

# Teaching Tanakh in the Twenty-First Century

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The Bible has topped the best-seller list every week since the invention of printing. It has directed the course of human civilization and has served as the foundation of faith for billions of people. Its content and style are recognized by believers and non-believers alike as the most profound and inspirational writing in the history of humankind. For observant Jews, Tanakh is nothing less than the Word of God. With these credentials, one might expect that teaching Tanakh would be an easy sell.

However, as in all teaching, bridging the gap between the subject and the student is a task that requires careful thought and continual reimagining. Students must overcome not only a language barrier when studying Tanakh in Hebrew, but also historical, cultural, and philosophical differences between the world of Tanakh and that of modern Western civilization. The teachings of Tanakh are certainly eternal; but their relevance is not always obvious to children and teenagers immersed in the digital age.

In previous generations, teaching *Humash* and Rashi sufficed to imbue students with the fundamentals of Jewish faith and law. Advanced students would also study the Ramban and—especially in Sephardic lands—pride of place was given to Ibn Ezra. However, I believe that our students today deserve and require a greater range of commentaries and methodologies. We have already seen this expansion of the canon take place in the past few decades in Modern Orthodox education, primarily through the writing and influence of two people:

1. Professor Nehama Leibowitz has opened up for us the full range of traditional Jewish commentaries, ancient and modern, with a talent for zoning in and clarifying the differences between them on various exegetical issues and their methodological considerations. Nehama also had a unique ability to make those issues relevant to modern

society to the point where her classes could be appreciated by a wide range of Israeli society—both religious and secular.

2. The effort spearheaded by Rav Yoel bin-Nun and continued by the many talented faculty members of Yeshivat Har Etzion and Makhon Herzog to bring a literary appreciation for Tanakh in terms of structure, themes, and parallels within a context dedicated to *peshat*.

These are but two prominent examples of individuals who have advanced our understanding and appreciation of Scripture through their innovative methodologies that successfully combine traditional and modern sensibilities. Many others have similarly made remarkable contributions to our understanding of Tanakh in a way that is respectful of its integrity. This is especially true in the recognition of the value of setting Tanakh in its ancient Near Eastern context, not only for the similarities but more importantly for the differences. The revolutionary messages of the prophets of monotheism and morality shine when viewed on the background of ancient paganism. Such efforts abound in the halls of Yeshiva University, Bar-Ilan University, and many other institutions.<sup>[1]</sup> These developments have opened a pathway toward selectively integrating modern Bible scholarship into mainstream Judaism. It is true that biblical scholarship presents certain challenges to traditional Orthodox belief, and recent thinkers have proposed a number of ways of dealing with these challenges. However, these issues are mostly irrelevant in a yeshiva high school setting where the goal is to inspire students about the eternal lessons of Tanakh and provide them with a basis upon which to build a lifelong commitment to Judaism and continued study.

Rather than focus on the problems of academic Bible, the approach of the writers mentioned above is to take advantage of the array of ways recent scholarship can enhance our appreciation and teaching of Tanakh. David Berger has argued that literary analysis of the Bible can help deal with problems of the morality of the Patriarchs as well as issues of higher criticism.<sup>[2]</sup> But we should teach such literary approaches not only in order to “provide the cure before the calamity” but also because it reveals more of Tanakh’s prophetic depth.

Unfortunately, these wonderful discoveries and helpful methodologies developed in academic circles in recent decades do not always trickle down into traditional educational settings. Nehama Leibowitz has certainly transformed generations of Modern Orthodox teachers and Makhon Herzog is also making a major impact on teachers who study there and who access their resources. Nevertheless, there is much more to be done in this regard, and there is especially a need to create curricula specifically designed with a classroom teacher in mind and that can guide a teacher as to how to transform this material into a structured and effective lesson.

## Curriculum Development

A few years ago, I started a project to prepare curricula for teaching Tanakh in high school. So far, my colleagues and I have written teacher’s guides for all or parts of *Shemot*, *Devarim*, *Yeshayahu*, *Yirmiyahu*, and *Tehillim*. Each lesson includes a step-by-step guide of suggestions for how to present the material, including worksheets, source sheets, PowerPoint presentations, and other multimedia resources. All of this material is freely available at [www.teachtorah.org](http://www.teachtorah.org), and many dozens of teachers in schools around the world have successfully made use of this material. Below, I present a small selection from these lessons that highlight the approach we have taken to integrate use of multimedia, derive insights from archaeology, make the subject matter relevant to contemporary sensibilities, and use analysis of structure to discover the essential lesson of a given chapter.

## Using Multimedia

With most high school classrooms now equipped with projectors and Smart boards, teachers can enhance their lessons with pictures, music, and interactive presentations. One way to vivify Tanakh is to show medieval paintings of biblical scenes.



*The Finding of Moses by Orazio Gentileschi (1633)*

For example, *Shemot* 2:5 narrates: “The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it.” The question arises, what role do the maidens play in this story? A wonderful trigger for this discussion is *The Finding of Moses* by Orazio Gentileschi (1633). This painting depicts tension between the princess and her maidservants. While the princess and one of the maidservants point to the circumcision as evidence for the need to murder the baby, the maidservants on the other side show caring and seem to plead for compassion.

Compare this painting to the Gemara at *Sotah* 12b, which says that all but one of the maidservants were punished for encouraging the princess to follow her father’s orders and murder the baby. Sforno explains that by God’s providence, the maidens, who would have murdered the baby, did not see the ark; instead only the princess saw it and she sent her personal maidservant to save it. While most Christian paintings of this scene depict a reluctant princess who is urged by her compassionate maidens to save the child, Jewish commentators take the opposite position. This viewpoint can lead to a conversation about peer pressure and doing the right thing even when those around us may encourage us not to.

It is noteworthy that one opinion in the Gemara takes *amatah* to refer not to her maid but to her arm, which stretched forth to take hold of the ark. This is a creative poetic way to portray the enthusiasm of the princess in wanting to save the baby and the miraculous nature of the event. However, this is obviously not the *peshat*, as Rashi and Ibn Ezra prove.

When learning *Tehillim*, we should emphasize their performative aspect. Just as one cannot appreciate the experience of being at a live concert if all you have are the lyrics, we have to try to reconstruct what it must have been like to experience the Leviim performing *Tehillim* in the magnificent *Bet ha-Mikdash*, Temple. Archaeologists have actually found the earliest musical notation in ancient Ugarit and have reconstructed what is sounded like. They have also uncovered mosaics with pictures of ancient instruments and figurines playing those instruments. Here, for example is a *kinor*, an eight stringed lyre, as depicted on a Bar Kokhba coin:



## A *kinor* depicted on a Bar Kokhba coin

By playing recordings of ancient world music, as well as *Tehillim* chanted by modern Hazzanim according to the *te'amim*, one can get some sense of how *Tehillim* may have been sung in the *Bet ha-Mikdash*. Modern musicians have also set many *Mizmorim* to music and playing these recordings in class can help make the study of *Tehillim* not only intellectually interesting but also emotionally inspiring.

## Archaeology

Archaeologists in the Middle East have made amazing discoveries in the past century—both of material remains and inscriptions—that can help shed light on the Tanakh. These findings can also be a valuable pedagogical tool for filling in the context of biblical times and making the events come to life.



**A drawing at Beni-Hasan from the tomb of Khnumhotep, who served in the royal court of pharaoh Senusret II in the nineteenth century BCE. This drawing depicts a group of Semitic people entering Egypt.**

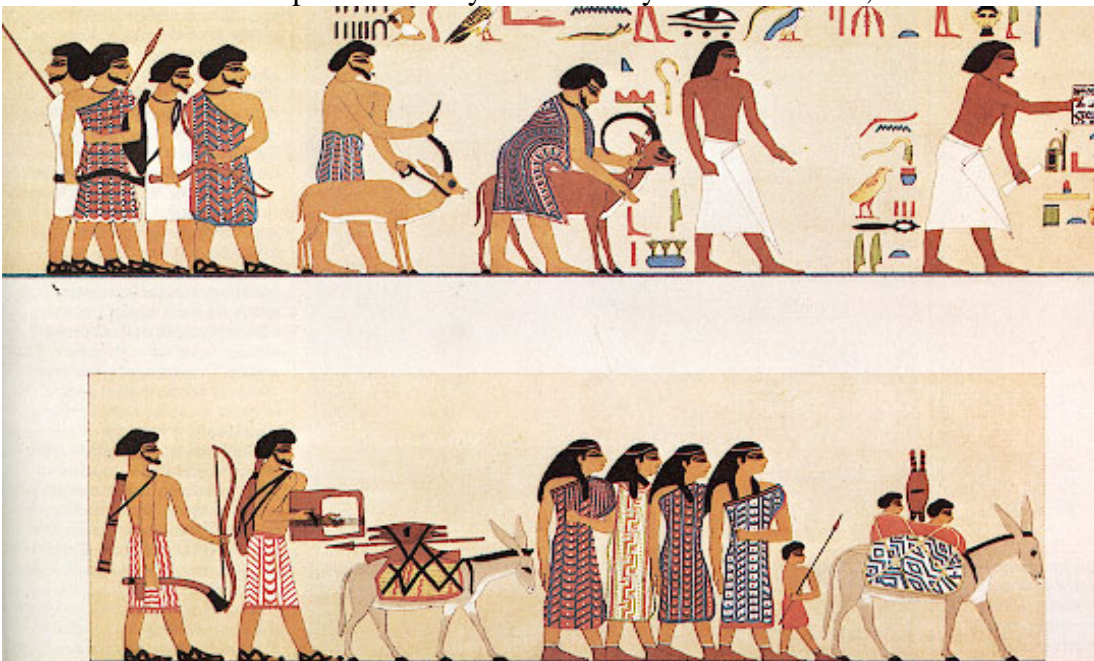
To cite a couple of examples, the Hyksos were a conglomeration of Semitic people who infiltrated Egypt starting from the twenty-first century BCE. They then gained supremacy in 1700 BCE and ruled Northern Egypt until 1550 BCE, when the Egyptian Pharaoh Ahmose I chased most of them out of the country and reestablished native Egyptian rule. Although these events are too early to identify the Hyksos with the Israelites, as Josephus did, this history nevertheless does help fill in the context for several aspects of the biblical story:

- The migration of Jacob's family to Egypt was part of a larger movement of Semites making the same trip.
- Hyksos rule of Northern Egypt explains how Joseph, a foreigner, could rise to great power and marry an Egyptian noblewoman since he was a Semite just as they were.

- It further explains why Pharaoh was so paranoid about the Israelite nation increasing and joining enemies to conquer the Egyptians. Such an event had already happened with the Hyksos and the memory of their revolt would still be prominent in his mind.

The second example is from Dr. Shawn-Zelig Aster's teacher's guide for *Yeshayahu* and is based on his own original research. Isaiah 6 has the prophet experience the sights and sounds of God's throneroom. Isaiah sees God seated on a throne and six-winged angels attending Him and pronouncing His holiness. One of the angels purifies the prophet by touching a hot coal from the altar to his lips. What is the meaning of this deep prophetic vision?

In 879 BCE, King Ashurnasirpal II of Assyria built a magnificent palace that was still in use over a century later in Yeshayahu's time. Like all other nations in Assyria's power grip, Israel and Judah had to send emissaries to the Assyrian palace with protection money if they wanted to avoid being conquered. Such an emissary would have been impressed by the many scenes of Assyrian battle victories etched in the palace hallways. In the Assyrian throneroom, he would see this relief:



**Drawing from throne room of Ashurnasirpal II**

- In the center is the tree that represents the world. At its top is a winged image of the god Ashur, the chief Assyrian god. The message is that the god Ashur is in charge of the world.
- On either side of Ashur is an image of the Assyrian king (with beard), whom the Assyrians consider king of the world.
- On either side of the Assyrian king is the four-winged figure that protects the king from impurity.

The emissary would probably have concluded that the Assyrian king is more powerful than Israel's God and would have reported this when he returned home. This would lead the nation to give up its hope, faith, and identity. Isaiah's prophecy counters this false impression. In fact, it is Hashem who sits on the throne and is king of the world: "His presence fills all the earth" (Isaiah 6:3). Significantly, while the Assyrian king is himself susceptible to impurity and requires protective angels to keep him pure, the angels in Isaiah's prophecy are necessary only to remove Yeshayahu's impurity. Hashem

requires no protection for He is Eternal, Holy, and beyond all human power.

Dr. Aster suggests that teachers connect Yeshayahu's prophecy to their own lives. Teenagers can often feel a sense of sensory overload and be impressed by the power of technology, movies, rockstars, international politics, and big business. This prophecy of Yeshayahu, however, which the rabbis incorporated into the daily siddur, can help students re-evaluate their priorities and loyalties and thereby reset their moral compass.

## Contemporize

Every lesson in a high school setting should have an enduring understanding so that students can relate it to their own lives and contemporary society. By contemporizing the Tanakh we not only ensure that students will internalize its teachings but we also provide a motivation for studying Tanakh and a way to make it relevant to their life concerns.

Studying the opening chapter of *Shemot* provides a fitting opportunity to understand dictators, ancient and modern alike. As Ramban points out, Pharaoh gradually enacts harsher and harsher decrees against the Israelites in order to slowly turn the Egyptian populace against their Israelite neighbors. How can people who were on good terms with their neighbors for generations suddenly become enemies? We see the same phenomenon occur in our own times in the Bosnian war and in Nazi Germany.

A teacher can provide to the students a few sources on the history of the Holocaust and ask students to find parallels in *Shemot*. For example, Goebbels refers to the Jews in Germany as "guests" who are "misusing our hospitality," and Julius Streicher spreads propaganda that the Jews are responsible for World War I and are enemies of the state. This reminds us of Pharaoh's accusation in *Shemot* 1:9-10: "The Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us."

We must be vigilant in recognizing propaganda whenever we read a newspaper, watch television, or listen to speeches. A teacher can easily find examples from current events whether relating to local news, Israel, or pop culture. Politicians, businesses, religious leaders, and intellectuals of various kinds constantly try to convince us that their view is correct and all other views are wrong. It is up to us to distinguish between the sincere and the self-serving, between good and evil, between accuracy and propaganda.

It might seem that nothing could be further from the lives of American teenagers than Moshe's prophetic encounter in the middle of the desert at the burning bush. In fact, however, this can be a foundational lesson for students about finding themselves and achieving their own leadership potential. Many elements went into the emergence of Moshe as a leader: his family, background, birth and childhood, a strong sense of justice, and passion to take action. While these attributes took many years to develop and mature, there was one single moment at which they all came together. In *Shemot* 3:4, we read that Hashem only calls to Moshe after He sees that Moshe turns to examine the bush. In order to hear the divine calling, one must be attentive and on the lookout for it. This is when the hero finds his calling and resolves in earnest to follow a plan to accomplish his or her set goal.

Although we are not prophets, each of us can receive a divine calling at his or her own level. A teacher can ask students to identify issues in their own schools, communities or in the world where there is injustice or something that needs attention. What talents and tools would someone need to help that problem? How can we develop ourselves to develop our own talents and be sensitive enough to take notice of the "burning bushes" all over the world today? How can we develop the confidence to step up and become leaders?

## Structure

*Mizmor* 145, known as *Ashrei*, is a highly structured alphabetic acrostic. That it is missing a *pasuk* for *nun* therefore stands out as a glaring omission. The classic answer given in *Berakhot* 4b explains that *nun* is omitted because it represents the fall of Israel as seen in Amos 5:2, “Fallen is the virgin of Israel,” which begins with a *nun*. This answer is not convincing for a few reasons. Just because there is a negative verse in Amos which begins with *nun* does not mean that *nun* is forever tainted. There are many positive verses that begin with *nun* and many negative verses that begin with other letters. If *nun* really is unusable, why is it found in other acrostic Psalms such as 111, 112, and 119? As I explain further in the teacher’s guide, this midrash is not meant as a commentary to psalm 145 as much as a way to deal with a difficult verse in Amos.

Most scholars think there was originally a verse for *nun* but it was mistakenly omitted by sloppy scribes. For evidence, they point to a copy of this Psalm found in the Dead Sea scrolls, which does include a verse for *nun*: “*ne’ eman Elokim bi-dvarav ve-hasid be-khol ma`asav*—God is trustworthy in His words and faithful in all His works.” However, it is highly unlikely that this is the original missing *nun* verse considering that its second half is a duplicate of verse 17. More likely, an overzealous scribe invented this verse to “correct” what he thought was a mistake.

Rather, we should seek out a literary explanation for why this psalm intentionally omitted a verse for *nun*. This emerges upon analysis of the structure of this Psalm. This Psalm begins and ends with the word *tehillah/tehillat*. Verses 1 and 2 both end with “Your name forever and ever” and the last verse similarly ends with “His holy name forever and ever.” The verb *brk*—bless occurs four times in the *mizmor* in vv. 1, 2, 10, and 21. Taking all these words together, we find that the first two verses and the last verse form an envelope around the rest of the psalm. Since the only other occurrence of *brk* is in v. 10, this middle verse too is linked to the opening and closing. Once we compare these *pesukim* side by side we find that there is a progression from one to the next:

1 I will extol You, my God and king, and bless Your name forever and ever.

2 Every day will I bless You and praise Your name forever and ever.

10 All Your works shall praise You, Hashem, and Your faithful ones shall bless You.

21 My mouth shall utter the praise of Hashem, and all creatures shall bless His holy name forever and ever.

In the first two verses, the singer blesses Hashem by himself. In the middle verse, a small group of faithful ones bless Hashem. By the end, all creatures bless His Holy Name. We can picture someone beginning to sing by himself, then being joined by a few devotees, and finally rallying everyone to sing together. These four verses act as a refrain at the beginning, middle, and end of the Psalm.

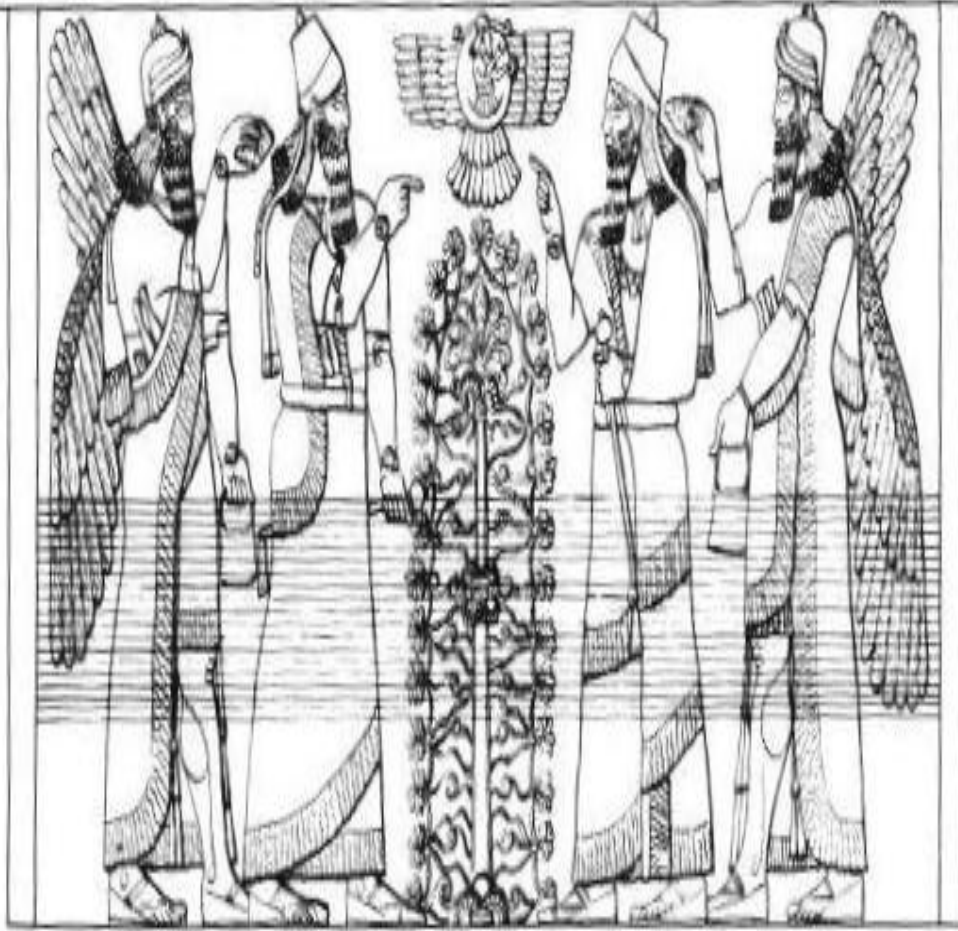
There are four sections in the *mizmor*: two before the refrain and two after it. Section 1 consists of vv. 3–6 and focuses on God’s greatness. The key words in this section are: greatness, might, glorious majesty, splendor, wondrous, and awesome. All of these words praise the great works of God in creation and nature. They relate to God as transcendent, powerful, and beyond reach.

Verses 7–9 comprise section 2, which is a celebration of God’s goodness. The key words in this section are goodness, beneficence, gracious, compassionate, kindness, and mercy. Verse 8, in particular, paraphrases God’s 13 attributes of mercy (*Shemot* 34:6). In this section we feel Hashem’s closeness to us, His care, and His accessibility.

Section 3 spans vv. 11–13, and its key words are: majesty, kingship, might, majestic glory, and dominion. This section shares many of the words and themes from section 1 but emphasizes God’s kingship in particular. Like section 1, this section also gives off the sense of Hashem as transcendent just like a human king is beyond the reach of the ordinary citizen. Remarkably, the three verses of this section begin with the letters ?, ?, and ?. When read backward, these letters spell ???—king!

Section 4 is the largest section at vv. 14–20 and parallels section 2 in its theme. This section describes how God provides help and sustenance to the needy (vv. 14–16) and responds to and protects the

deserving (vv. 18–20). The middle verse of this section sums up its central message—“Hashem is beneficent in all His ways and faithful in all His works” (v. 17). The predominant word in this section is “*kol*–all,” which is repeated 10 times. It emphasizes that Hashem is not just selectively good to some people sometimes but rather all-good all the time to all living beings.



Some philosophers speak of God as a transcendent, infinite, all-powerful being about whom we can know nothing and from whom we would not expect special favors. Others think of God as a close, ever-compassionate father-like figure who thinks about us and cares for our every need. In philosophy, it is difficult to reconcile these two conceptions. However, when meditating or when in a state of prayer, our emotions can often shift from one to the other and back. The four sections of this *mizmor* similarly vacillate between these two extremes. Sections 1 and 3 conceive of God as transcendent and therefore call to proclaim His greatness and kingship. Sections 2 and 4, on the other hand, consider God to be near at hand as they praise His goodness.

We can now trace the movement of the reader as he or she experiences this *mizmor*. At first alone, the reader begins by thinking of God’s greatness and awesomeness in section 1 but does not feel close to Him. Once the reader begins to fathom God’s mighty acts in creation, the reader begins to think of acts He performs for the world. In section two the reader begins to sense God’s mercy. The reader now reaches a higher level where he or she feels connected with a group of “faithful ones” in the refrain. We then think about God as an infinite king in section 3. But even a king must take care of his subjects, and the infinite king provides infinite care for all beings. It is significant that the last section is the longest and most detailed. It is clearly the climax of the *mizmor* and contains its most essential message.



Getting back to the missing *nun*, we now see that this verse is omitted right at the juncture between sections 3 and 4. This omission makes the reader pause and serves as a literary device to indicate a section break. In fact, as we saw from the structure above, section 4 is the climax and essence of the *mizmor* and so it is fitting to mark a section break between it and everything that precedes it. In fact, vv. 1–13 are also marked off as a unit by the envelope created by the word *melekh* in v. 1 and the repetition of the same word in section 3, vv. 11–13. Furthermore, when reading the acrostic backward from the end, the absence of the *nun* verse calls attention to the beginning letters of section 3, *mem, lamed, kaf*—king.

The main idea of the *mizmor* is a total praise of Hashem by all people at all times. This is summed up in the progression of the refrains and in the repetition of the key word *kol*. The psalm takes the form of an alphabetic acrostic in order to poetically convey this message. By using every letter of the alphabet, we sense that we are praising God using all possible language. It is complete praise from A to Z. This is a truly magnificent example of how appreciating structure, even—or especially—when it deviates from our expectations, is a necessary and inspiring method for uncovering the wisdom and perfection of Tanakh.

I hope that this selection of lesson summaries will suffice to prompt the reader to visit [www.teachtorah.org](http://www.teachtorah.org). I would further request that readers provide feedback on this material and I invite teachers to join in participating in and contributing to this project.

## Notes

[1] A recent and significant contribution to this approach is by my Rabbi, Moshe Shamah, *Recalling the Covenant: A Contemporary Commentary on the Five Books of the Torah* (Jersey City: Ktav, 2011).

[2] David Berger, "On the Morality of the Patriarchs in Jewish Polemics and Exegesis," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996), 131-146.