Incorporating Sephardic Commentary in the Tanakh Curriculum

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essay, “Tanakh and Sephardic Inclusion in the Yeshiva High School Curriculum,” in Hayyim
Angel, Cornerstones: The Bible and Jewish Ideology (New York: Kodesh Press, 2020), pp.
126–156. It also appears in Conversations 44.)

God’s revealed word in Tanakh lies at the very heart of Jewish thought and religious
experience. Educators of Tanakh have the singular opportunity to give their students tools and
knowledge to grow throughout their lifetime. The principles we apply in Tanakh education can
and should have a meaningful impact on all religious education.

Commentators of Tanakh lived in different lands and throughout the ages. Most of what
we learn in the realm of Tanakh has little to do with Sephardic, Ashkenazic, or other Jewish
communities. 1 We study our commentators because each one enriches our understanding of

Tanakh and deepens our religious experience and engagement.

This point should serve as a guiding principle for all religious education. Students should consider all great rabbinic thinkers and Tanakh commentators as relevant. They also should understand that the more voices we have access to, the broader and deeper our religious experience. This educational worldview also serves to unify the Jewish people by teaching that there are many legitimate avenues into tradition.

Reflecting on this aspect of this educational vision, Rabbi Marc D. Angel argues:

> We study this diverse and rich literature and realize the phenomenon that all these Jewish sages and their communities operated with the identical assumption—that God gave the Torah to the people of Israel, that halakha is our way of following God's ways. As we contemplate the vast scope of the halakhic enterprise—and its essential unity—we begin to sense the wholeness of the Jewish people. 2

There are three areas in Jewish education where we may develop this premise:

- Tanakh must play a prominent role in the general curricular philosophy.
- Even as we may focus heavily on classical medieval commentary and more contemporary approaches, we should intentionally expose high school students to a greater diversity of interpreters and mention where and when they lived.
- We should make brief mention of various customs within learning Tanakh when relevant. For example, the Psalms recited in the liturgy and the Haftarot chosen by different communities are excellent entry points. This approach teaches respect for diversity of sacred customs, since different communities developed different means of

expressing
religious experience within halakhah.

In Tanakh, students should engage with God’s word through the guidance of our greatest
interpreters and thinkers. We never would learn Tanakh only through the eyes of the Northern
French commentators such as Rashi or Rashbam, nor would we draw exclusively from the
Spanish interpreters such as Ibn Ezra or Ramban. Nor should we stop with the medieval period
of interpretation, given the wealth of insight and scholarship that emerged over the past 500
years. Even if we devote the lion’s share of our attention to the classical medieval commentators,

there is great value in the periodic mention of later commentators. It is critical to send the
message that great thinkers of every age and era have added their voices to the Torah.
There is a gap in contemporary Jewish education regarding Sephardim. Whereas medieval Sephardic interpreters and thinkers are meaningfully studied, post-Expulsion thinkers
and interpreters are often ignored. An easy challenge for educators to illustrate this point: Name
five Sephardic rabbis who lived from 1550 to1900. If many religious educators struggle to
answer so basic a question, there is little hope that their students will fare any better. This
unfortunate educational gap often is manifest throughout the realms of biblical interpretation,
halakhah, history, and customs. 3

Later commentators from the Ashkenazic world have fared much better in contemporary
Jewish education. Names like Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna (Gra, 1720–1797), Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi
Mecklenburg (1785–1865), Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888), Malbim

(Rabbi Meir
Leibush ben Yehiel Michel, 1809–1879), Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, 1817–1893), Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann (1843–1921), and others rightly have become familiar
names to advanced students of Tanakh. In a different arena, Hassidic masters and their insightful
homiletical approaches such as Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk (1717–1786, Noam Elimelech),
Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev (1740–1810, Kedushat Levi), Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Alter of Ger
(1799–1866, Hiddushei ha-Rim), Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (1847–1905, Sefat Emet),
and Rabbi Shmuel Bornsztain (1855–1926, Shem mi-Shemuel), among many others, have found
a meaningful place in religious education and conversation.

It is worth making the extra effort to sprinkle in interpreters from the pan-Sephardic
world (which includes Middle Eastern and North African communities that never went through
Spain and therefore are not technically “Sephardic”). 4 Figures such as Rabbi Moshe Alsheikh
(1508–1593, Turkey, Israel) and Rabbi Hayyim ibn Attar (Or ha-Hayyim, 1696–1743, Morocco)
are more well-known. Names such as Rabbi Avraham Gavison (1520–1578, Algeria), Rabbi
Avraham ben Shelomo (sixteenth-century Yemen), Rabbi Shemuel Laniado (died 1605, Syria),
Rabbi Yaakov Fidanque (seventeeth-century Amsterdam), Rabbi Raphael Berdugo (1747–1821,
Morocco), Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh (1823–1900, Italy), and many others, should enter the
discussion as well.

Aside from the valuable contributions these interpreters have made, this educational
approach enables students to absorb the message that the pan-Sephardic world meaningfully

contributes to our understanding of Tanakh and Jewish experience after the Expulsion from Spain. 5 There is no need to overhaul any curriculum or lesson plan. Educators should be informed, and then incorporate comments throughout the year to enrich the discussion and to broaden the playing field of interpretation for their students.

On a practical level, educators should read contemporary commentaries and anthologies that cite many works from different eras. Nehama Leibowitz's Studies are classics in this area. A contemporary valuable online resource is alhatorah.org, by Rabbi Hillel Novetsky. The essays on each topic survey and analyze a wealth of classical and contemporary approaches, making access to the more obscure commentators easy for educators.

The more commentaries educators have in their own arsenal, the more they can fathom Tanakh texts. They also are better equipped to provide more avenues for students to connect to tradition and to respect legitimate diversity within a commitment to Torah. Moreover, by teaching students that interpretation of Tanakh comes from many lands and eras, our students can identify with all Jewish thought, thinkers, and history.

It is not of primary importance for students to memorize the name, dates, or place of every rabbi and scholar. However, educators can create the proper environment for students to taste from the vast wellsprings of tradition and see that many voices contribute to the discussion. The dazzling range of possibilities within Jewish tradition teaches humility and intellectual receptivity; people may hold significantly different opinions and still be united under the roof of

the Torah.

Tanakh is the great equalizer in religious education, and should be a model for how we approach all Jewish education. Tanakh educators have the opportunity to bring the wealth of Jewish religious experience and learning into the classroom to teach that multiple voices enrich our understanding of Torah, and that many avenues exist to bring people into an engaged relationship with tradition. The wholeness of the Jewish people is a genuine value at every level. 6

Notes

1 Advanced students of Tanakh might consider the subtle distinctions between early medieval approaches of the rabbis of Spain and France. By the thirteenth century with Radak and Ramban, however, commentators began to seamlessly integrate and incorporate the best of both interpretive traditions. Through high school education, the early medieval distinctions generally are not of vital importance to the process of learning Tanakh.

2 “Teaching the ‘Wholeness’ of the Jewish People,” in Seeking Good, Speaking Peace: Collected Essays of Rabbi Marc D. Angel, ed. Hayyim Angel (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1994), pp. 255–258. Although this particular excerpt specifically addresses the area of halakhah, Rabbi Angel also addresses the broader issue of a comprehensive Jewish education—including Tanakh and history—in his article.

3 For an intellectual history of some of the important Sephardic rabbinic thinkers of this period, see Rabbi Marc D. Angel, Voices in Exile: A Study in Sephardic Intellectual History (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1991).

4 Rabbi Marc D. Angel, Editor’s Introduction, Conversations 29 (Autumn 2017), p. vi.

5 From a pure Tanakh interpretation perspective, this approach also remedies a broader
educational gap: Most Tanakh scholars and educators ignore the contributions of nearly all
interpreters from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, deeming them inferior to the medieval
exegetes and the nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentators. See Amos Frisch, “A Re-
Evaluation of Jewish Biblical Exegesis of the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries” (Hebrew), in
Mehkarim ba-Mikra u-ve-Hinnukh: Studies in Bible and Education Presented to Prof. Moshe
Ahrend, ed. Dov Rappel (Jerusalem: Touro, 1996), pp. 122–141.
6 See further discussion in Hayyim Angel, “‘The Disciples of the Wise Increase Peace in the
World’: The Use of Traditional Scholarship to Build Bridges and Mend Rifts,” reprinted in this
volume.