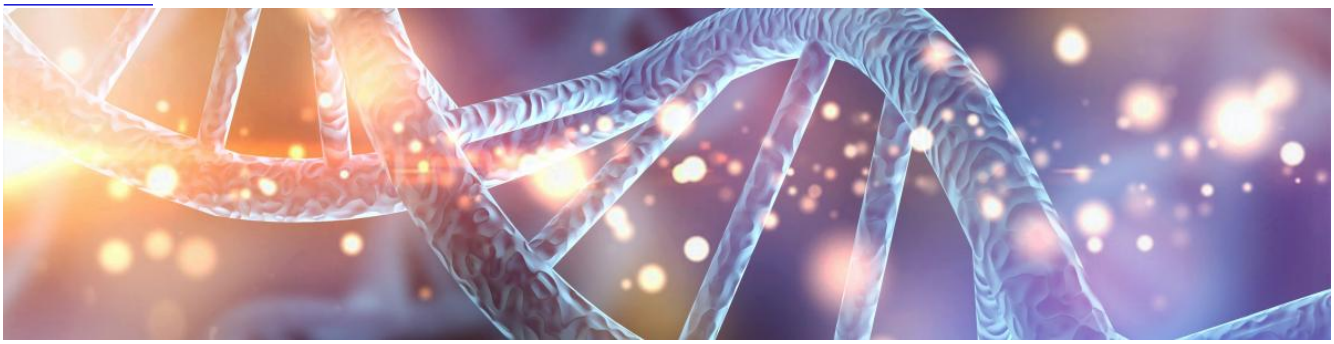
Controversies over the Historicity of Biblical Passages in Traditional Commentary

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Rabbi Hayyim Angel is National Scholar of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. He teaches Tanakh at Yeshiva University and has authored many important books and articles relating to Tanakh. This article appears in issues 27 and 44 of Conversations.

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Tanakh lies at the heart of Jewish faith, and comprises God's revealed word. Tanakh represents the truth for believing Jews. However, must or should every word be understood literally?

Do believing Jews need to insist that the world was created in seven 24-hour days? Is all humanity biologically descended from one couple that lived some 6,000 years ago?

God does not have hands or nostrils, despite many verses whose literal reading suggest otherwise. How are we to understand stories of angels who eat (Genesis 18) or wrestle (Genesis 32)?

Some also ask whether it is possible that King David really committed adultery and orchestrated murder as suggested by the literal biblical text (II Samuel 11), or whether King Solomon really worshipped idols (I Kings 11).

Rabbi Saadiah Gaon (882–942) maintained that biblical texts should be taken literally, unless one of four criteria is met:

And I so declare, first of all, that it is a well-known fact that every statement in the Bible is to be understood in its literal sense except for those that cannot be so construed for one of the following four reasons: It may, for example, either be rejected by the observation of the senses…Or else the literal sense may be negated by reason…. Again [the literal meaning of a biblical statement may be rendered impossible] by an explicit text of a contradictory nature, in which case it would become necessary to interpret the first statement in a non-literal nature…. Finally, any biblical statement to the meaning of which rabbinical tradition has attached a certain reservation is to be interpreted by us in keeping with this authentic tradition. (*Emunot VeDe'ot* Book VII)[1]

If the literal reading of a biblical text contradicts empirical observation, logic, another biblical text, or rabbinic tradition, then it must be reinterpreted.

Following in Rabbi Saadiah's footsteps, Rambam agreed that if logic or scientific knowledge contradicts the literal sense of a biblical text, that text must not be taken literally[2]:

I believe every possible happening that is supported by a prophetic statement and do not strip it of its plain meaning. I fall back on interpreting a statement only when its literal sense is impossible, like the corporeality of God: The possible however remains as stated. (*Treatise on Resurrection*)[3]

Rambam included considerably more than God's corporeality among the impossible, and therefore allegorized many biblical passages. Other rabbinic thinkers adamantly opposed this method of interpretation, protesting that it imposed foreign ideas onto the biblical text. Additionally, it created a dangerous slippery slope for interpreters to allegorize far too many passages.[4]
In this essay, I will consider several debates as they pertain to the interface between Torah and science, Torah and logic, and Torah and other religious concerns such the sins of biblical heroes. Although the two sides of the debate often vigorously disagree, it is possible to chart a path that hears the voices of both sides.

Torah and Science

Some believe that there are conflicts between Torah and science. Science states that the world is billions of years old; there was a process of evolution; and it is unlikely in the extreme that all humans biologically descend from the same couple that lived only 6,000 years ago. The literal reading of the early chapters in Genesis does not seem to match the scientific account.

However, there need not be any conflict between Torah and science. As noted above, Rabbi Saadiah Gaon and Rambam maintain that whenever the literal reading of the Torah contradicts empirical evidence, the Torah should not be taken literally. In his discussion of Aristotle's theory of the eternality of the world, Rambam rejects it because Aristotle was unable to prove his theory. However, were Aristotle able to prove it, Rambam would reinterpret Genesis chapter 1 (*Guide of the Perplexed* II:25). Rambam did not believe that the entire creation account was intended as literal, either (*Guide of the Perplexed* II:29).
More recently, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote that as long as one believes that God created the world, the length or process of the creation is not a binding article of faith:

Judaism is not frightened even by the hundreds of thousands and millions of years which the geological theory of the earth's development bandies about so freely…. The Rabbis have never made the acceptance or rejection of this and similar possibilities an article of faith binding on all Jews. They were willing to live with any theory that did not reject the basic truth that "every beginning is from God." (*The Educational Value of Judaism*, in *Collected Writings*, vol. VII, p. 265)[5]

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook made a similar point regarding the Theory of Evolution:

> Even if it were to become clear to us that the world came into being by way of the evolution of the species, still there would be no contradiction, for our count follows the plain sense of the biblical verses, which is far more relevant to us than knowledge about the past, which carries little value for us. Without question, the Torah concealed much about creation, speaking in allusions and parables. For everyone knows that the creation story is included among the secrets of the Torah, and if everything followed the

> plain sense [of the verses], what secret would there be here?...The main thing is what arises from the entire story—knowing God and [living] a truly moral life. (*Iggerot Ra'ayah* I, letters 91, p. 105)[6]

Instead of reinterpreting the Torah to match science, one could argue that the Torah does not teach scientific truth, but rather religious truth. From this perspective, a believing Jew accepts the religious messages of the Torah, while accepting science from scientists. In his introduction to the Torah, Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto espoused this position:

> Intelligent people understand that the goal of the Torah is not to inform us about natural sciences; rather it was given in order to create a straight path for people in the way of righteousness and law, to sustain in their minds the belief in the Unity of God and His Providence.

Commenting on Psalm 19:6–7, which describes the sun moving across the sky, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch similarly remarks:

> David, as do all the Holy Scriptures, talks in the language of men. His language is the same as that of Copernicus, Kepler and Newton, and as that which we use today…. This language will remain the same even when the assumption that the sun is static and that the earth revolves around it—and not the sun around the earth—will have been proven to be irrefutable certainty. For it is not the aim of the Holy Scriptures to teach us astronomy, cosmogony or physics, but only to guide man to the fulfillment of his life's task within the framework of the constellation of his existence. For this purpose it is quite irrelevant whether the course of days and years is determined by the earth's revolution around the sun, or by the latter's orbit around the former.[7]

In his inaugural address as the second president of Yeshiva College and the Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Theological Seminary delivered on May 23, 1944, Rabbi Dr. Samuel Belkin expressed similar sentiments:

It is not our intention to make science the handmaiden of religion nor religion the handmaiden of science. We do not believe in a scientific religion nor in a pseudo-science. We prefer to look upon science and religion as separate domains which need not be in serious conflict and therefore need no reconciliation.[8]

In a more pointed manner, Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz dismissed the possibility of reading the Torah as a history or science textbook:

> If the Holy Scriptures were sources of information, it would be difficult to see where their sacredness resided.... The idea that the Shekhinah (God's Presence) descended on Mount Sinai in order to compete with the professor who teaches history or physics is ludicrous, if not blasphemous.[9]

To summarize, there is ample room within tradition to avoid faith-science conflicts. One may reinterpret passages in the Torah, or one may study the Torah for its religious messages while accepting science as science. In an age where science is vastly more empirical than it was in the times of Rabbi Saadiah Gaon and Rambam, it is particularly valuable that these rabbinic thinkers paved a path for belief in the Torah without any conflict with scientific knowledge.[10] Their guidance helps us focus on what truly matters—the religious messages that the Torah wishes to teach.

Torah and Logic[11]

1. *Angelic encounters*

Rambam maintained that all angelic encounters were experienced in prophetic visions, not in actual reality (*Guide of the Perplexed* II:41–42). There are occasions where this principle helps explain difficult texts. For example, when Joshua encountered an angel "in Jericho" (Joshua 5:13–15), that city had yet to be captured. Rambam's assumption, that Joshua was experiencing a prophetic vision, eliminates this difficulty. In a prophetic vision, Joshua *could* have been standing inside of Jericho.[12]

On other occasions, however, Rambam's assumption appears to contradict or stretch the literal reading of the biblical text. For example, Rambam maintained that Abraham's encounter with the three angels in Genesis 18 must have occurred in a prophetic vision (*Guide of the Perplexed* II:32). Ramban (on Genesis 18:1) censured this position. If this were only a vision, why does the Torah provide so many details with regard to Sarah's preparation of food? Did Lot and the wicked people of Sodom experience prophetic revelation when they encountered the angels in Genesis 19? If they were experiencing prophecy, then Lot would still have remained in Sodom, since the entire destruction was experienced only in prophecy! Ramban believed that Rambam's position is incompatible with the

Torah.[13]
Rambam's premise about angels also became a potentially dangerous precedent. Abarbanel (on Genesis 22:13) expressed chagrin that some writers applied Rambam's principle to argue that the Binding of Isaac occurred only in Abraham's prophetic vision, since an angel stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac.[14] Abarbanel considered this view a terrible misapplication of Rambam's teachings, and stated that it was wrong to deny the historicity of the Binding of Isaac.

2. *God's unusual instructions to prophets*
Throughout Tanakh, God ordered prophets to perform symbolic actions, including several that appear shocking. For example, God instructed Hosea to marry an *eshet zenunim* (commonly translated as "prostitute"[15]) to illustrate Israel's infidelity to God. The ensuing narrative reports that Hosea did so, and fathered three children with her (Hosea 1:2–9). Similarly, God commanded Isaiah to "untie the sackcloth from his loins" to foretell that the Assyrians would lead the Egyptians and Ethiopians away as naked captives. Isaiah faithfully obeyed, and walked around *arom* (literally, "naked") and barefoot (Isaiah 20:2–6).
Rambam insisted that God never would order a prophet to do anything foolish or irrational. Therefore, Hosea and Isaiah performed these actions only in prophetic visions:

God is too exalted than that He should turn His prophets into a laughingstock and a mockery for fools by ordering them to commit acts of disobedience. In the same way when He says, *Like as My servant Isaiah hath walked naked and barefoot*, this only happened *in the visions of God.* The position is similar with regard to the words addressed to Hosea: *Take unto thee a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry*. All this story concerning the birth of the children and their having been named so and so happened in its entirety *in a vision of prophecy.* This is a thing that can only be doubted or not known by him who confuses the possible things with the impossible ones. (*Guide of the Perplexed* II:46)[16]

According to Rambam, Hosea did not actually marry a prostitute,[17] nor did Isaiah walk around naked in public.[18] When a conflict arises between the personal perfection of a prophet and his mission to the people, Rambam favored the element of personal perfection.
Abarbanel criticized Rambam (and Ibn Ezra) for contradicting biblical texts, which state explicitly that Hosea and Isaiah performed these actions:

One must be extremely astonished at these learned authors (i.e., Ibn Ezra and Rambam)—how could they advance this kind of sweeping principle in prophetic narrative? If the text testifies that the action occurred, we have no right to depart from its plain sense, lest we interpret the verses incorrectly. Indeed, it is infidelity and a grave sin (*zimmah va-avon pelili*) to contradict the plain sense of the verses; if this is what we do to them, this disease (*tzara'at*) will spread over all verses and reveal interpretations that contradict their veracity. (commentary on Hosea 1)

Abarbanel insisted that a prophet's mission to the people is more important than the prophet's personal perfection and dignity. Therefore, according to Abarbanel, if God decides that these shocking symbolic actions could have a positive religious effect on the people, God will order prophets to perform them.

3. *Messianic visions*

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid. In all of My sacred mount nothing evil or vile shall be done; for the land shall be filled with devotion to the Lord as water covers the sea. (Isaiah 11:6, 9)

Believing that the natural order will not be altered in the messianic era, Rambam adopted Ibn Ezra's reading of this prophecy and interpreted it as a poetic way to express that all nations will live together in peace (*Laws of Kings* 12:1; *Guide of the Perplexed* II:29).

Unlike the previous examples, however, Rambam entertained the literal reading of Isaiah 11:6–9 as a possible meaning:

You must realize that I am not at all positive that all the promises and the like of them are metaphorical. No revelation from God has come to teach me they are parables. I will only explain to you what impels me to speak this way. I try to reconcile the Law and reason, and wherever possible consider all things as of the natural order. Only when something is explicitly identified as a miracle, and reinterpretation of it cannot be accommodated, only then I feel forced to grant that this is a miracle. (*Treatise on Resurrection*)[19]

Although there were issues that Rambam considered irrational and impossible, there were others where he allegorized because he thought this to be the most plausible way of explaining a text. In those latter instances, he was willing to entertain the more literal reading.

Torah and Talmudic Values[20]

In the above cases, literalism is associated with piety and non-literalism with rationalism. But sometimes it goes the other way. Some, following one strand of talmudic thinking, hold that King David didn't really commit adultery and orchestrate murder in spite of the literal biblical text (II Samuel 11), or that King Solomon didn't really worship idols (I Kings 11).

In II Samuel chapter 11, David commits adultery with Bathsheba, and then has her husband Uriah killed off so that David can marry Bathsheba. The prophet Nathan excoriates him in chapter 12, and David expresses profound remorse for his sins before embarking on a remarkable process of repentance.[21]

Adopting the literal reading of the text, Abarbanel enumerates five sins committed by David: (1) adultery; (2) being prepared to abandon his biological child by asking Uriah to return to Bathsheba; (3) having Uriah—a loyal subject—killed; (4) having Uriah killed specifically by enemies; (5) insensitively marrying Bathsheba soon after Uriah's demise.

Abarbanel then cites the Gemara: "whoever says that David sinned is merely erring" (Shabbat 56a). That talmudic passage suggests that Uriah had given a bill of divorce to Bathsheba prior to going to battle, and therefore David did not commit technical adultery. Uriah should be deemed a rebel against David for slighting the king, and therefore David was halakhically justified in having him killed (commentators debate what the precise problem was, within this talmudic reading). Although David's actions were unbecoming, he is not guilty of the most egregious sins according to this passage.

However, retorts Abarbanel, the textual proofs adduced in David's defense are uncompelling, whereas the prophet Nathan explicitly accuses David of sinning—and David confesses and repents. Moreover, Rav, the leading disciple of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi (known simply as "Rabbi"), dismisses his teacher's defense of David on the spot: "Rabbi, who is descended from David, seeks to defend him

and expounds [the verse] in David's favor." Therefore, concludes Abarbanel, "these words of our Sages are the ways of *derash*, and I have no need to respond to them.... I prefer to say that [David] sinned greatly and confessed greatly and repented fully and accepted his punishment, and in this manner he attained atonement for his sins."[22]

Although Abarbanel presents himself as an independent *pashtan* in this instance, he has not broken with rabbinic tradition. A number of rabbinic sources do not exonerate David. For example, there are opinions that Bathsheba was possibly a married woman or certainly a married woman;[23] that Bathsheba's consent still might be viewed halakhically as a form of rape of a married woman since she was not in a position to decline;[24] that David was culpable for the death of Uriah;[25] that Joab bears guilt for failing to defy David's immoral orders regarding Uriah.[26] The unambiguous textual evidence against David, including his own admission of guilt and wholehearted repentance, seems to have convinced Abarbanel that it was unnecessary to cite additional sources beyond Rav's dismissal of his teacher's defense of David.[27]

Despite these protests, many other commentators, including Rashi, Radak, Ralbag, and Malbim, accept the talmudic defense of David in Shabbat 56a. There is a religious balance between viewing biblical heroes with proper reverence and simultaneously listening to the the biblical text.[28]

Navigating a Path that Hears Both Sides of the Debate

Once we recognize that the most critical component of learning Tanakh is to hear God's revealed word and learn the prophetic messages of the text, we can address the issue of taking each text literally.

If we take the texts literally but not as dogmatically literal when there are conflicts, we can make much headway in navigating the debates. For example, the Sages debate whether the story in the Book of Job occurred. Rambam believed that the story did not occur, but stressed that we must focus on the religious messages of the narrative:

To sum up: *whether he has existed or not*, with regard to cases like his, which always exist, all reflecting people become perplexed; and in consequence such things as I have already mentioned to you are said about God's knowledge and His providence. (*Guide of the Perplexed* III:22)[29]

Similarly, the Torah states that God created the world in seven days, thereby teaching that God created the world, and that Shabbat is of vital importance in the God-Israel relationship. If the world is billions of years old, this scientific reality in no way detracts from the religious values of God as Creator above nature or in the importance of Shabbat.

The Torah teaches that all of humanity is descended from one couple, and therefore there is no room for racism (Sanhedrin 37a). If geneticists demonstrate the extreme unlikelihood of all people descending from one couple that lived 6,000 years ago, this scientific reality in no way diminishes God's message in the Torah against racism.

The sins of King David teach the dangers of lust (Rabbi Judah HeHasid), the power of repentance (Abarbanel), and the incredible integrity of prophecy in its willingness to condemn Israel's most beloved leader when he violates the Torah. If Uriah gave Bathsheba abill of divorce, that would

in no way compromise the prophetic messages of the text.

Tanakh is not a systematic theology, science, or history. We treat nearly all of Tanakh as historical, but God did not reveal prophecies to the prophets in order to teach science or history. God is speaking to us, and it is our religious obligation to hear, understand, and listen to that voice. We take all of the texts seriously, even if some of them may be understood as non-literal. Where there are debates among our commentators, we may navigate the path of taking the texts literally to learn their prophetic messages, while remaining open to science, reason, and other religious values from within tradition.[30]

[1] Translation from R. Natan Slifkin, *The Challenge of Creation: Judaism's Encounter with Science, Cosmology, and Evolution* (Brooklyn, NY: Yashar, 2006), p. 107.

[2] See Menachem Kellner, "Maimonides' Commentary on Mishnah Hagigah II.1, Translation and Commentary," in *From Strength to Strength*, ed. Marc D. Angel (Brooklyn: Sefer Hermon Press, 1998), pp. 101–111.

[3] Translation from *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Rambam*, Abraham S. Halkin, trans. and D. Hartman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), p. 228.

[4] See R. Natan Slifkin, *The Challenge of Creation*, pp. 116–119, for discussion of the opposition of Ralbag and Abarbanel to over-allegorization.
[5] In R. Natan Slifkin, *The Challenge of Creation*, p. 119.
[6] In R. Chaim Navon, *Genesis and Jewish Thought*, trans. David Strauss (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2008), pp. 36–37.
[7] *The Hirsch Tehillim, Extensively Revised Edition,* originally translated by Gertrude Hirschler (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 2014), p. 167.
[8] In Zev Eleff, *Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2016), p. 208.
[9] *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, ed. Eliezer Goldman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) p. 140.
[10] For a detailed discussion of this religious position, extensive sources, and applications to contemporary scienctific knowledge, see R. Natan Slifkin, *The Challenge of Creation*.
[11] Some of this section is adapted from Hayyim Angel, "Rambam's Continued Impact on Underlying Issues in *Tanakh* Study," in *The Legacy of Maimonides: Religion, Reason and Community*, ed. Yamin Levy and Shalom Carmy (Brooklyn: Yashar Books, 2006), pp. 148–164; reprinted in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 35–55; revised second edition (New York: Kodesh Press, 2013), pp. 19–38; *Peshat Isn't So Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2014), pp. 58–79.

[12] Ralbag adopted Rambam's view on these verses. Alternatively, Joshua may have been standing in the Jericho area, not inside the walled city (Rashi, Radak).

[13] See further discussion of this debate in Shalom Rosenberg, "On Biblical Exegesis in the *Guide*" (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1 (1981),

pp. 113–120.

[14] See discussion in Abraham Nuriel, “Parables Not Designated Parables in the *Guide to the Perplexed*” (Hebrew), *Da’at* 25 (1990), pp. 85–91.

[15] See, for example, Pesahim 87a–b, Kara, Ibn Ezra, Radak, Abarbanel, Malbim. Yehudah Kiel (*Da’at Mikra: Twelve Prophets vol. 1* [Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1990], p. 3, n. 6) suggests the alternative that the woman was not yet promiscuous, but would cheat on Hosea after they were married.

[16] Translation from *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Shlomo Pines, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 404–406.

[17] On this issue, Rambam followed Ibn Ezra (Hosea 1:1). Radak accepted Rambam’s view in both cases.

[18] Several commentators who understood Isaiah’s actions as having occurred in a waking state explained that “*arom*” can mean “with torn clothing,” or “scantily clad,” rather than outright “naked.” See, for example, Targum, Rashi, R. Eliezer of Beaugency, Ibn Caspi. For further discussion of classical rabbinic views, and the meaning of Isaiah’s symbolic action in light of his historical setting, see Shemuel Vargon, “Isaiah’s Prophecy Against the Background of Ashdod’s Revolt Against Sargon II and Its Suppression” (Hebrew), in Vargon, *BeArtzot HaMikra: Mehkarim BeNevuah, BeHistoriah, UbeHistorigraphiah Nevuit* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2015), pp. 104–122.

[19] Translation from *Crisis and Leadership*, Abraham S. Halkin, p. 223.

[20] Some of this section is adapted from Hayyim Angel, “Abarbanel: Commentator and Teacher: Celebrating 500 Years of his Influence on Tanakh Study,” *Tradition* 42:3 (Fall 2009), pp. 9–26; reprinted in Angel, *Creating Space between Peshat and Derash: A Collection of Studies on Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2011), pp. 1–24; *Peshat Isn’t So Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2014), pp. 80–104.

[21] See further in Hayyim Angel,“The Yoke of Repentance: David’s Post-Sin Conduct in the Book of Samuel and Psalm 51,” at http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/818982/Rabbi_Hayyim_Angel/The_Yoke_of_Repentance:_David%I Sin_Conduct_in_Sefer_Shemuel….

[22] Samuel, pp. 342–343.

[23] Bava Metzia 59a; Sanhedrin 107a; *Midrash Psalms* 3:4.

[24] Ketuvot 9a.

[25] Yoma 22b; Kiddushin 43a.

[26] Sanhedrin 49a.

[27] Abarbanel was not the first medieval interpreter to assert David's guilt, either. Rabbi Judah b. Natan (Rashi's son-in-law, in *Teshuvot Hakhmei Provencia*, vol. 1 no. 71), Rabbi Isaiah de Trani (on Psalms 51:1), and Ibn Caspi (on II Samuel 11:6) preceded him. For a survey of rabbinic sources, see R. Yaakov Medan, *David U-Bat Sheva* (Hebrew) (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2002), especially pp. 7–26.
[28] For discussions of this balance, see R. Amnon Bazak, *Ad HaYom HaZeh: Until This Day: Fundamental Questions in Bible Teaching* (Hebrew), ed. Yoshi Farajun (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2013), pp. 432-470; R. Shalom Carmy, "To Get the Better of Words: An Apology for *Yir'at Shamayim* in Academic Jewish Studies," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 2 (1990), pp. 7–24; R. Aharon Lichtenstein, "A Living Torah" (Hebrew), in *Hi Sihati: Al Derekh Limmud HaTanakh*, ed. Yehoshua Reiss (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013), pp. 17–30; R. Yaakov Medan, *David UBat Sheva: HaHet, HaOnesh, VeHaTikkun* (Hebrew) (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2002), pp. 7–24; R. Joel B. Wolowelsky, "*Kibbud Av* and *Kibbud Avot*: Moral Education and Patriarchal Critiques," *Tradition* 33:4 (Summer 1999), pp. 35–44; R. Joel B. Wolowelsky, "Abraham's Stories," in *Rav Shalom Banayikh: Essays Presented to Rabbi Shalom Carmy by Friends and Students in Celebration of Forty Years of Teaching*, ed. Hayyim Angel and Yitzchak Blau (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2012), pp. 385–401.
[29] Translation from *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Shlomo Pines, p. 486.
[30] For an effort to define the parameters of what is traditionally acceptable within the allegorization of biblical passages, see Joshua L. Golding, "On the Limits of Non-Literal Interpretation of Scripture from an Orthodox Perspective," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 10 (2001), pp. 37–59.