Nehama Leibowitz and the Paradox of Parshanut

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Nehama Leibowitz and the Paradox of *Parshanut*:
Are Our Eyes on the Text, or on the Commentators?[1]
By Hayyim Angel

Introduction: The Commentators as Our Eyes to the Text

> In Elementary and High Schools, we do not study *parshanut* or exegetical methodology for their own sake; rather, we study Torah with the assistance of its interpreters. And if, God forbid, the Torah should be pushed to the side—whether its stories and laws, its teachings and ideas, its guidance and beauty—because of overemphasis on *parshanim*, then any small gain my book achieves will be lost at a greater expense (Nehama Leibowitz).[2]

In line with all traditional exegesis, Professor Nehama Leibowitz, *zt"l* (henceforth, Nehama, as she preferred to be called) emphasized that we must scrutinize the meaning and significance of each word and passage in the Torah, and perceive its messages as communicated directly to us. We accomplish these daunting tasks by consulting the teachings of the Sages and later commentators (*mefarshim*). In effect, they serve as our eyes through which we understand the biblical text in its multifaceted and ever-applicable glory.

Of course, the opinions of the *mefarshim* must be painstakingly evaluated against the biblical text. Sometimes, one position is preferable to another because it captures the language or the spirit of a passage more fully.[3] On many occasions, the text simultaneously sustains multiple interpretations on different levels.[4] But it is always the text that commands our attention.

To those studying *parshanut* as a discipline, whether for methodological approaches or in historical context, Midrashim and commentators are no longer secondary to the biblical text. They are three-dimensional people living in specific times and places. *Parshanut* investigates how a given exegete approached the text, and what influenced him, such as Midrashim and earlier commentaries, intellectual currents of his time, and other historical considerations beyond purely textual motivations. The student of *Tanakh* views commentary as secondary literature, while the student of *parshanut* or history treats exegetes as primary sources. These contrasting perspectives almost necessarily will yield different understandings of the comments of *mefarshim*.

For the most part, Nehama avoided studying *Tanakh* in its historical context, and likewise was reluctant to consider Midrashim and the works of later commentators in their respective settings. In particular, she devoted an entire study in an attempt to demonstrate that Rashi on the Torah *always* was motivated by textual considerations, and never exclusively by educational or other religious agendas such as polemics. Because of her emphatically text-centered methodology, Nehama also did not focus on individual contributions of *mefarshim*. She brought all *mefarshim* to her studies simultaneously, utilizing those comments that she believed elucidated the text of the Torah.

In theory, the disciplines of *Tanakh* and *parshanut* should be complementary. A heightened understanding of *parshanut* certainly offers one a more finely tuned ability to study *Tanakh* through the eyes of the *mefarshim*. But, as Nehama warned, it is all too easy to become sidetracked from the biblical text by overemphasizing *parshanut*. In light of this tension, we will consider those essays in *Pirkei Nehama: Nehama Leibowitz Memorial Volume* that explore the strengths and limitations of Nehama's methodology.[5]

Close Text Reading and Nehama's Evaluation of *Peshat*

Moshe Ahrend (pp. 42–49) and Elazar Touitou (pp. 221–227) observe that Nehama espoused a broad definition of *peshat* that places the overall spirit of a passage (*ruah ha-ketuvim*) at the forefront of inquiry. In contrast, exegetes such as Rashbam were more concerned with local meanings of what is found explicitly in the text (cf. Cohn, pp. 106–107).[6]

David Zafrany notes that Nehama accentuated the finest semantic nuances and redundancies (pp. 75–77). Predictably, this exegetical position led to Nehama's particular fondness for the commentaries of Rashi and Ramban.[7] In contrast, exegetes such as Rashbam and Ibn Ezra believed in *kefel ha-inyan be-milim shonot* (poetic repetition) and other idiomatic conventions in the Torah. Nehama often referred to the latter group as "*rodfei ha-peshat*" (those who pursue the plain sense of the text) as a means of criticizing their viewpoint (cf. Ahrend, p. 38).

This discussion also underlies Nehama's favorable outlook toward Benno Jacob and the Buber-Rosenzweig translation of the Torah. Although Nehama was acutely aware that these authors were not Orthodox Jews, they were attentive to the finer literary qualities of the biblical text, attributing significance to each word of the Torah.[8] Rivka Horowitz discusses the impact of these twentieth-century German-Jewish writers on Nehama (pp. 207–220).[9]

Moshe Sokolow (pp. 298–300) and Amos Frisch (pp. 313–323) both illustrate Nehama's love of comparing and contrasting parallel biblical texts. Nehama followed the path of Rashi, Ramban, Malbim, and Netziv, against the approach of Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Ibn Caspi. The latter generally treated such repetitions as stylistic variations, without meaningful significance.

These discussions illustrate vital aspects of Nehama's learning methodology, and explain how she related to different commentators as a result. However, the majority of essays in *Pirkei Nehama* make *parshanut* the primary source of inquiry, exploring the methodology of various exegetes and/or Nehama as a *parshanit* and educator in her own right. One theme conspicuously (and unfortunately) absent from this volume is an essay devoted to Nehama's own original interpretations on the Torah.

Between Dogmatism and Historicism

> Dogmatism aspires toward absolute, supertemporal authority, but for this it pays the heavy price of blurring the distinctiveness of periods and perspectives. Historicism strives for greater differentiation and for explaining causal connection and circumstantial conditioning; but with its gain comes the loss it incurs with its complete relativization (Uriel Simon).[10]

Gavriel H. Cohn likens Nehama's educational technique to Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's memorable portrayal of his learning dialogue with the great talmudists (p. 26).[11] Her *iyyunim* guide the reader to the text, surrounded by *mefarshim* spanning many generations (cf. Cohn, p. 97).

Several writers observe that Nehama's synchronic and text-centered approach often comes at the expense of other aspects of *parshanut* study. In an analysis of Nehama's methodology, Yisrael Rozenson remarks that Nehama treated Rashi and many other commentators as standing above historical circumstance and influence, exclusively interpreting the biblical text.[12] Gavriel H. Cohn notes that Nehama did place Abarbanel and Hirsch in their historical settings on occasion, and in rare instances she did so for others as well (p. 97, n. 18; cf. Ahrend, p. 39; Touitou, p. 232). With Rashi, however, there could be no exceptions. Nehama tried valiantly to demonstrate that Rashi on the Torah *always* was motivated by textual nuances and difficulties, and never exclusively by religious or polemical considerations. Her extreme position on this issue generated the greatest amount of critical discussion in *Pirkei Nehama*.

It is specifically through the defense of Nehama's outlook by Shemuel P. Gelbard that one readily can identify its shortcomings (pp. 177–185). Gelbard asserts (p. 178) that Nehama did not prove her point conclusively in her article, "Rashi's Criteria for Citing Midrashim."[13] While allowing for rare exceptions for educational or polemical concerns, Gelbard maintains that Rashi almost always was motivated by something in the biblical text (p. 179). To substantiate his thesis, Gelbard adduces an impressive array of *midreshei aggadah* cited by Rashi that all address some difficulty in the text even as they also teach important religious lessons.

Enlightening in their own right, Gelbard's examples do not prove his or Nehama's claim, for two reasons: (1) To verify Nehama's argument, one must take into account not only the Midrashim that Rashi cites, but also those he does not cite. Why does Rashi quote one Midrash instead of another, when the latter also may have been responding to a similar text anomaly?[14] (2) There could be, and in fact are, *other* examples in Rashi's commentary that do not fit into this general analysis, a point Gelbard himself concedes. At the end of her article on Rashi's criteria for selecting Midrashim, Nehama left the first issue for another study. The articles of Yitzhak Gottlieb and Avraham Grossman in *Pirkei Nehama* should be considered, respectively, as attempts at such further studies. They convincingly identify motivations in Rashi's commentary beyond pure adherence to the biblical text.

Yitzhak Gottlieb quotes Nehama's assertion that Rashi quoted Midrashim pertaining to *semikhut* (juxtaposition of passages) only when the juxtaposition presents some textual difficulty (pp. 149–175).[15] Gottlieb notes that although we always can find some text motivator for *semikhut*, it is more relevant to ask if there is a fundamental difference between those Midrashim that Rashi quoted and those he did not (p. 170; cf. p. 150, n. 4).[16] After a comprehensive examination of the midrashic discussions of *semikhut*, Gottlieb cannot ascertain any distinct pattern for those Midrashim that Rashi quoted versus those he did not, leading him away from Nehama's conclusion. Gottlieb concedes that Rashi may not have had these omitted Midrashim available to him. But if Rashi did have them, it is reasonable to conclude that although Rashi generally was motivated by text concerns, he also cited certain Midrashim instead of others for other reasons, including his desire to disseminate his religious ideals: for example, to provide comfort for persecuted Jews, to affirm God's love of Israel, and to defend Judaism against Christian polemical accusations (p. 174, esp. n. 99).

Avraham Grossman bolsters Gottlieb's conclusions by identifying likely polemical and educational examples from within Rashi's commentary on the Torah (pp. 187–205). Grossman surveys opinions of scholars ranging from Nehama's extreme efforts to deny all historical impact on Rashi, to Yitzhak Baer and Elazar Touitou's equally far-reaching assertions about the impact of historical circumstances on Rashi's commentary.[17] Grossman adopts a middle position and maintains that many instances of Rashi's selection of Midrashim do address textual difficulties, but others emerged primarily from polemical, or other religious concerns.

Rashi saw assimilation and persecution among French Jews, and therefore used his commentary to inspire them during the grim period surrounding the First Crusade. Grossman asserts that on occasion, Rashi may have selected Midrashim he knew were far from *peshat* in order to convince his community that they are loved by God and should remain faithful to the Torah and mitzvoth (p. 189).

Grossman then cites examples where Rashi explicitly stated that he preferred an interpretation *le-teshuvat ha-minim* (to answer the heretics) to explanations of the Sages, since Christians were taking the midrashic messianic interpretations of biblical texts and applying them to the Christian savior (p. 190).[18] However, these instances occur exclusively in Rashi's commentaries on *Nakh*. In Rashi's commentary on the Torah, there are no explicit examples, making the enterprise of pinpointing polemical exegesis speculative.[19] Grossman rises to this challenge by adducing ten instances of polemic and five of other religious-educational matters, where Rashi on the Torah clearly deviated from *peshat* or consistently selected certain types of Midrashim from among many others to support his educational agendas.

For example, Rashi's famous rereading of Jacob's statement to Isaac—*anokhi. Esav bekhorekha*, "It is I. Esau is your firstborn" (Gen. 27:19)—is against the plain meaning of the text. In the generation following Rashi, Rabbi Menahem ben Shelomo (*Sekhel Tov*) wrote that were one to accept Rashi's reading here, a dualist would be able to support the existence of two deities from the Ten Commandments by reading its first verse, "*Anokhi. Hashem Elokekha*"! Grossman maintains that Rashi knew he was deviating from *peshat* in this instance (pp. 192–193). He did so, in all likelihood, because Christians regularly accused Jews of being deceitful in business, emulating their ancestor Jacob.[20] By writing that Jacob did not use deceit (even translating "*mirmah*" as "wisdom" on 27:35), Rashi deflated the Christian indictment at its roots.

Grossman also demonstrates that Rashi consistently quoted Midrashim that defended the character of Jacob and those that lambasted Esau. Such consistent patterns plausibly can be understood against the background of Jewish-Christian tensions in medieval Europe. Rashi used Jacob as a symbol for the Jews, and Esau represented a combination of Edom, Rome, and Christianity.[21] Although several of Rashi's comments also may address textual anomalies, the consistent pattern of midrashic selections can be understood more fully against the polemical backdrop.

At the end of his article, Grossman reaffirms that many of Rashi's comments were in fact textually motivated (pp. 204–205). However, the *primary*, overarching goal of his commentary was to provide religious guidance to Jews. If his educational goals coincided with *peshat*—which they usually did—then Rashi could teach biblical text and Judaism simultaneously. If not, Rashi favored religious teaching over a sterile, "scientific" response to the biblical text. Although one may debate individual examples cited by Grossman, blatant deviations from *peshat* such as "*Anokhi. Esav bekhorekha*" and consistent patterns of Rashi's citation of certain Midrashim over others confirm his general thesis.[22]

In a separate article published in the same year as *Pirkei Nehama*, Shemuel P. Gelbard also reached the conclusion that Rashi had several "meta-issues" behind his commentary.[23]

In his essay on Nehama's treatment of Rashbam, Elazar Touitou (p. 232) marvels at Nehama's reluctance to acknowledge Rashbam's operating in polemical context even when Rashbam *explicitly* stated that he was responding to *minim* (Christians).[24] Touitou's most convincing example of polemic relates to the Golden Calf episode. Although Nehama credited Rabbi Judah Halevi (*Kuzari* 1:97) for defending the honor of Israel in his interpretation of the Golden Calf episode,[25] she did not envision a similar possibility for Rashbam when he wrote (on Exod. 32:19) that Moses dropped the tablets because he was physically exhausted. As a result, Nehama rejected Rashbam's unusual interpretation outright:

> It appears to us that Rashbam, considered one of the greatest *pashtanim*, has distanced himself significantly from the *peshat* of the text. Does the text want to teach us about Moses' physical weakness? It appears that the description of the shattering of the tablets in Deuteronomy completely refutes his comments.[26]

To justify Rashbam, Touitou notes that medieval Christians viewed the Golden Calf episode as proof of Israel's failure to accept God (p. 229). They claimed further that Moses' shattering of tablets represented the abrogation of God's covenant with Israel. Well aware of these assertions, Rashbam feared that French Jews, suffering from persecution and discrimination in Christian society, might have their resolve further weakened by these arguments. Therefore, Rashbam eliminated the sting from the Christian position by maintaining that Moses was physically exhausted. But there is little doubt that he understood *peshat* in the verse.[27]

By demonstrating how certain interpretations of Rashi and Rashbam can be explained in historical context, Grossman and Touitou are able to justify why these commentators veered from *peshat* on occasion. Nehama's insistence on viewing Rashi and Rashbam exclusively as eyes to the text led her to rebuke Rashbam's interpretation of Moses' dropping the tablets and simply to ignore Rashi's comments on "*Anokhi. Esav bekhorekha.*" Moreover, she neglected opportunities to highlight the heroism and greatness of Rashi and Rashbam as religious leaders in medieval France.

However, the historical approach to *parshanut*, when taken too far, can undermine *peshat* learning. For example, Touitou (pp. 230–231) observes that Rashbam deviated from the midrashic reading of the sale of Joseph, maintaining that the Midianites (and not Joseph's brothers) sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites (Gen. 37:28). Touitou questions whether the text alone really would have motivated Rashbam to offer a new interpretation. Touitou further observes that Rashbam waited until *Parashat Vayyeshev* (Gen. 37:2) to introduce his discussion with his grandfather Rashi pertaining to the importance of *peshat*, and the ability to formulate *perushim ha-mehaddeshim be-khol yom* (new interpretations that develop each day).

Touitou proposes that Rashbam was responding to Christian paralleling of the Joseph narratives to the stories relating to the betrayal of their savior. Therefore, Rashbam wrote that the brothers did not sell Joseph in order to upset the parallels Christians were trying to create. Touitou further suggests that Rashbam waited until *Vayyeshev* to discuss his *peshat* methodology precisely because of the importance of anti-Christian polemics behind his emphasis on *peshat*.

Though stimulating, Touitou's hypothesis is unconvincing. Why did Rashbam fail to introduce the importance of *peshat* during so many earlier stories in Genesis also associated with polemics? More significantly, Touitou attempts to bolster his thesis by asking, "Is it reasonable that Rashbam would deviate from such an established interpretation," and by wondering whether the text alone really would have motivated Rashbam (p. 230). These questions essentially eliminate *peshat* study, and reduce *all* novel interpretations to polemical responses.

Nehama may have been unnecessarily harsh on Rashbam for his explanation of Moses' dropping the tablets out of exhaustion. However, that overly critical viewpoint appears to be a small price to pay for what otherwise might lead to the overlooking of a genuine text issue by relativizing an interpretation to historical circumstances. Nehama devoted an entire *iyyun* to the sale of Joseph, demonstrating how Rashbam derived his opinion from the text, and also how many later commentators adopted his approach.[28] While Rashbam's original reading subsequently could have been useful to counter Christian arguments, there is no reason to believe that polemics are what *motivated* Rashbam in this instance. His interpretation is reasonable, if not likely, in *peshat*.

For that matter, Nehama's ascribing Rabbi Judah Halevi's interpretation of the Golden Calf episode to his love of Israel also leads to this problem. Many later commentators, from Ibn Ezra until Amos

Hakham (*Da'at Mikra*), adopted the *Kuzari*'s general explanation as *peshat* in the narrative. By suggesting that Rabbi Judah Halevi was motivated by his love of Israel, Nehama sidestepped an important *peshat* debate that continues until today.

After all this discussion, it seems that one must modify Nehama's earlier comments only slightly: In her study of Rashi's selection of Midrashim, she should have written that Rashi *generally* cited Midrashim to address textual concerns, but occasionally allowed his overarching role as Jewish educator to supersede technical *peshat* considerations (as argued by Gelbard, Gottlieb, and Grossman). In her *iyyun* on Moses' shattering the tablets, Nehama might have extolled Rashbam as a religious leader[29] or omitted his comments, rather than sharply rejecting them.

However, Nehama's general approach still holds true: one always must begin by searching for text motivations for *mefarshim*. Only in cases where a *pashtan* does violence to the text, or when consistent exegetical patterns can be demonstrated, should one look elsewhere for possible motivations—and these must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. It is preferable to adopt Nehama's original position as a starting point, rather than to lose any dimension of the Torah itself.

Nehama's Avoidance of Diachronic Surveys of *Parshanut*

Uriel Simon's essay surveys *mefarshim* in chronological sequence, paying close attention to who had which commentaries before him (pp. 241–261). At the same time, he remains focused on text-based questions.

In her *iyyun* addressing why Joseph never contacted his family during his 22-year stay in Egypt, and Joseph's ostensibly vengeful behavior toward his brothers, Nehama wrote that all commentators addressed these issues.[30] Simon criticizes Nehama for saying that "*all* commentators" dealt with her questions—this simply is not true (p. 244). Simon then surveys Jewish interpretation from the Second Temple period through Abarbanel, demonstrating the impact of earlier writers on later writers, particularly with respect to the initial questions they asked when addressing the text. Simon demonstrates that without a diachronic study, one cannot appreciate the unique contributions of each commentator on a given issue.

Simon's essay is valuable, but it still leaves Nehama's *iyyun* intact—as an ahistorical study. Simon's discussion of the development of the ideas complements Nehama's exclusive text study and the relevance of the text to Jews today. Nehama did not stress the contributions of individual commentators, because she focused on the text itself.

Nehama's Reluctance to View *Tanakh* in Historical Context[31]

Moshe Ahrend observes that Nehama drew on a wide variety of sources, but generally avoided ancient Near Eastern sources (p. 47). Nehama appears to have been concerned that whatever benefits might be derived from such inquiry could be neutralized by the religious dangers inherent in considering a divine text in light of human-authored parallels.[32]

In addition to this motivation for Nehama's reluctance, her avoidance of ancient Near Eastern texts fits into her overall approach of eschewing the placing of *Tanakh* and *mefarshim* into historical frameworks. Yisrael Rozenson observes that even in those few instances when Nehama did refer to the historical setting of the Torah, she generally mined the parallels for psychological insight.[33] For example, Nehama cited the debate between Rashi and Ibn Ezra on Pharaoh's "readying his chariot" (Exod. 14:6): Rashi wrote that Pharaoh did so himself, whereas Ibn Ezra assumed that Pharaoh ordered his attendants to perform that labor. In support of Rashi's interpretation, Nehama cited James B. Pritchard's *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, which mentions that Thutmose III of Egypt personally went to the forefront of his battalion.[34] However, Nehama was not trying to bring a precedent to support Rashi's interpretation from a parallel context. She was bolstering the timeless, *psychological* interpretation of royal initiative as illustrated by Rashi. In her *iyyun*, Nehama then quoted a second "proof" for Rashi—King Abdullah's personally firing the first shot during Israel's War of

Independence!

Nehama in Her Context[35]

Nehama, of course, also reacted to the realities of her own time. She saw a troubling rate of assimilation among Jews. This may have factored into her emphasis on mitzvah observance, personal responsibility, psychological issues, and repentance, rather than abstract theological issues (see Cohn, p. 103; Horowitz, p. 207). Nehama accentuated these matters to the extent that they rightfully merit entire articles in *Pirkei Nehama*. Menahem Ben-Yashar addresses psychological-educational issues in Nehama's writings, Menahem Ben-Sasson analyzes Nehama's stress on repentance, and Erella Yedgar surveys Nehama's teachings of personal and interpersonal responsibility.[36]

Gavriel H. Cohn contrasts Nehama's approach with the one prevalent among secular Zionists, who studied *Tanakh* as ancient history and who placed archaeology at the forefront of their study (p. 27). Nehama's blanket avoidance of those dimensions is better understood in this context. Nehama emphasized the eternal relevance of the Torah, not its setting in the ancient world.

As Rivka Horowitz points out, Nehama realized that secular biblical scholarship often was inimical to traditional values and did not always value the meaning of each and every word in *Tanakh*. Could it be that Nehama's unusually sharp attacks against the "*rodfei ha-peshat*" (where Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Radak bear the brunt of her criticism) were also a veiled polemic against these secular scholars?

Like all traditionalists, Nehama believed that Jewish values emerge from the text of the Torah. She also considered any deviations from *peshat* a compromise to one's interpretation. Rashi was her ideal commentator, because he noticed the finest text nuances and tried to capture their religious messages. Perhaps her extreme assertion that Rashi cited Midrashim exclusively motivated by the text emerged from her confidence that Rashi shared her own approach (cf. Ahrend, pp. 44–45; Cohn, p. 97). As several writers in *Pirkei Nehama* have demonstrated, however, many earlier *mefarshim*—even Rashi—balanced textual and religious agendas in their commentaries.

Conclusion

The writers in *Pirkei Nehama* convincingly demonstrate that Nehama's principles of interpretation are limiting on several fronts. By downplaying the role of historical context, one loses dimensions of the Sages and later commentators as teachers and spiritual guides in history (Gottlieb, Grossman, Touitou). By treating all commentators synchronically, one does not appreciate the development of ideas over time, or the contributions of individual exegetes (Simon). By ignoring the historical setting of *Tanakh*, one forfeits the gains that parallel Near Eastern sources offer (Ahrend, G. Cohn). In a majority of these instances, however, Nehama appears to have consciously sacrificed those dimensions of *Tanakh* study in favor of the living discussions and evaluations made possible by her synchronic, non-historical focus.

Returning to the premise of Simon's article, much of our discussion revolves around the formulation of one's questions. Nehama asks: What does the Torah, as a divinely revealed, living document, teach us? How can Midrashim and *mefarshim* highlight these lessons? Simon asks: How has a given text been interpreted historically? When did different questions and ideas first appear in Jewish exegesis? What influence did earlier commentators have on later commentators? Grossman and Touitou ask: How did Rashi, Rashbam and others use their commentaries to promote their religious ideals in medieval Christian Europe?

Let us return to Rashi's treatment of "*Anokhi. Esav bekhorekha*." In a study parallel to his own on the Joseph narratives, Uriel Simon would quote Rashi's comment with its midrashic antecedents, and then show how later commentators generally rejected this interpretation as being distant from *peshat*. Avraham Grossman and Elazar Touitou would cite this comment of Rashi as proof that he was addressing polemical issues. Alternatively, or as a complementary suggestion, they could maintain that

Rashi was offering an educational lesson in the greatness of biblical heroes.[37]
For Nehama, though, these discussions may be important for understanding Rashi, but they are not relevant to a *peshat* understanding of the Jacob narratives. According to Nehama, the Torah teaches that Jacob erred in his deception, and paid a heavy price for it.[38] So naturally, she omitted Rashi's comments, which do not fit the *peshat* of the text.[39] A comment by Rashi such as this one undermines Nehama's sweeping assertion in her study of Rashi's methodology, where Rashi is the primary source. But her *iyyun*, where the Torah is the primary source, should not be, and is not, affected at all.
Ultimately, the tension between viewing *mefarshim* as secondary or primary sources always will remain. At the same time, however, the related disciplines ideally will grow together, shedding light on each other's insights. Our task is to remain fully conscious of these different perspectives, what each can contribute, and the strengths and limitations of each viewpoint. The essays in this volume successfully bring many of these issues into sharp focus.

Pirkei Nehama is a meaningful tribute to Nehama, exploring and evaluating her contributions to *Tanakh* and *parshanut*, her methodology, and her educational techniques. We may now better appreciate her work in its historical context and her learning and educational methods. We can appreciate the areas of inquiry generally missing from her approach. Most importantly, Nehama's legacy will not be found primarily in her contributions to our understanding of the *mefarshim*; it is in her peerless ability to use the teachings of our Sages and commentators to guide us lovingly through every nuance of the eternally relevant Torah.

Notes

[1] This article appeared in *Tradition* 38:4 (Winter 2004), pp. 112–128. Review of *Pirkei Nehama*: *Nehama Leibowitz Memorial Volume*, ed. Moshe Ahrend, Ruth Ben-Meir and Gavriel H. Cohn (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, The Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education, Department for Torah and Culture in the Diaspora, 2001); reprinted in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 56–76; revised second edition (New York: Kodesh Press, 2013), pp. 39–59; Angel, *Peshat Isn't So Simple* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2014), pp. 36–57.
I thank my students Shlomo Koyfman and Yehuda Kraut for reading earlier drafts of this essay and for their helpful comments. I am also indebted to my teachers Professor David Berger and Rabbi Shalom Carmy, who read later drafts of the essay and recommended several important revisions.
[2] *Limmud Parshanei ha-Torah u-Derakhim le-Hora'atam: Sefer Bereshit* (Hebrew), (Jerusalem: The Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education, Department for Torah and Culture in the Diaspora, 1975), introduction, p. 1.
[3] Several writers in *Pirkei Nehama* stress Nehama's emphasis on evaluating earlier opinions against the biblical text. See, for example, Gavriel H. Cohn, pp. 26–27; Moshe Ahrend, p. 36. Moshe Sokolow devotes much of his essay to this theme as well (pp. 297–306), quoting Nehama's remark to a student: "We are not Catholics; we do not have a pope to rule who is correct" (p. 297).
[4] Nehama preferred to accentuate the multidimensionality of the biblical text, rather than limiting herself to finding only one *peshat*. See, for example, Gavriel H. Cohn, p. 28.
[5] In this review, we will consider the following essays: Gavriel H. Cohn, "How I Love Your Torah" (pp. 25–30); Moshe Ahrend, "From My Work with Nehama, of Blessed Memory" (pp. 31–49); David Zafrany, "Nehama Leibowitz *z'l*'s Methodology in Adducing Rabbinic Statements" (pp. 71–92); Gavriel H. Cohn, "Midrashic Exegesis in the Torah Enterprise of Nehama Leibowitz" (pp. 93–108); Yitzhak Gottlieb, "'Why is it Juxtaposed' in Rashi's Commentary" (pp. 149–175); Shemuel P. Gelbard, "Aggadah Explains the Bible" (pp. 177–185); Avraham Grossman, "Religious Polemic and Educational Purpose in Rashi's Commentary on the Torah" (pp. 187–205); Rivka Horowitz, "Nehama Leibowitz and the 20th Century German Jewish Exegetes: Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Benno Jacob" (pp. 207–220); Elazar Touitou, "Between 'The Plain Sense of the Text' and 'The Spirit of the Text': Nehama Leibowitz's Relationship with Rashbam's Commentary on the Torah" (pp. 221–240); Uriel Simon, "The Exegete Is Recognized Not Only Through His Approach But Also Through His Questions" (pp. 241–261); Moshe Sokolow, "Authority and Independence: Comparisons and

Debates in Nehama's Teaching" (pp. 297–306); Amos Frisch, "A Chapter in Nehama's Teaching: Regarding 'Repeating Structures' in Biblical Narrative" (pp. 313–323). All page references to their articles refer to the pagination in *Pirkei Nehama*.

[6] See, for example, Nehama's treatment of Rashi and Rashbam to Exod. 3:10–12, in *Iyyunim Hadashim be-Sefer Shemot* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, Dept. for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, 1969), pp. 54–57. Surveys of traditional understandings of the term "*peshat*" can be found in Menahem M. Kasher, *Torah Shelemah*, vol. 17 (1956), pp. 286–312; David Weiss-Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 52–88; Moshe Ahrend, "Towards a Definition of the Term, '*Peshuto Shel Mikra*,'" (Hebrew), in *Ha-Mikra be-Re'i Mefarshav: Sara Kamin Memorial Volume*, ed. Sara Japhet (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994), pp. 237–261.

[7] In her article on Ramban's methodology, Ruth Ben-Meir ("Towards the Exegetical Approaches of Ramban" p. 125, n. 2) notes that Nehama quoted Ramban second only to Rashi.

[8] Several writers in *Pirkei Nehama* make reference to Nehama's citation of non-Orthodox scholars. See Mordechai Breuer ("Prof. Nehama Leibowitz, *a'h*"), p. 18; Gavriel H. Cohn, p. 28 (in n. 9, he notes that of the non-traditional sources Nehama used, they still generally were Jewish); Moshe Ahrend, p. 36. See also Aviad HaKohen, "'Hear the Truth from the One Who Says It,' This is the Great Principle of Nehama Leibowitz's Torah" (Hebrew), *Alon Shevut* 13 (1999), pp. 71–92.

[9] See pp. 657–658 for the text of Nehama's response to Rabbi Yehuda Ansbacher from 1980. In that letter, Nehama defended her drawing from the work of non-Orthodox scholars, including the fact that she was more impressed by Benno Jacob's rebuttals of Higher Biblical Criticism than even those of R. David Zvi Hoffmann. Although some have insisted that Benno Jacob and Martin Buber were more traditionally oriented because Nehama cited them, Nehama's letter makes it clear that she used their works because she learned from them. The final section of *Pirkei Nehama* contains primary sources and personal reminiscences that do not constitute a biography of Nehama, but do contribute toward seeing her work in the context of her life.

[10] "The Religious Significance of the *Peshat*," *Tradition* 23:2 (Winter 1988), p. 52.

[11] See *Ish ha-Halakhah—Galui ve-Nistar* (Jerusalem: The World Zionist Organization—Dept. for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, 1989), p. 232; cf. *Al ha-Teshuvah* (Jerusalem: The World Zionist Organization—Dept. for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, 1978), p. 296.

[12] Yisrael Rozenson, "The Exegete, the Interpretation, and History: An Observation on Nehama Leibowitz's Exegetical Approach" (Hebrew), in *Al Derekh ha-Avot: Thirty Years of Herzog College*, ed. Amnon Bazak, Shemuel Wygoda, and Meir Monitz (Alon Shevut: Tevunot Press, 2001), pp. 434, 437.

[13] The article first appeared in *Iyyunim Hadashim be-Sefer Shemot*, pp. 497–524. It was translated into English by Alan Smith, in *Torah Insights* (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, The Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education, Department for Torah and Culture in the Diaspora, 1995), pp. 101–142.

[14] Elazar Touitou, "Between Interpretation and Ethics: The Worldview of the Torah According to Rashi's Commentary" (Hebrew), in *Ha-Mikra be-Re'i Mefarshav: Sara Kamin Memorial Volume*, ed. Sara Japhet [Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1994], pp. 322–329) cites examples where Rashi drew from a Midrash, but altered the rabbinic formulation, probably to fit his own educational agenda. Cf. David Zafrany (pp. 71–92), who analyzes Nehama's citation of Midrashim including instances when she purposefully altered rabbinic formulations.

[15] "Rashi's Criteria for Citing Midrashim," in *Torah Insights*, pp. 101–105.

[16] Nehama agreed that Rashi's quoting a Midrash when there is a text difficulty is not the same as his asserting that this Midrash is to be considered the *peshat*. See her essay on Rashi's citing Midrashim (*Torah Insights*, p. 132): "We will bring one further eminent example to support our thesis that Rashi only cites a Midrash when he encounters a difficulty in the verse which he cannot explain in a simple (*peshat*) fashion." Cf. Yitzhak Gottlieb (p. 149, n. 3).

[17] See Yitzhak Baer, "Rashi and the Historical Realities of His Time" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 20 (1949), pp. 320–332; Elazar Touitou, "The Historical Background of Rashi's Commentary on *Parashat Bereshit*" (Hebrew), in *Rashi: Iyyunim be-Yetzirato*, ed. Zvi Aryeh Steinfeld (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1993), pp. 97–105; Elazar Touitou, "Between Interpretation and Ethics: The Worldview of the Torah According to Rashi's Commentary" (Hebrew), in *Ha-Mikra be-Re'i Mefarshav: Sara Kamin Memorial Volume*, ed. Sara Japhet (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press of Hebrew University, 1994), pp. 312–334.

[18] For documentation of Rashi's polemical interpretations outside of the Torah (especially on Isaiah and Psalms), see Yehuda Rosenthal, "The Anti-Christian Polemic in Rashi's Commentary on *Tanakh*" (Hebrew), in *Rashi: Torato ve-Ishiyuto*, ed. Shimon Federbush (New York: World Jewish Congress, and the Department of Education and Torah Culture of the Jewish Agency, 1958), pp. 45–59; Avraham Grossman, "Rashi's Commentary to Psalms and the Anti-Christian Polemic" (Hebrew), in *Mehkarim be-Mikra u-be-Hinnukh: In*

Honor of Moshe Ahrend, ed. Dov Rappel (Jerusalem: Touro College, 1996), pp. 59–74; Avraham Grossman, "The Commentary of Rashi on Isaiah and the Jewish-Christian Debate," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish Intellectual and Social History: Festschrift in Honor of Robert Chazan*, ed. David Engel et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 47–62. See also Avraham Grossman, "The Jewish-Christian Polemic and Jewish Biblical Exegesis in Twelfth Century France" (Hebrew), *Zion* 51 (1986), pp. 29–60, which deals primarily with Kara's involvement in polemics (see p. 29, n. 1 for further bibliography of scholarly literature). Shaye J. D. Cohen maintains that although Rashi certainly polemicized against Christianity in his commentary on *Nakh*, there is no evidence that he did so in his commentary on the Torah ("Does Rashi's Torah Commentary Respond to Christianity? A Comparison of Rashi with Rashbam and Bekhor Shor," in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, ed. Hindy Najman and Judith M. Newman [Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2004], pp. 449–472.)

[19] It is noteworthy that in her article, Nehama dealt exclusively with Rashi's commentary on the Torah, and specifically not on *Nakh* (see *Torah Insights*, p. 108, and p. 136, n. 5).

[20] For further discussion of Jacob's deception in medieval polemics, see David Berger, "On the Morality of the Patriarchs in Jewish Polemic and Exegesis," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), pp. 131–146. Prof. Berger (private communication) adds that it is not always easy to distinguish a "polemical" motive from a more general visceral dislike of Esau and his descendants.

[21] For discussions of the origins of the Edom-Rome-Christianity link in Jewish literature, see Gerson Cohen, "Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 19–48; Yair Hoffmann, "Edom as a Symbol of Wickedness in Prophetic Literature" (Hebrew), in *Ha-Mikra ve-Toledot Yisrael* (Festschrift Yaakov Liver), ed. Binyamin Uffenheimer (Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University Press, 1972), pp. 76–89; Moshe Sokolow, "Esav: From Edom to Rome," in *Mitokh Ha-Ohel: From within the Tent: The Haftarot*, ed. Daniel Z. Feldman and Stuart W. Halpern (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2011), pp. 65–77; Solomon Zeitlin, "The Origin of the Term Edom for Rome and the Roman Church," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 60 (1970), pp. 262–263.

[22] Grossman has since published a book-length study on Rashi's educational objectives: *Emunot ve-De'ot be-Olamo shel Rashi* (Hebrew) (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2008).

[23] Shemuel P. Gelbard, "Rashi's Objectives in His Commentary to the Torah" (Hebrew), *Megadim* 33 (2001), pp. 59–74.

[24] See also Elazar Touitou, "The Meaning of the Term '*Teshuvat ha-Minim*' in the Writings of Our French Rabbis" (Hebrew), *Sinai* 99 (1986), pp. 144–148.

[25] *Iyyunim Hadashim be-Sefer Shemot*, pp. 395–397.

[26] *Iyyunim Hadashim be-Sefer Shemot*, pp. 428–429.

[27] Touitou elaborates on Rashbam's treatment of the Golden Calf episode in "*Peshat* and Apologetic in Rashbam's Commentary to the Moses Narratives in the Torah" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 51 (1982), pp. 236–237. Prof. David Berger (private communication) considers Touitou's explanation attractive, but is unsure that the Christological understanding of the breaking of the tablets is prominent enough to account for such a radical departure from *peshat*. One must at least consider the possibility that Rashbam was troubled that Moses would destroy the most unique, holy, and apparently irreplaceable object in the world just because Jews were sinning.

[28] *Iyyunim be-Sefer Bereshit* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, Dept. for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, 1966), pp. 279–288.

[29] Cf. Nehama's sympathetic treatment of Abarbanel's deviation from *peshat* in *Iyyunim be-Sefer Devarim* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, Dept. for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, 1995), pp. 60–61.

[30] *Iyyunim be-Sefer Bereshit*, pp. 325–328.

[31] For a survey of medieval approaches to the historical aspect of Torah, see Uriel Simon, "*Peshat* Exegesis of Biblical History—Between Historicity, Dogmatism, and the Medieval Period" (Hebrew), in *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*, ed. Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler and Jeffrey Tigay (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), Hebrew section, pp. 171*–203*.

[32] Moshe Sokolow relates that "when invited by *Da'at Mikra* to prepare their commentary on Bereishit, Nehama declined. When I asked her why, she replied: Because I don't know the ancient Near East! When I pointed out that she always hastened to eschew ancient Near Eastern texts, she clarified: One can *understand* Bereishit without the ancient Near East, but one cannot write a commentary on Bereishit without it" (*Studies in the Weekly Parashah Based on the Lessons of Nehama Leibowitz* [Jerusalem: Urim, 2008], pp. 274–275). For an article discussing some implications of the use of ancient Near Eastern sources in Orthodox biblical scholarship, see Barry L. Eichler, "Study of Bible in Light of Our Knowledge of the Ancient Near East," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Jason

Aronson Inc., 1996), pp. 81–100.
[33] "The Exegete, the Interpretation, and History," pp. 448–449.
[34] *Iyyunim Hadashim be-Sefer Shemot*, pp. 183–188.
[35] For a biography of Nehama that also explores trends in her thought, see Yael Unterman, *Nehama Leibowitz: Teacher and Bible Scholar* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2009).
[36] Menahem Ben-Yashar, "Psychological and Educational Dimensions in Nehama Leibowitz's Exegesis" (pp. 341–355); Menahem Ben-Sasson, "Repentance in Nehama Leibowitz's *Iyyunim*: A Study in the Educational Purpose of the *Iyyunim*" (pp. 357–368); Erella Yedgar, "Personal and Interpersonal Responsibility in the Writings of Nehama Leibowitz: A Study in Her Value-Educational Agenda" (pp. 377–406).
[37] Avraham Grossman ("The Jewish-Christian Polemic and Jewish Biblical Exegesis in Twelfth Century France" [Hebrew], *Zion* 51 [1986], pp. 50–52) addresses medieval rabbinic defenses of biblical heroes in light of polemical considerations. Cf. David Berger, "On the Morality of the Patriarchs in Jewish Polemic and Exegesis," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), pp. 131–146.
[38] *Iyyunim be-Sefer Bereshit*, pp. 185–192.
[39] After dismissing Rashi's interpretation of "*Anokhi. Esav bekhorekha*," Ibn Ezra (on Gen. 27:19) defended Jacob's behavior on the grounds that the ends justify the means in this instance. This interpretation leads to a remarkable irony: Ibn Ezra's rejection of Rashi's explanation was based on his (correct) assumption that Rashi was compromising *peshat* learning. But Rashi (at least according to Grossman) made this "compromise" in order to save Jewish souls—the ends of saving souls justified the means of "deceitfully" providing an unsound interpretation. Rashi's greatest supporter, then, would be Ibn Ezra's justification of Jacob's behavior! For Nehama, however, neither approach was acceptable. Jacob himself was wrong in his deceit (see *Iyyunim be-Sefer Bereshit*, pp. 185–192), and Rashi likewise would never (in her judgment) deviate from *peshat* for non-textual religious agendas.