Hebrew words of the biblical text say—by now their understanding of Hebrew is much stronger, along with their common sense and self-confidence—and what Rashi (and a lot of other commentators) sometimes say those words mean.*

So I think what I would do, at that point in the curriculum, is not go to modern biblical scholars, but try to get students to understand the exegetical problem from Rashi's point of view, or, for that matter, that of the early rabbinic midrashim on which he relied. To begin with, this would require them to understand that the Torah and Rashi, or even midrash, are not simultaneous, and that the interpreters are confronting a text that has been around for some time and cannot be changed or rejected. Basically: 'You be Rashi. How are you going to explain this verse in a way that is consistent with the other things you know from the Tanakh and from halakhic practice, everything that we believe and follow?' ... I admit, this approach might not pass muster in Meah Shearim, but I really think it's honesty that kids want and need; so do we all.

A few words about the new Tanakh curriculum introduced by the Ministry of Education in Israel. For those of us who grew up in the United States, where Separation of Church and State is an axiom of faith, the fact that the State of Israel offers Jewish education in its public schools is somewhat disconcerting. Nevertheless, the fact that the official Ministry of Education in Israel concerns itself not only with general studies but with religious studies as well, means that for many religious schools in Israel (there are some religious schools that choose to operate outside of the state-sponsored system) there are educational experts who develop formal curricular goals, syllabi, and standardized tests. Diaspora educators appear to be largely unfamiliar with these materials, and I often link to them in response to Lookjed queries asking for support materials on Tanakh or Talmud.
Aside from the religious public school system, the Ministry of Education in Israel also runs an ordinary public school system—*mamlakhti*—that is not "religious," although it does include Jewish studies as part of its unit on Jewish culture and Jewish heritage. A wide range of topics are included among the

goals of teaching Bible on the high school level. They enumerate, among them, “Biblical criticism, editing changes to the Torah as a means to understanding the text, the authors’ intentions, their world and their views” (My translation. To see a full description of the *mamlakhti* curriculum and its goals, see http://cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/Units/Tochniyot_Limudim/MikraMam/AlYessodi/).
While the *mamlakhti* system has no problem including Biblical Criticism in its curriculum, the *mamlakhti dati* system has never attempted to introduce modern literary methods into its classrooms. Until recently, the religious school Bible curriculum followed a time-honored course, whose focus was largely on covering a wide range of material with medieval commentaries (e.g. Rashi, Ramban, Ibn Ezra) and other traditional sources (e.g. Netziv, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch). With a change of leadership, a new curriculum has been developed that is to be introduced in the upcoming academic year (5773).
A description of the goals of the new curriculum reads as follows (my translation):
• Interaction of students with the Word of God
• Developing a connection with the moral values ??and behaviors required by the Torah
• Strengthening Jewish identity and strengthening students’ ties with the Land of Israel
• Imparting ways to learn Torah and to love Torah in a traditional manner
(A full description of the new curriculum, including links to support materials, appears at http://www.lilmod.cet.ac.il/).
According to a recent article that appeared in the Shabbat broadsheet *Olam Katan* (available online at http://www.olam-katan.co.il//all_gilyonot/359.pdf), the new curriculum was accompanied by a set of enrichment materials that were available at the abovementioned website, that have since been removed. Four different types of materials were posted:

1. Ordinary articles on biblical themes written from a traditional perspective
2. Articles written by Torah scholars that can be understood as relating to biblical characters in a contemptuous manner (a reference to what is called, pejoratively, *Tanakh be-Govah Enayim*—“*Tanakh* at eye-level”; see below)
3. Articles that grapple with questions raised by Biblical Criticism
4. Articles that present Biblical Criticism as a legitimate reading of the Torah

As noted, these enrichment materials were posted as supplementary reading for teachers, and were not an intrinsic part of the new curriculum; they were removed after complaints were received by the Ministry of Education.
The author of the *Olam Katan* article, who is clearly sympathetic to the more traditional approach to teaching, presents both sides of the argument regarding the introduction of Biblical Criticism—should it be viewed as an evil that questions the very basis of the Torah and Judaism, or must it be taught, given the reality that any student who leaves the four walls of the traditional study hall will be forced to face that challenge at some point in his life. Moreover, there is the idea—one that is accepted by the adherents of the *Tanakh be-Govah Enayim* school generally and by the students of Rabbi Mordechai Breuer specifically—that although we may disagree with the answers given by Bible critics, their questions are legitimate ones, and we can enhance our understanding of Torah by accepting them and developing our own, traditional responses to them.
Removal of the articles that discussed Biblical Criticism notwithstanding, the heated debate regarding the new curriculum continues.
Part of this is related to the belief is that this new curriculum aims to introduce an approach to Tanakh that is based not so much on the theories of Biblical Criticism, but on modern literary methods, and specifically a method of study that has become known in Israel as *Tanakh be-Govah Enayim*—“*Tanakh* at eye-level.” This method, which approaches biblical characters as extraordinary characters with human foibles, albeit from whom we can learn life lessons, has been popularized by the teachers and students at Herzog College, which is affiliated with the Hesder Yeshiva, Yeshivat Har Etzion, in Alon

Shvut. It is based on a close reading of the text together with a willingness to explore possibilities that do not appear in traditional commentaries, and has been the source of tension between different factions in the National Religious camp in Israel for a number of years.
This debate promises to become more heated as the new curriculum is introduced in *dati-le'umi* classrooms in the coming months.

Although neither the contributors to the Lookjed discussion nor the educators who developed the new curriculum for the religious public schools in Israel were interested in developing a systematic course in Biblical Criticism for use on a high school level, it is clear that there is a wide range of attitudes with regard to the introduction of modern literary and academic techniques in the classroom. There appears to be the widespread agreement—even in the liberal camp—that at least some of the theories of modern Biblical Criticism are antithetical to Jewish belief and should be taught only as one approach among many or offered so that students will be prepared for the challenges presented by those theories at some point in the future. At the same time, it is hardly surprising to discover that the more traditional schools have been reluctant to introduce modern literary methods, while less traditional schools view such methods as basic to the understanding of the biblical text in contemporary times.
In closing I would like to share the thoughts of Professor Kugel, who is well aware of the challenges that his research and writings present for many a believing Jew. In answer to a questioner who asked how a religious person can maintain his/her faith and fealty in and to a rabbinic system that is so directly based on the belief of a divinely revealed text, given the conclusions presented in Professor Kugel's books, he responded, in part, with a parable.

[U]ltimately, any Jew must admit that at some point the divinely-given text leads to the human interpreter and the poseq, indeed, to this specific taqqanah and that specific gezerah shavah. And frankly, we don't really seem to all that aware of, or even care much about, where the dividing-line falls. This is our "prepared table," the work of many hands. If someone wants a different table, let him go ahead—but this is the Jewish table, the way Jews serve God.

As one of our sages said: to what may the matter be compared? To a man who wished to see the King. So he went to the royal palace and stood outside and waited for the King to appear. After some hours, the King did come outside, and the man was thrilled. But soon the King went back inside the palace. The man returned the next day, and the next, and sometimes he did catch a glimpse of the King, but always only for a few seconds, and then his view would be blocked by someone, or the King would step behind a pillar or get into his carriage and ride off. What had at first been thrilling now became only frustrating.

Eventually, the king's close advisor became aware of the presence of the man standing day after day outside the palace, and he approached him and said: "I know what you want, but you are going about it the wrong way. Go up to the palace door and ask to work inside—it doesn't matter what: janitor, guard, woodcutter or water-drawer! Then you will enter the palace by right and see the King as a matter of course; indeed, He will recognize you and perhaps even call you by name." And so the man did, and it was just as the King's advisor had said: he saw the King up close every day, and the King called to him by name.

This is the whole idea of Judaism. If you want to come close to God, the only way is to become His employee. Understanding that avodat Hashem is the true foundation of our halakhah may not de-fang modern biblical scholarship; a lot of what it says will always be disturbing to Jews. But I think that modern scholarship does not, because it cannot, undermine the essence of Judaism or what Jews actually do in their lives; it cannot … cause the system to collapse.

Jewish educators who are successful in teaching their students to aspire to serve God as enthusiastic and passionate Jews can help produce adults whose faith can remain firm even in the face of serious questions.

[1] The particular discussion that was begun with my recollection of my own teaching career and a reference to an article from the *Journal of Jewish Education* can be accessed at http://lookstein.org/lookjed/read.php?1,19050,19050. Dr. Tanchel's article, entitled "A Judaism That Does Not Hide: Teaching the Documentary Hypothesis in a Pluralistic Jewish High School" is available at http://www.lookstein.org/retrieve.php?ID=3360722. The conversation about Professor Kugel's *How to Read the Bible* appears at http://lookstein.org/lookjed/read.php?1,16514,16610.