From Devar to Torah: Or Wittgenstein's Big Shoes

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I

This is my second symposium on Tanakh education for *Conversations*, and there have been countless others, elsewhere, on related topics.[1] Each time I have aimed to approach the subject from a different angle, and to examine where my thinking has changed. This time, alas, the questions posed to us about the challenges to Tanakh education impel me to be frank about our difficulties. My solace is that the situation is far different in Israel, and for the better.

To start with three glaring deficiencies in our education. One is that *frum* (religious) discussion of Tanakh, whether you call it *devar Torah* or sermon, is detached from *peshat* (the plain meaning of the text), both *peshat* in the biblical text and careful reading of the classical rabbinic sources. It is often an exercise in homiletical whimsy, as evanescent as Jonah’s gourd, conceived for the moment, and almost immediately forgettable, a “treadmill to intellectual oblivion.” In my previous life as an editor, I would get material from rabbis and laypeople, who had been encouraged to consider their *devar* (sic!) print-worthy, and it was

awkward trying to explain the difference between the fruits of their lucubration and the real thing. For the most part these productions are harmless, but cumulatively they deliver the message that anything goes, and they reinforce the feeling, more generally propagated by the internet, that discussing Tanakh and other theologically significant matters, does not require much of an attention span.

Partly as a reaction to this perceived arbitrariness, partly out of curiosity and a desire to be "modern," superior, academic, and up-to-date, there is an opposite tendency: to treat Tanakh earnestly as a basket of "problems." One gravitates toward tidbits of comparative Semitics or Ancient Near Eastern discoveries, or technical phenomena like *Qeri/Ketiv.* More ambitiously, one concentrates on some of the challenges posed by biblical criticism (with special attention to those that can be talked about while standing on one foot), picks up rumors of scholarship in the media, attends lectures. Here, of course, especially with Higher and Lower Criticism, there is a danger of heresy or pseudo-heresy. However, even when no theological lines are crossed, such an attitude leads to trivialization of the word of God. The academic or controversial talking points take priority over the encounter with *Torat HaShem*.

This is liable to happen precisely because the more "devout" alternatives, in their own way, are also pleased to sidestep serious reading of the text in favor of the glib *devar.* Also because the prevalent mode of interpretation in our synagogues and schools tends to be univocal—what is commonly called the "takeaway" is supposed to be clear, unambiguous, all neatly wrapped up and tied with a bow. The study of great literature, history, and the like might force us to recognize that often, for the crucial questions in human life, there are no simple bottom-line solutions, and if our liberal arts studies were alive and healthy, they would contribute depth to our study of Torah as well.[2] But that is a different subject; as we are, one shallowness calls out to the other. Sadly, when speaking with individuals fully in the grip of "modernism," it is impossible even to explain to them what they are missing.

Last and most urgent is the problem of sheer ignorance. Tanakh is not much taught, what is taught is rarely retained, and 12 or more years of putatively intensive Jewish education are apparently insufficient to give young people adequate resources to allow serious study of Tanakh and its commentators (or even Talmud for that matter) in the original. I leave it for others to judge whether

this is a consequence of neglect or incompetence on the part of elementary school and high school teachers, or fear that pursuing mastery with young students will damage fragile egos, or other factors. In my work, I witness the panic provoked in seemingly healthy young people by the challenge of Hebrew. Among the not-so-Modern Orthodox I have met *baalei keria* (readers of the Torah in synagogue services) unsettled by what they perceive to be arcane and intimidating explanations of the fact that, in the Torah, initial letters of a word sometimes have the *dagesh kal* and sometimes do not.

You may argue, correctly, that my laments concern only the poorly educated “masses,” not the elite. Indeed, our most intelligent and diligent students and thinkers are in no way inferior to the best of yesterday and it is the best that we should be nurturing. What this argument leaves out is that, in an egalitarian environment, the weakest dictate the tone and standard for the rest. Invincible mediocrity among adults, reinforced in the schooling of the young, “trickles up” and demoralizes the best. You may also observe, regarding the first two of my complaints, that I, having taught Tanakh and Jewish thought for so many decades to so many of the rabbis and teachers out in the field, did not successfully communicate better alternatives, and cannot disclaim responsibility for our collective failure.

II

Last week my class in the Book of Exodus confronted Seforno’s overview of the book. Seforno quotes Ezekiel 20, where the prophet states that the Israelites in Egypt were rife with idolatry and that God took them out of Egypt only to prevent desecrating God’s Name. Hazal already noted that this damning information was suppressed for 850 years, from the time of the Torah to the time of Ezekiel. The implication would be that a *peshat* reading of Exodus would not incorporate the information we get from Ezekiel and that is reiterated in Midrashim. Seforno, however, relied on the content of Ezekiel’s prophecy in interpreting the Torah. Studying Seforno compels us to take up a variety of significant questions: Is he right to perceive hints to Israelite corruption in Exodus *?* Is their sin mitigated by partial repentance? Why does Rambam, referring to the idolatry in Egypt mentioned in Ezekiel, claim that God rescued the people due to the oath God swore to Abraham? Are the ups and downs in Israel’s response to

Moses linked to the history of betrayal? How is the record of idolatry in Ezekiel similar or different from Joshua 24, where we are reminded that Terah was an idolater? Why are these matters raised in Ezekiel and in Joshua?

If we aim to enhance our study of Tanakh and the commentators, it is essential to read them with care and it is equally crucial to bring to them our own questions. It may be useful, sometimes very useful, to consult academic scholarship on the Jewish exegetes, their cultural background, generalizations about their methods, the history of their printed texts, but the considerations emerging from the previous paragraph are not conditional on out of the way secondary resources. The first and last requirement is reading and thinking alertly.

In the case just examined I did not propose solutions. Study first, make speeches later. Asking the right questions is the first step in the quest for answers. Those of us who teach are expected, at least occasionally, to make original points, preferably true. But the quest for truth and wisdom begins with questions persistently pursued. I would not exchange such reflection for a *devar*, or for a veritable wilderness of *devar's*.

III

Sometimes the spur to analysis is not our spontaneous reflection or our study of the traditional resources. What about academic publications and specifically what about books and articles that are dismissive of Orthodox doctrine and indifferent to our God-fearing orientation? The simple answer is that it depends on whether the questions they raise and pursue are worthy of our attention or not. It may be more useful to look at an example than to speak in the abstract.

When I received the invitation to contribute to this discussion, I was in the middle of reading Adi Ophir and Ishay Rosen-Zvi's *Goy: Israel's Multiple Others and the Birth of the Gentile.* This book is mainly about post-biblical Judaism, rabbinic and non-rabbinic literature of the talmudic period, but it contains interesting analysis of Tanakh as well. The thesis of the book is that the idea of "*goy*," the non-

differentiated ontological “other” of the Jew, is a relatively late invention. Biblical literature spoke of specific nations, Moabites and Egyptians, for example, and defined Gentiles in terms of their practices, such as idolatry, but did not assign them to one all-inclusive, metaphysical category of Gentile. This general thesis should be of interest to anyone concerned with the subject of Jewish identity as it developed and as it is articulated in our sources.

Here let me focus on an aspect of the book relevant to Tanakh. Many eschatological texts concern the Gentile nations. Some describe war or potential war involving the nations or specified nations against God and/or Israel (Joel 3–4; Ezekiel 38–39; Zechariah 12 and 14). The same prophets envision the nations serving God and worshipping in God’s Temple (e.g., Zechariah 8 and 14; Zephaniah 3; Isaiah 56 and 66, *inter alia*). Some assign a positive future status to converts (Isaiah 56; Ezekiel 47). Most of these sources turn up in the Ophir-Rosen-Zvi volume. In theory one could notice the same phenomena simply by studying the primary texts and the traditional commentaries. In practice, reading the book contributed to my thinking, and invited further reflection.

Here comes the caveat. The atmosphere and content of the presentation is academic, not religious. No surprise that the books of the Torah are dated and analyzed in conformity with preferred versions of biblical criticism. No surprise that, when prophetic accounts of the ideal future are contrasted with the books of Ezra and Nehemiah which condemn intermarriage with Gentiles, the obligatory buzzwords of modernity, words like “xenophobic,” and “separationist” are used to condemn halakhic Judaism. Quite apart from specific issues of theological truth, it is taken for granted that the Torah, both Written and Oral, should be treated not with reverence, but as a specimen of intellectual history that is judged from the superior perspective of secular scholarship.

How should this affect the Orthodox reader? If you open the Tanakh or listen to discourses linked to Tanakh in search of inspiration or comfort food for the brain, no benefit accrued from studying such works can outweigh the discomfort it engenders and the potential corrosion of faithfulness. Even the serious student cannot dismiss reflexively the threat of intellectual and religious corruption in this field, as is the case in so many other areas of confrontation with contemporary secular culture. How to prepare and fortify oneself?

One prerequisite is knowledge. That includes, first and foremost, knowing one's way around Tanakh and being fully at home with the long history of Jewish interpretation. For those who think they will benefit from the academic literature, it means acquiring fluency in the substance and language of non-Jewish interpretation and academic scholarship, being able to readily "translate" their premises, arguments, insights, and aims into our own way of speaking and thinking, somewhat as students of foreign languages and cultures learn to think like the natives and to understand intuitively a cultural frame of reference alien to theirs. This is easier said than done, especially when the learner, by definition, begins without the needed background.

The Orthodox student must be a person of robust faith. Academic study is only one area where this is necessary. By faith, in this context, I mean not only subscribing to all the correct beliefs and rejecting the heretical ones. Being faithful means being steadfast in one's commitment. This is hard to achieve under the pressure of increasingly "other-directed," conformist, socialization, in our "secular" lives and within the shelter of our Orthodox enclaves. Too many of our would-be intellectuals and pseudo-intellectuals vacillate between confidence and doubt, driven by the desire to fit in and unduly influenced by whom we have spoken to last. Faith is not only a virtue of the mind; it demands more than intelligence and "inner directedness." Faith is a virtue of character, and rests upon spiritual and ethical stability. Faith is about who we are, not only about what we know and believe.

When Wittgenstein remarked that you need big shoes to cross a bridge with cracks in it, he was not prescribing for specific scholarly pursuits but describing what it takes to be a thinking individual, a "philosopher." And the thrust of his remark was that understanding is not typically promoted through exhibitions of scintillating intellectual cleverness but often requires a "big shoe" solidity, which he is not afraid to call "obtuseness." Professional proficiency in a complex field requires apprenticeship with appropriate exemplars of excellence, despite the theoretical possibility that you can pick up a modicum of reading competence, information, and reasoning skills in the solitude of the library. That is even more so in acquiring and sustaining the fundamental orientation needed to become a serious religious individual. You cannot grow as a faithful individual, in the sense used here, without the personal example of faithful personalities. As the Mishna (*Avot* chapter 1) puts it, you must make yourself a teacher and acquire a friend. We need before our eyes living examples of solid, persistent, unshakeable yet

thoughtful commitment to God and to God's Torah.

IV

Which contemporary writers are especially worthy of commendation? It goes without saying that if you are working on a specific text or a set of questions, the most useful books and articles are those that address the problems at hand, and the researcher or thinker who will benefit you most in each case may not be of value at other times. The works I mention here have general value. In keeping with my previous remarks, these are works that exemplify a proper balance among exegetical, theological, literary, and historical dimensions of study. In other words, they provide good role models and not just useful information.

1. After all these years, Nechama Leibovitz's *Gilyonot* remain an excellent invitation to the careful reading of exegesis, mostly but not wholly the traditional commentators. At times, the sources tackled, and the kind of solutions implicitly favored reflect the parameters of her personal agenda. All the same, she is the teacher of all of us.

2. The *Daat Mikra* series of commentaries published by Mosad haRav Kook was intended to supply a biblical commentary faithful to tradition, yet up to date with modern scholarship, history, geography, and so forth. Some of the volumes are already showing their age, and the format is one that sometimes tends to be overly conservative, and at other times overly inclusive of religiously liberal positions. It is successful as a commentary more than as an intensive analysis of specific issues. Nonetheless, it does the work it was intended to do.

3. On the Torah, I like the *Torat Etzion* series. One advantage is that it represents many writers, for the most part familiar with the kind of questions and solutions prevalent among the Bible critics, and aware of the approaches to these questions adopted by contemporary Orthodox interpreters. Despite the shared backgrounds and interests of many

contributors, individual writers speak for themselves, which makes for a degree of diversity in their presentations.

4. If I were to mention one name in contemporary Orthodox Bible scholarship, it would be the prolific Yonatan Grossman. His many books and articles comment on a variety of biblical texts, most notably his multiple volumes on the Book of Genesis. These stand out for their attempt at comprehensiveness and no less for the balance between his use of traditional exegesis and approaches, on the one hand, and the full panoply of modern scholarship on the other hand.

In mentioning these endeavors, I do not intend to dismiss the work of many other Orthodox writers, nor to exclude engagement, by those able to do so, with scholarship from outside our community of faith and commitment. Some years ago, I set aside one morning a week for private learning with one of my students. During these sessions we had before us a book by a well-known contemporary Orthodox scholar-thinker. One day my *havruta* asked me why I kept consulting this volume when invariably I disagreed with his analysis. The reason was that I cared about the questions he asked and the sources he brought to bear. He stimulated our thinking in ways that I appreciated. Much of the task incumbent on us is accumulating knowledge and information and keeping it in working order. The great challenge and joy, however, is to seek wisdom beyond information, and for that we must learn how to think and to find teachers and partners in our quest.