

The Renewed Conversations

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There is an old adage (or there ought to be) that “The finest antidote to depression is Modim.” Indeed, anyone who prays daily and pays attention to the words he or she is saying should find it difficult to be despondent. We thrice-daily (at least) thank God for “our lives, our spirit, the daily miracles that are with us and God’s wonders and beneficence that are with us at all times.” When we appreciate the breath we inhale and expel, the cognitive ability to reason, the family and special friends that enrich our days and the consistent wonders that fill our lives, sadness is indicative of a complete loss of perspective. This is not to argue that there aren’t worrisome things in our lives, personal, familial, communal, national, and universal—but a healthy appreciation for the blessings in our lives empowers us to brave these challenges with hope and with a confidence in even better days to come.

While there are countless areas of our lives which have improved in the past few decades—in spite of (and, in some cases, as a result of) noted worrying trends, I'd like to focus our attention on a generally overlooked area of Jewish life—the fostering of our relationship with the Book of Books, our Tanakh. Wondrous and heretofore unimaginable developments have impacted the way that we view, study and teach Tanakh in at least three distinct yet interrelated areas. One of the delightful ironies which these intersections share is their respective roles, in earlier times, in effecting the opposite. For centuries, the serious study of Tanakh largely disappeared from the traditional Jewish paideia and each of these areas played a central role in that enforced distance. Yet, beautifully and seemingly serendipitously, these three areas have become forces for increased study, promulgation and a renewed rigor of Biblical study in the observant community.

For purposes of clarity and distinction, I will refer to developments in the areas of “academic,” “interreligious,” and “intra-religious” Bible study. These will be presented in a non-synchronous order; the consideration is chiefly driven by the role that area plays in study, from the more intense and integral to the peripheral and public.

Academia

That world that we refer to as “academia” is itself young; even though the first institutions of higher learning date back nearly a millennium, critical studies of areas which were traditionally the bailiwick of religion (which, it should be noted, included cosmology, geology and the rest of the natural sciences) began in earnest and in a publicly accessible

manner at the end of the eighteenth century with the advent of the Enlightenment. As the early founders of "source criticism" developed and formed the contours of the Documentary Hypothesis, the study of our holiest text became a target of radical splicing operations premised on an essentialist denial of prophecy and of the traditional approach to the historicity of the text. This quickly went from theory to creed in the academy so much so that anyone writing or lecturing on the biblical

text in those circles who even suggested that even "JEPD" be viewed through the lens of "R" (the Redactor) was laughed out of the circles, circles which then determined the new orthodoxy about the Bible. The history of the school of "higher criticism" and its broader impact on the humanities throughout the western world is a much longer study with a conclusion yet to be written. The nineteenth-century world of Jewish studies was immediately divided into two main camps with a small but vital third camp that will eventually play a central role in all three of our areas of interest. The two broad approaches were assimilation or isolation. The school of Wissenschaft des Judentums along with its religious stepchild, the "Neolog" (later "Reform") movement adopted the Documentary Hypothesis entire and developed its intellectual and religious platforms, respectively, against that background. Since the founding of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in 1865, Bible study and decisions about Jewish practice were premised on seeing the Torah's text as an amalgam of ahistoric traditions from the ninth to the sixth centuries BCE (or later) which only came together in the fifth century BCE. These were the assimilationists. In direct response and reaction, the world of Eastern European tradition, already

boiling in the cauldron of the new Hassidic movement and its inroads into traditional life, completely rejected not only the conclusions reached by the school of higher criticism but even refused to entertain the challenges that their observations raised. The general tactic assumed in these communities was isolationism, to the point of, in some extreme cases, regarding family members who engaged in academic Bible study or even enrolled in the universities (now suddenly open to Jewish students) as dead. Indeed, there were families that practiced mourning rituals for children who breached the walls of the shtetl to pursue this newly minted discipline.

However, there were a few traditional scholars who engaged with the world of “higher criticism” on its own terms with the overt goal of formulating a traditionalist response and defense of Mesorah. Most notably, David Zvi Hoffmann (1843–1921) in Berlin composed a commentary to Leviticus with the stated aim of responding to the newly popular Documentary Hypothesis. There were a number of other traditionalists who also came to the defense of the Mesorah from different perspectives, such as Shmuel David Luzzato (“Shadal,” 1800–1865) in Italy and Meir Leibush Wisser (“Malbim,” 1809–1879) in Bohemia. We will consider these religious heroes to be confrontationalists. As always, the “golden mean” is a path walked by few. Generally, the world of traditional study looked askance at any engagement with this new “heresy” and built higher walls. This led, predictably, to a broad devaluation of the study of Tanakh in these communities and their attendant schools. For the most part, the study of any scripture was governed by a complete dependence on medieval commentators and their

observations about the text—to the deliberate exclusion and rejection of any contribution to be offered from the “outside world.” This was the general state of Tanakh study in the self-defined world of religious education until the last few decades.

What Happened?

Intellectual evolutions are inevitably multicausal. By the early part of the twentieth century, there were internal challenges within the academy that questioned the foundations of the theory, a phenomenon which is typical within three generations after a fresh, exciting “discovery.”

In the meantime, a new generation of Jews was growing to embrace the Tanakh as a result of the miraculous return to the Land and the revival of spoken Hebrew. It may be surprising, but much of the movement towards an enhanced study of the Bible came from secular

Israelis who were emotionally committed to the historicity of the text. We need look no further than our first Prime Minister, a decidedly secular Jew who was in love with the Tanakh and held a regular Saturday night “parlor meeting” at his home to engage with leading teachers in the study of our Book of Books. After all, our claim on the Land and our connection to every dunam is ultimately anchored in the earliest chapters of Genesis; this stake is only firmly set if there really was a Patriarchal family that was promised the Land, a premise denied by the academy.

Our claim to Jerusalem is not new—it dates back 3,000 years to David’s move of his capital from Hebron to the Jebusite city and then the divine promise that just as David’s dynasty would always rule in Judea, similarly God would never abandon David’s city. Curiously, even those many avowed atheists were able to read these divinely centered texts as meaningful and legitimate. With time, cross-fertilization of the worlds of academia and tradition increased, and a new sentiment took hold in many corners of the religious world of Jewish education: There is much of value in philology, archaeology, anthropology, paleontology, Assyriology, Egyptology, and many more disciplines which are the bailiwick of the academy. None of these disciplines stand in challenge to our traditional beliefs; indeed, much about the Tanakh can be understood with more clarity and immediacy by using these tools judiciously. As a student of mine is fond of quoting, “You cannot understand the Tanakh unless you understand the world of Tanakh.”

The result of this has not only been felt in the many religiously committed Bible scholars and writers, but also in the growing acceptance even in the generally isolationist world of “Haredi” education of many external disciplines to be used as legitimate “handmaidens” of Torah study. There is a newfound appreciation for the critical distinction in study between what the text says, for which any and all sources of data can and must be used to further and deepen our understanding, and what the text is telling us, which is bound up in the covenantal community’s received tradition; indeed, it may be said that what the text is telling us is the tradition of the holy nation. The rest is commentary. Go study.

The first welcome and exciting development in the study of Tanakh is the newfound alliance of the academy and the yeshiva. This is not a marriage; their purposes and modes, the environment each wishes to foster is unique and exclusive. Yet, there is an amity and a partnership which has engendered much intellectual growth among many of the committed members of each school. The academy and the yeshiva are each wiser as a result.

The Growth of Inter-Religious Bonds

There have been epochs where Jews were able to comfortably and safely discuss, debate, and share ideas with prelates and monks as well as kadis and imams. In ninth-century Baghdad, there were regular gatherings of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian clerics who engaged in publicly attended spirited debate about the truth of their respective faith's claims. The newfound interest in textual study among Christian scholars in twelfth-century France led to direct and indirect adoption of Jewish methodology anchored in the school of Rashi. From Abelard to the scholars at Saint-Victor, there was a brief yet productive period of cross-cultural cooperation and intellectual impact. This was, again, purely in the realm of understanding what the text said, not its message.

However, for most of the common era, dialogue and an awareness of a somewhat shared textual legacy was buried beneath discrimination, persecution and dispersion. On a broader societal level, Jews and their "others" typically viewed each other with suspicion, and the notion

of common cause was an unfathomable idea.

In a sense, this should have changed dramatically in the eighteenth century. With the promising development of the republic, first in France and then in America, the principles of justice, equity and civil rights for each member of the polity were understood to be grounded in what is commonly called “the Judeo-Christian” tradition. While this hybridization does more to obfuscate than clarify, there is something to it. The basic mores of the Tanakh inhere, at their base, a desideratum of a just society with consideration of the rights of all people. For the first quarter millennium of this country’s history, this understanding of a common ground was chiefly the bailiwick of secularists; religious groups tended to amplify differences and overlook common ground. (There were remarkable exceptions to this disconnect, such as the decade from 1955 to 1965 when traditional Jews walked, arm in arm, with Southern Baptist blacks, demonstrating on behalf of full rights for all Americans).

What we are seeing in the last quarter century is a newly discovered affinity between Jews and Christians. I am not arguing that we have a panacea, nor that complete harmony here is even desirable—but the sense of common cause has become significantly heightened, especially in response to “wokeness” and its many disturbing tentacles, reaching into education, language, roles, and so much more. Observant Jews have been surprised to find themselves on the same side of political, legal and social divides with traditional Christians (and, in some cases, devout Muslims). Whether arguing for religious exemptions from local zoning laws, more protection for individuals to act upon their religious convictions, or a general reaction to the

excesses of
“wokeness,” peoples of traditional faith are finding more that unites them across
inter-religious
lines, without dismissing that which divides them.

One caveat is prudent here. Whereas the traditionalist wings of both Jewish and
Christian
faith communities have only recently found significant common ground, the near
opposite is true
in the liberal wings. Ecumenical ventures abounded in the latter half of the last
century, and
parallel developments (including expanding clergy roles to women, opening
opportunities for
leadership to gay and transsexual members) could be traced to that mid-century
“brotherhood.”
This has all but disappeared in the last decade, most notably since October 7
when the entire
world of progressive politics has turned an angry back on Israel and the Jewish
people.

Before moving on to the third marvelous development of our times, I’d like to
circle back
to the beginning of this section. In addition to the relatively newfound fraternity
between
traditionalists in both circles, Jewish scholars are now sought after at Christian
Bible
conferences, not just as academics but also as purveyors of God’s message “from
this inside.” It
seems that the first two blessings of our confused era have impacted on each
other and as
traditional Jewish minds have opened up to academic scholarship to enhance our
understanding
of Tanakh, the lines of dialogue about that Book of Books have also opened up;
there is a
genuine interest on the part of Christian students of the Bible to read it through
legitimate Jewish
eyes.

The second, most welcome development that we are experiencing in our lives at this current moment is a newfound sense of collegiality, common cause and healthy environment for dialogue between traditional Jews and Christians—and this further impacts upon and is impacted by the first welcome phenomenon. Doors open in several directions, allowing the doors of the yeshiva and the academy to cautiously nudge open as the opacity of the walls separating the kehillah and the Christian faith community become a bit more translucent.

The Blessing of Intrareligious Fraternity

Sectarianism and schismatics are no stranger to the Jewish body politic. The phenomenon of Jewish groups splintered with rivaling claims to the legitimate tradition—or the “proper” interpretation and application of that tradition—has existed at least since the middle of the Second Temple period. Sects have usually had one of three destinies. In very few cases, they maintain a quasi-identity with the Jewish world while maintaining some vestige of their unique practices. An example of this is the Karaite community, which continues to exist and identify with Karaite scholarship and practices. More frequently, the sects ultimately fold back into the larger, traditional Jewish family and, with few variations, adopt the widespread approach to practice and creed maintained by the larger community. In other words, the sects, qua sects, disappear from the social map and become historic footnotes. A variation in this development is the loss of those members to the prevailing religious culture of the surrounding society. In a few cases, these sects establish themselves as a distinct religion, drop claims of having the “true” tradition of Judaism and begin their own faith community.

Worldwide Judaism, especially in North America, stands at a precipitous moment. The

break from tradition, occasioned by the twin “E’s” —the Enlightenment and the Emancipation—began in the early nineteenth century. The visible fragmentation of the Jewish

community and public dissension between the many groups which fell along various points on

the plane—from maintaining strict status quo tradition to reforming a completely “new Judaism”

—had its own salvific impact and served to force each group to develop clearer ideological

platforms, outlining why its “solution” was the most practical, most ideal or truest to tradition. In

post-World War II America, this fracturing emerged as “denominationalism,” with the Reform

movement claiming the lion share of membership, the Conservative movement maintaining that

their ethos wed a fealty to tradition with a commitment to change and the much smaller

Orthodox establishment placing its emphasis on unswerving loyalty to the ways of our fathers.

Such were the lines and although there were periods of interdenominational dialogue, even

cooperation, by the 1980s the dividing lines had sharpened and the “heterodox” movements and

those identified as “Orthodox” each made policy statements that more clearly defined the lines

which divided and made cross-denominational dialogue—and certainly cooperation—more

difficult.

Which brings us to the current moment in denominationalism. For the past 40 years, each

of the movements has, to a large extent driven by socio-political orientation, pushed away from

each other (“drifted away” is far too mild a description). This sad reality, that a traditionally

oriented Jew now inevitably feels great discomfort and alienation in the pews of a heterodox Temple, has gone hand-in-hand with a more tragic development. The numbers, both of membership and, more to the point, of active and practicing members in the heterodox worlds have rapidly shrunk. The reports of schools closing, synagogues merging, Temples being used for multiple congregations due to so much excess available space—this is all to weep. Yet, oddly, both in the aftermath of the clumsy way in which society responded to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as, far more significantly and emphatically, the grass roots response to the horrors of October 7, 2023 and its ugly aftermath in the streets and on the campuses of this country, there is a new kind of “teshuvah” movement. Those affected by this sudden urge to reclaim a traditional life, to learn more about our heritage and to embrace a stronger identification with all things traditionally Jewish refer to themselves as “October 8 Jews.” The numbers aren’t staggering, yet doors have suddenly opened up for Jews who have come to realize what an amazing legacy they have yet to claim to walk right in and find brothers and sisters with a greater fluency in the rhythms of our faith to embrace and instruct them. The old models of denominational definitions are still there—but the walls erected by these definitions are now made up of wobbly stones and lots of sunshine is coming between the cracks.

One beautiful result, to which many of us involved in “outreach education” can attest, is a newfound interest among formerly disaffected Jews in reclaiming their “portion of the Torah,” their right and privilege—and responsibility—to engage in the study of Tanakh as the basis for a

holistic Jewish life.

This third blessing, one which has the potential to heal those rifts which were hatched

200 years ago in western Europe, is, unfortunately, not the result of our own initiative but of a

horror foisted on us. Yet, as the Talmud teaches, we bless and thank God for His gifts, even when

they come at a time and as a result of great pain.

Afterword

I have sketched out three areas in Jewish life, specifically with regard to the study of

Tanakh but each with a much broader back drop. I will briefly reflect on each of these from a

local perspective—that of an observant, traditional and traditionalist teacher and student of

Tanakh.

My own understanding of Tanakh has been immeasurably deepened by the many opportunities to learn about “the world of Tanakh,” through the many disciplines of the academy

which, a century ago, would have been inaccessible to me. And some of my colleagues, who are

anchored in the world of academia, suddenly find traditional commentaries and approaches to

enhance their own grasp of the text.

The opportunities that I’ve been given to speak to people who share the Tanakh as the

key structure in the storehouse of their faith, has given me the chance to see something that only

a select few would have sense two generations ago—a healthy respect for the text, for its

language and for how our Mesorah has explained it—and tremendously powerful

and essentialist

common bonds that our people of faith share, including the sanctity of life, the vitality of faith

and the task to elevate all of humanity.

And, finally and most significantly, the thousands of young (and young at heart) Jews

(and even “October 8 converts, yet another remarkable phenomenon) who are looking for

meaning and substance not in the latest fads of post-Marxist politics, not in the jargons of

“wokeness”—all of which have birthed a poisonous betrayal of the Jews—but in their own

heritage. Thankfully, the Tanakh is being restored to its rightful place, as the foundation stone of

Jewish life, values, nationhood and the message which our people are tasked with bringing to the world.

We live in amazing times.