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INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH IDEAS AND IDEALS

CONVERSATIONS

Where the Yeshiva Meets the University: Traditional and Academic Approaches to Tanakh Study

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Guest Editor: Rabbi Hayyim J. Angel

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CONVERSATIONS

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SUBMISSION OF ARTICLES

If you wish to submit an article to *Conversations*, please send the Editor (mdangel@jewishideas.org) a short description of the essay you plan to write. Articles should be written in a conversational style, without footnotes, and should be submitted typed, double spaced, as Word documents.

Articles reflect the views of their authors, and do not represent official positions of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Conversations welcomes "letters to the editor," commenting on articles that appear in its pages. Letters should be emailed to the Editor.

Conversations will be published three times per year: May, September, and January. Submissions must reach the Editor at least eight weeks before the first day of each publication month.

Part I:

Editor's Introduction

Editor's Introduction

Religious Tanakh Study in the Twenty-First Century: Opportunities and Challenges

Tanakh lies at the heart and soul of Judaism. The Talmud and midrash, Jewish philosophy and mysticism, and Jewish thought all find their deepest roots in the Bible. For millennia, Jews and other faith communities have been transformed by this unparalleled collection of 24 books. Tanakh is accessible and enjoyable to small children and to the most sophisticated scholars and thinkers. It is a singular privilege to encounter its sacred words, to engage with its eternal messages, and to be galvanized to greater ethical and social action and spiritual growth as a result of our study.

From the perspective of contemporary religious students of Tanakh, we have remarkable opportunities today. Scholars publish critical editions of our classical commentators so that we have access to the most accurate texts from our greatest teachers. Scholars discover and publish previously obscure rabbinic works, enabling us to broaden our understanding of the range of interpretation in the classical period. They also advance the field of biblical study in areas including, but not limited to, literary analysis, archaeology and history, and linguistics. The information readily available in books, online resources, and classes is breathtaking.

At the same time, however, these opportunities also pose serious challenges to our enterprise. How do we balance this flood of knowledge and methodology with the fact that many scholars in the field are not Orthodox Jews and therefore bring their own assumptions and biases to their work? Are there means for sorting through which information and methodology is beneficial for our religious growth and what must be discarded or modified? In addition to our personal learning, how and at what age do we incorporate the best learning methodologies and information into the classroom—whether our students are children or adults? Ultimately, the litmus test of success for our study of Tanakh is that it deepens our reli-

gious commitments and inspires us to greater ethical behavior. How do we shape the contours of this discussion to maximize those benefits and characterize that process with intellectual honesty and integrity?

This special issue of *Conversations* is entitled *Where the Yeshiva Meets the University: Traditional and Academic Approaches to Tanakh Study*. It grapples with these vital questions from a diversity of perspectives. It contains 19 articles from leading Orthodox Tanakh scholars and educators in America and Israel. The first section addresses broad issues of religious worldview pertaining to the integration of religious Tanakh study and contemporary scholarship. The second section addresses educational issues pertaining to bringing religious Tanakh study and contemporary scholarship in the classroom setting. The third section provides case studies that combine classical commentary with contemporary scholarship and methodology. The final section presents alternate directions of text study beyond traditional text analysis: combining biblical text with visual art; Hasidic-psychological thought; and Bibliodrama.

When we learn and teach Tanakh properly, we convey a sense of holiness and reverence, coupled with respect for individuality and intellectual struggle with our most sacred texts and traditions. Learning for over 20 years with advanced students at Yeshiva University; in many Adult Education settings; with teenagers and with young children, I have found time and again that Tanakh has the singular ability to speak a language that can inspire and edify people of all ages and backgrounds. The potent combination of rabbinic commentary and contemporary scholarship enables our minds, hearts, and souls to complement one another in a holistic spiritual and intellectual experience. The maturation of sophisticated Tanakh study provides us with a system with which to navigate the complicated contours of scholarship and religious growth. Rabbis and educators have the immense responsibility to sort through available information, commentaries, and methodologies in order to steer the discussion for the benefit of the community. I hope and pray that this volume engages, challenges, and inspires readers—both professional educators and interested laypeople—to encounter the exciting work in Tanakh being produced by contemporary Orthodox scholars and educators.

Much gratitude goes to my father, Rabbi Marc D. Angel, for inviting me to be the guest editor for this issue. Thank you also to my sister, Ronda

Angel Arking, for her eagle-eyed editing and insightful comments on the articles. Most importantly, I thank the contributors to this volume—it is always appreciated when talented scholars and educators take time from their busy schedules to share their work with a broader audience.

The eternally relevant vision of the Torah and prophets is available for the taking. What we make of the journey is up to us, to learn and transform, and work on building the ideal self and society envisioned by our prophetic tradition as we develop our own relationships between God and humanity through the inspired words of Tanakh.

Hayyim Angel
Hanukkah 5773

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The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals thanks Rabbi Hayyim Angel for serving as Guest Editor of this special issue of *Conversations*. As one of the foremost teachers and scholars of Tanakh, Rabbi Angel has brought together an impressive group of authors who share their wisdom and experience with our thousands of readers. The Institute is grateful to all these authors for their participation.

We are pleased to acknowledge the support of the **Norman S. Benzaquen Publication Fund of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals** for this issue of *Conversations*.

We hope that this issue of *Conversations* will generate discussion and productive conversations among our readers. As we further explore ways to deepen our knowledge of Tanakh, we will come to a deeper appreciation of the profound wisdom of the foundational texts of Judaism.

The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals fosters an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, and inclusive Orthodox Judaism. Please visit our website at jewishideas.org and our YouTube channel: youtube.com/jewishideasorg. We welcome your membership and support.

Together, we can accomplish great things.

Part I:

Religious Outlook Toward Tanakh Study

Always Connect

Shalom Carmy

(Shalom Carmy teaches Jewish Studies and philosophy at Yeshiva University and has frequently taught interdisciplinary courses in other departments. He is also Editor of Tradition. *He studied under Rabbis Aharon Lichtenstein and Joseph Soloveitchik, who recruited him as one of the editors of his posthumous works. His theological contribution is distinguished by preoccupation with the way religious doctrine and practice express themselves in the life of the individual. In Bible he coined and is identified with the "literary-theological" approach.)*

I

The aim of Jewish Tanakh study is to encounter the word of God. There are, of course, other motives for studying Tanakh: It provides information about ancient Hebrew and Aramaic of use to linguists, and information about ancient history for specialists in that field; familiarity with the Bible is essential background for the study of Western culture and modern Hebrew literature and thus pertinent to a good liberal arts education; it serves those secularists who are curious about religious belief; not least, the Bible provides a subject of conversation and an opportunity to display one's cleverness. From a religious perspective, however, such motives are ancillary, helping one to get at the meaning, or trivial distractions from the meaning. If you received a passionate message and contented yourself with analyzing the style, commenting on the grammar and typography and social mores, while keeping your distance from the person addressing you, you would be mocking the author. To do the same in the study of Torah is a mockery of religious commitment.

"The days of our lives are seventy years and with strength eighty years," says the Psalmist. Our current life expectancy, though finite, is a bit

longer than the biblical life span, yet our days are still frightfully brief and fugitive. How we allocate the few hours we devote to Torah, which includes Talmud, halakhah, Jewish thought *inter alia*, and within that harsh budget, what to do with the portion for Tanakh, must be governed by our goal in that study. One consideration is how best to pursue the primary goal of encountering God. A secondary question is how to benefit from the ancillary disciplines such as Semitics, archaeology, and the like when our time and attention are so severely limited.

Unfortunately, what is viable for the full-time *talmid hakham* (Torah scholar), in this regard, is not what is good for the layperson. Those of us who can devote the bulk of our time to Torah study have an advantage. Not only do we know more, we are also preoccupied with Torah, day and night, to a degree that others have difficulty achieving. At home with a significant range of text, context, and tradition, much of which is kept constantly in use, we can aspire to carry our learning lightly, and thus we may hope, with relative ease, to integrate different kinds of knowledge, traditional and secular, and to harness different kinds of insight from within Torah and from our life experience. There are days when the sun stands still, and despite everything, we seem to have time for everything.

Naturally I am speaking now for the scholar who holds paramount the religious dimension of Torah study. In an age of specialization and secularization, academics engaged in Jewish studies, even those who are nominally practicing Jews, are liable to misplace their sense of priority. Sometimes the result is heresy or indifference to normative belief, and/or a flippant, even cynical attitude toward religious conviction and religious reverence. Otherwise the compartmentalization of religion and scholarship declares itself in a bizarre alienation between one's professed religious orientation and one's actual full-time intellectual life. This troubling phenomenon of disconnect between the human being who aspires to edify himself or herself through the study of Torah in the service of God and the bleached soul of the neutral or cynical practitioner of academic studies, is a warning to us all not to take for granted the proper integration of intellectual activity and life.

The layperson, however sincere, generally cannot acquire the mastery required to control substantial areas of learning and to keep them in permanent repair. (I am not even mentioning the many intelligent men and women whose language skills are deficient.) There are exceptions, nonprofessionals who are able, through commitment of will and nurturing cir-

cumstance, to "hold in" learning, as they say in the yeshivot. It is a sign of vigor in our community, when such an individual makes a contribution to the community, even to the point of producing material worthy of publication. It is an even more wonderful mark of wholesomeness when such productivity grows out of *yirat Shamayim*, the genuine fear of Heaven, and not merely as a highly skilled avocation. Our concern here is with those who are not so proficient or fortunate, at least not yet.

Should the Torah education of the layperson, be it via lecture or solitary reading, stress accumulating information, or should it prize creative engagement? Information is necessary for knowledge, but if the goal is religious reading, surely active study is far superior to passive reception. The problem is how to respond actively without sufficient knowledge and, even more important, without the continuous preoccupation that brings with it the ability to distinguish important questions from trivial ones, the ready command that makes it possible to apply what one knows to the question at hand and to avoid being overwhelmed by unfamiliar data.

If our goal as educators is to encourage active, thoughtful religious reading, our teaching must exemplify active, thoughtful religious reading. The primary orientation of our teaching should not be conveying information alone, nor should it be reporting our original contributions, however important. We are not fulfilling our main task unless we communicate information and ideas and modes of reasoning in a manner that enables our audience to think along with us. If we succeed in doing so, our listeners are likely to engage in religious reading with us, and they are likely to develop the habits of thought and feeling, the analytic aptitude and the sensitive reverence that will enable them to encounter the text on their own, if they have the minimal literacy.

What is involved in communicating our engagement in religious reading? As we are preoccupied with the disciplined study of Tanakh in the light of traditional Jewish approaches, from Hazal down to the present, so must the non-professional student. That is one facet of our task. As we utilize information, insight, and sometimes theoretical constructions from other sources, we should make available the same for the non-professional as well. That is another facet of our task. Regarding the former, the major gap to overcome is one of knowledge and training within the traditional literature of Torah. Regarding the latter, there is another difficulty: Given the pressure of time, how does one make room

for such sources without undermining the balance between ancillary informational instruments and the encounter with God to which they are subservient?

II

The primary texts of Jewish Bible study are available in almost every synagogue and school; many are found in the average home: the standard rabbinic sources; the commentators in the various *Mikra'ot Gedolot* editions; the major figures of modern times. In her volumes of studies on the Torah (and even more so in her *Gilyonot*) the twentieth century's master teacher, Professor Nehama Leibowitz (who preferred to be known simply as Nehama), showed how these texts can be deployed educationally: what it means to read a commentator carefully, to notice what motivates that commentator's remarks, how and why these remarks differ from other commentators, and so forth. If you are searching on your own for a viable *derekh ha-limmud*, a way to study Tanakh, one that will link you to the chain of Jewish understanding, then prolonged exposure to Nehama's work remains the royal road to religious reading. Assuming the validity of her position, let me append some pedagogical notes, and address one question of intellectual substance.

The approach I advocate here, one that Nehama illustrates, privileges analysis over interpretation or thesis-mongering. By that I mean that the goal of teaching is not to communicate conclusions alone, but to make transparent the way conclusions are reached. This can be justified on academic grounds: What is more honest than making one's considerations transparent, showing the alternatives not chosen, and enabling the listener to assess your choice? Here I am making the educational point. If you want your audience to be engaged in your study and to encourage them to do likewise, the only way to do it is to convene the commentators you have studied and allow your students to participate in your dialogue with them.

This sounds obvious to me. There is, however, a tendency among some teachers to present interpretations in which the give-and-take with the traditional literature is either absent or very well concealed. Often practitioners of this approach have done their homework but are wary of inflicting it on their audience; they fear that burdening their listeners with

a blow-by-blow account of their transactions with their predecessors, trailing clouds of footnotes, is liable to prove a distraction rather than a boon. Sometimes they are so taken by the freshness and the compelling power of their insight that they can do without such dialogue. Long experience makes me sympathetic to the concern about over-documentation and the "weariness of making citations without end"; writers and lecturers should take the trouble to be selective. Long experience also tells me that enthusiastically pushed interpretations produced in a vacuum are usually not as brilliant or as plausible or even as original as their champions presume. However that may be, the danger I perceive on the educational front is that those who hear these interpretations are liable to go and do likewise, with predictably arbitrary or whimsical results that do not honor the best among those who inspire them.

The corpus of Jewish biblical exegesis includes many topics and arguments that do not promise moral-religious edification: for example, lengthy discussions of grammar and vocabulary, geography (as the exegetes grasped it), or even some of the sections dealing with halakhah. If the goal of Tanakh study is to bring us into closer relationship with God, such matters would seem to be of less relevance to the non-specialist student. Indeed, it is evident that Nehama chose her topics and her selections from the commentators with an eye to moral and religious edification. On one occasion, when a young teacher told her she had been assigned the opening chapters of Leviticus, dealing with the order of the sacrifices, Nehama expressed strong disagreement. In her opinion, the portion of *Kedoshim* (chapters 19–20) should be highlighted in Leviticus, not the details of the sacrifices, because the former has greater moral value. Of course, Torah is Torah; moreover, in the right context, the passages describing the manner in which God enables human beings to come close to Him through the various offerings is surely not religiously indifferent. Nonetheless, it seems odd and unbalanced to struggle with esoteric halakhic subjects, to discuss, for example, the subtle interaction between *peshat* and *derash* (the "plain" meaning of a verse and the interpretation handed down or elaborated through the oral tradition) when students do not yet control sufficient information to appreciate the debate, or to invest disproportionate time in clearing philological underbrush at the expense of more directly relevant religious factors.

III

The major criticism of Nehama's program is that it substitutes the study of the commentators for the study of Tanakh. Her method achieves insight into Rashi or Ramban's understanding of the biblical text but does not ask what the biblical text means on its own. This criticism has two aspects: one is that an approach devoted entirely to classical Jewish works, from Hazal through the medieval literature through the *parshanut* (interpretation) of the last 200 years omits consideration of new discoveries, be they linguistic or archaeological; the other is that her approach ignores questions that may be important for us today but are not addressed systematically by the classical *mefarshim* (commentators).

Nehama vigorously opposed R. Yoel Bin-Nun's attempt to revise the Bible curriculum in Israeli high schools to make room for non-exegetical data such as geography. On grounds of intellectual integrity he was surely right. Ramban rejoiced when he reached the land of Israel, where he gained a better grasp of her geography and saw with his own eyes the Paleo-Hebrew script he had only read about. If we are indeed Ramban's disciples, it ill behooves us to ignore such realia as become available to us. As we have seen, the educational question is not so clear. How much time, and how much emphasis, should such information merit?

To keep our discussion simple, let's limit ourselves to cases where the pertinence of the new information is undeniable:

> 1) I Samuel 13:21 mentions *ha-petzirah pim*. Traditional commentators say this refers to an implement with two edges (*pim* as plural of *peh*=mouth). We now know that *pim* is the name of an ancient unit of weight. The verse is saying that the Israelites were charged a *pim* to fix their *petzirah* (sharpening). The new explanation is uncontroversial. Assuming that communicating it does not take an inordinate amount of attention away from religiously significant matters, there is no reason not to adopt it.
>
> 2) Ezekiel 14 refers to three righteous men—"Noah, Danel, and Job." Traditional commentators had no choice but to identify Danel with the biblical Daniel, despite the slight difference in spelling. We now believe that Danel, king of Keret, who is known from Ugaritic literature, fits the context better. If this view is accepted none of the

three righteous men are Jewish. This affects the theological message of the chapter, which deals with righteous individuals in a corrupt society. Although the traditional identification is still of value for our study of the history of exegesis, there is no reason not to adopt the new one, and adjust our reading of the prophecy accordingly.

3) II Kings 18:13–16 reports a confrontation between Hezekiah and Sennacherib, which ends with Hezekiah's submission. This is followed by further demands by the Assyrian king's representative, culminating in the almost-capture of Jerusalem that is aborted by a plague among the Assyrians. Ralbag (on Kings) held that the text records two separate episodes: The second confrontation occurred when Hezekiah rebelled years later. Abarbanel believed there was only one confrontation: Hezekiah's capitulation was deemed insufficient. The particular view we adopt affects our assessment of Hezekiah's strategy, his courage, and his trust in God. Sennacherib's Annals have been recovered, and scholars have debated the One Campaign vs. Two Campaign theories based on these records, which depict the king's successes but carefully avoid ascribing victory to him in the siege of Jerusalem. Here the Annals can make a real difference in determining which medieval *parshan* came closer to the historical truth. Again the only question is how much attention and emphasis this discussion deserves given the limits on time and the primacy of the religious motive for study.

4) Rambam (*Guide* III:48) proposed that the prohibition of "cooking the kid in its mother's milk" is to be understood against the background of idolatrous practices of the time. When the Ugaritic archives were unearthed early in the past century, a line of poetry was deciphered to imply that cooking meat and dairy together was indeed part of Northwest Semitic rite, thus confirming Maimonides. For the past four decades this reading has been dismissed, so we are back where we started, though the word has not yet reached some popular Orthodox and non-Orthodox authors and lecturers.

These examples demonstrate the potential relevance of "outside" information; the last demonstrates what happens when pathways once welcomed become dead ends. How are laypeople (or scholars who are not always up to the minute on every question) to keep abreast of these devel-

opments? How many journals can even scholars plow through? For some purposes the twentieth-century *Da'at Mikra* commentary on Tanakh (Mossad HaRav Kook) is a reliable source of information. But these works are not infallible and they age. I have no solution to this problem, which has its parallel in all other liberal arts. The point is that contending with it cannot take priority over our fundamental commitment to religious reading. If we take Ramban's multifarious interests as a model, we must be sure to look to his sense of religious priorities as well.

IV

The second criticism of the exegesis-centered approach was made by R. Mordekhai Breuer. Take the Documentary Hypothesis, which maintains, among other things, that apparent redundancy in the Torah is evidence of multiple authors. Thus the creation story of Genesis 1, in which God is called *Elokim*, was written by a different author than the creation story of Genesis 2, where He is called by the Tetragrammaton. In *Lonely Man of Faith* R. Joseph Soloveitchik listed many thematic differences between the two chapters, regarding humanity's place in nature, the relations between the sexes, and God's mission for humanity. R. Soloveitchik concluded that the juxtaposition of the two stories does not reflect multiple authors, but rather a complex view of the human condition. On his own, R. Breuer had arrived at a similar methodology—that God speaks in multiple voices, so that grasping the Torah's message requires us to examine each section alone, but also in the context of other sections. Along these lines he studied the Torah systematically against the backdrop of one version of the Documentary Hypothesis. He believed that the questions raised by the critics helped to incubate his awareness of this complexity in the Torah's narrative and legal portions. Thus thinking about these questions is valuable for Orthodox Bible study in our time.

According to Breuer, Nehama rejected his program. When R. Soloveitchik did it, it was legitimate in her eyes. But the Rav's rabbinic license did not extend to others. Again, from a purely intellectual perspective R. Breuer is right. If some of the questions raised by the critics are valid, and if, as I hold, R. Breuer's approach is on the right track (regardless of criticisms I have made elsewhere), then we understand Tanakh better by considering them; Breuer would also insist that by doing so we gain much for our analysis of the classical commentators and again I agree with him.

By the same token: If Rambam was right in thinking that knowledge of the cultural background of Tanakh could add something of worth, then, in principle, we are justified in examining that cultural background in whatever depth and breadth we are capable of. At the same time, the explosion of knowledge in the field of ancient history makes it impossible for all but the few to engage it actively. It is one thing, for example, to read Sennacherib's Annals in translation; it is a another to consider whether there was something distinctive about the cult of Assur that affected the confrontation between Assyrian religion and Israelite faith in God. It is one thing to contrast Hammurabi's Code with *Mishpatim*, as was commonly done a hundred years ago during the "Bible-Babel" affair. It is another to weigh several Near Eastern law codes and to consider which is more pertinent to the background of biblical law and why.

Once again: if our goal in studying Tanakh is to encounter the word of God, then it is not only *what* we learn that is important but *how*. R. Breuer carries on his massive project of appropriating what he finds valuable in the questions of the Bible critics. It is instructive that he does so while hardly ever mentioning their solutions. The questions are important; debating against heretical positions is a distraction from that task. It profits us less than nothing if we gain a whole world of scholarly tools and lose our souls. This is true of the scholar of whom the Mishnah states that "he whose knowledge precedes his fear of Heaven, his knowledge is not sustained." Even more is it true of the person whose time is husbanded and who must therefore be more anxious to employ it in a balanced and well-integrated way. We who teach must both communicate the truth and exemplify it.

V

The kind of background information to be presupposed in our study of Tanakh is not set in stone. Nehama herself did not shy away from calling upon European literature or literary criticism to further her analysis; occasionally she used non-Jewish or non-traditional Bible translations to illustrate various options, and she took from Martin Buber or Benno Jacob what she needed and could not learn elsewhere. The goal of her study, however, could not be mistaken, and neither can ours. I have already warned of the danger posed by the putatively sophisticated disconnection between academic activity and the encompassing intellectual-religious

response demanded by Judaism. This is due not only to increased flirtation with orthopraxy, in the narrow sense of the word, with its rejection of normative belief and indifference to the cognitive dimension in the Jew's personal relationship with God, but also, perhaps even more so, it is associated with a studied irreverence toward God and Torah that borders, if it does not pass over into vulgarization, and undermines that personal relationship. It is also the error of those within Orthodoxy who define intellectual deviance only in terms of propositional heresy, regarding *Torah mi-Sinai* or the integrity of *Torah she-be'al Peh*, without taking into account debunking attitudes that stop short of propositional heresy.

Many are lured by these siren songs, not only through the desire to assimilate the indifference and mild contempt for the intellectual content of religious belief that is prevalent in influential circles and is attached to the prestige enjoyed in some circles by academics, but also due to the absence of a visible alternative. We have outlined a *derekh ha-limmud* along the lines practiced by Nehama, supplemented perhaps by *talmidei hakhamim* such as R. Mordekhai Breuer or R. Yoel Bin-Nun, who bring the tradition into interaction with new questions, or guided by masters such as R. Joseph Soloveitchik, who took what he wanted from modern scholarship only to concentrate relentlessly on the human condition, as Judaism illuminates it, and the personal experience of God and Torah. All too often, these models are ignored by rabbis and teachers.

One factor is no doubt the fact that many of our communal functionaries have not been exposed to serious study of Jewish exegesis at all, or sufficiently to internalize a genuine *derekh ha-limmud*. Perhaps for that reason, they may deem their own homiletic concoctions and sermonic strains, where the text of Tanakh and the work of the classical commentators serve as pretext without context, more worthy of the ear of their classes and congregations than a careful, patient and submissive thinking along with Ramban or Netziv. Perhaps they regard studying the classical texts less important than whatever "message" or exhortation they wish to communicate to their attentive flock.

Much can be attributed to the moist gabbiness and intellectual shallowness characteristic of the talking professions. Once rabbis and teachers were expected to teach; now they are called upon to preach. As Ann Douglas has shown, Christian preaching in the United States once had hard intellectual content, and only in the nineteenth century did the

Protestant sermon lose its cognitive substance. Perhaps this is another aspect of liberal American culture that has infiltrated our Jewish life. Or perhaps we have been brought to believe that only Talmud is intellectually for real, while the study of Tanakh is a game of tennis without a net, and the main goal is to have a good time.

Perhaps what I perceive as intellectual indolence and self-indulgence on the part of our professionals is no more than their adapting to what the congregations and the parents prefer. As someone told me after I delivered an earlier version of this talk at several Orthodox synagogues: Orthodox audiences enjoy hearing about the Holocaust, about acrimonious incidents in Jewish history, or about controversial halakhic rulings; they are not interested in talking about God and their relationship to Him. Yet amid the silence and conviviality, there are listeners who learn that the discussion of Tanakh in our community is an occasion for whimsy or an excuse for political or communal exhortation, and that if one is to study Tanakh seriously, the outlook of academic sterility is the only game in town.

Whether the approach adumbrated here is likely to prove popular should be a matter of indifference. If, as I hope, there is an appreciative audience for an approach to Tanakh that is intellectually serious and fosters active engagement in the encounter with God and with His revelation, then it is a privilege to minister to that thirst. If, as we are sometimes assured, it is an uphill battle, then it is an even more urgent obligation to subvert that indifference and convert it to connection.

Further Reading:

S. 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.

S. Carmy, "A Room with a View, But a Room of Our Own," *Tradition* 28:3 (1994), pp. 39–69. Also in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996), pp. 1–38.

S. Carmy, "Homer and the Bible," *Tradition* 41:4 (2008), pp. 1–7.

S. Carmy, "A *Peshat* in the Dark: Reflections on the Age of Cary Grant," *Tradition* 43:1 (2010), pp. 1–6.

S. Carmy "Cold Fury, Hidden Face, the Jealousy of Israel: Two Kinds of Religious Estrangement in the Torah," *Tradition* 43:4 (2010), pp. 21–36.

S. Carmy, "Concepts of Scripture in Mordechai Breuer," in *Jewish Concepts of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Benjamin D. Sommer (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012), pp. 267–279.

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Orthodox Bible-Study: The Reality on the Ground

B. Barry Levy

(B. Barry Levy has been a professor of Bible at McGill University since 1975. Formerly he taught at Yeshiva University and at Brown University. He also has held appointments as visiting graduate professor at Concordia University and at Yeshiva University, as Shier Distinguished Professor of Judaica at the University of Toronto, and as Starr Fellow at Harvard University. His last book was Fixing God's Torah: The Accuracy of the Hebrew Bible Text in Jewish Law *(New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); his forthcoming one is* Jewish Masters of the Sacred Page*, a study of the history of rabbinic Bibles.)*

Much love, sanctity, and attention is lavished on the Bible in virtually all forms of Jewish religious life. Nevertheless, talmudic and midrashic considerations dominate the general picture of Judaism, particularly in the halakhic realm—and therefore in many details of Bible interpretation, application, and observance. To be sure, this dominance of the Bible by rabbinic concerns is not true of all Jews. Some early rabbis regularly kept the biblical and rabbinic corpora highly integrated. They often used the Bible as a check on the Talmud and related rabbinic thinking, noting that numerous biblical passages that putatively contained rabbinic ideas or derivations from Scripture were *asmakhta be-'alma,* "merely [scriptural] support." Furthermore, this argument was used by many of their later followers. Even so, in many late-antique, medieval, and post-medieval contexts, Talmud study outranked Bible study both quantitatively and qualitatively. Talmudic issues still determine or strongly influence many aspects of contemporary religious life, often known in scholarly circles as "Rabbinic Judaism." This situation derives in part from the early-rabbinic teaching that Moses received two

Torot on Sinai—one written in the Bible (which some ancient rabbis understood to be directed at all humanity[1]) and another oral one preserved by the rabbis and incorporated into the subsequently developed rabbinic literature (intended for the Jews).

A strong commitment to the importance of oral tradition in many ancient Near Eastern cultures—as evidenced by the preservation of very few written law codes but tens of thousands of legal documents, which of necessity bear witness to the oral transmission of numerous legal traditions in all these societies—helped determine and reinforce the importance of this Oral Torah for Jews long before the rabbis came on the scene. Even so, many early rabbinic leaders memorized all or much of the Bible, and although their citation of the Bible and reliance on its teachings are extremely widespread, they are not universal. Thus, preference for the rabbinic over the biblical was, and still remains, more a prioritizing of one than an outright rejection of the other. However, this uneasy balance sometimes was carried to excess. Today, traditional Jews who seemingly give the Bible too much attention are likely to be criticized if not ostracized by their rabbinic colleagues. Should they attempt to follow its values or laws independently of the normal rabbinic channels of interpretation and application, they may be decried as heretics or, in some cases, treated like Karaites.

This situation has contributed to either distancing many Jews from much of their Scripture or adopting it in rabbinic form; sometimes both. As a community, contemporary Jewish readers—young and old, traditionalist and non-traditionalist—often are deprived of a sophisticated appreciation of the Bible on its own terms, preferring instead to ignore it or to see it through rabbinic eyes. And many will grasp at any creative way to link the Bible to their lives, even when this does violence to its literal meaning or totally removes it from its ancient context. In like manner, many lack strong backgrounds in the non-rabbinic and contemporary scientific literatures that deal with Scripture, and often even the classical Jewish ones. This does not mean that all individual Jews are ignorant of the Bible or unaware of its classical and modern interpreters and interpretations. The weekly Torah reading and related educational and homiletical treatments have done much to keep the Bible's contents familiar to students and synagogue goers, and numerous people attend adult education classes that focus on parts of the Bible; indeed adult study of the books of the Torah has been a well-document-

ed Jewish priority for more than 2,000 years. Individually and collectively, many Jews know or are familiar with much of the Torah, the Five Megillot, and many passages from the Prophets and Psalms. But partial awareness of some books appears quite positive in comparison with the almost unknown content of the Minor Prophets, Job, Proverbs, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. These books remain all but hidden from the Jewish public, and the knowledge of them that can be found tends to be anecdotal rather than systematic; it is oriented to late-antique or later rabbinic thinking rather than to an ancient and biblical mindset. And it rarely consists of more than isolated facts about specific verses or groups of them and random ways of looking at them.

Like the many artists who, over the past several millennia, depicted biblical characters as real or idealized images of themselves or their contemporaries rather than as authentic ancient realities, most modern readers imagine the people of the Bible thinking modern thoughts and conducting ancient life in ways that respond to modern questions and incorporate contemporary values, even if they are not dressed in fully modern garb or flying in airplanes. Some might even argue that the original texts were written in ways that intentionally accommodated endless centuries of evolving images and applications. Other readers perceive these ancient texts and people as specifically pre-modern and rabbinic. *Moshe Rabbenu* is a rabbinic title, not a biblical one, as is *Yosef ha-tzaddik*; Moses, David, and other biblical leaders often are described anachronistically in early rabbinic texts, holding rabbinic-type courts and conducting conversations more expected of rabbinic than biblical figures. Presentations of the Genesis characters (including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their families) observing later Mosaic or even rabbinic religious practices, while not biblical in origin, are at least as early as Jubilees (usually dated in the second century B.C.E.) and were developed later in the Mishnah, Talmudim, Midrashim, and subsequent essays and commentaries.

Even so, numerous important rabbis rejected both the notion that Genesis 26:5—". . . because Abraham obeyed my voice, observed my demands, my commands, my laws, and my dictates"—described that patriarch observing the 613 commandments and the rabbinic preference to interpret that book's narratives as if that is what they portrayed (see the related commentaries of Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Radak, the Tosafists, etc., and discussions of the Genesis characters as *Benei Noah,* "Noahides").[2] Images

of patriarchs as rabbis are sanctified by early and repeated midrashic use and remain the way many religious educators would have students understand the passages—but that preference makes such interpretations neither more believable nor binding. They are understandable because the ancients lacked modern historical perspective, and the texts served both educational and homiletical purposes. The latter reason remains operative even today, but we cannot ignore the potential role of historical perspective in understanding this entire matter and its dominance in most modern considerations.

Later presentations of Abraham, Moses, and Mordecai, for example, in fur hat and caftan and thinking Hasidic thoughts may seem quaint and unhistorical, and they are seriously out of step with ancient realities. But perhaps more significant is their failure to acknowledge the distance they exhibit from other more realistic and no less faithful rabbinic interpretations. Even so, "realistic" is a highly subjective term that varies from one generation to another. And whatever one thinks of such presentations, methodologically they often differ little from contemporary treatments that fill the heads of scriptural heroes with equally anachronistic existential philosophy, modern science, or halakhic reasoning, or present them as Holocaust survivors or the purveyors of modern or postmodern cultural ideals such as democracy, ecology, or feminism. As far as I am concerned, an authentic reconstruction is one that is realistic to the original context of the story, and since our knowledge of that context is necessarily imperfect, varies with the interpreter, and constantly is modified in the light of new discoveries, we must understand its reconstruction as incomplete and impermanent. However, this should not give free reign to the manifold creative suggestions that have accumulated over the centuries.

The range of passages included in my generalization about Jewish knowledge of the Bible and the overall validity of its claim depend on the educational experiences afforded to various individuals, the extent to which they remember what they were taught about the Bible (usually) in high school, and whether they continued to study it after graduating, but I believe the statement does describe the Jewish reality in today's Western world. Those who have been raised and educated outside the Jewish contexts in which these things may have been taken seriously and have foregone the opportunity to study them elsewhere usually will have at their disposal only what is available from the general non-Jewish culture, which

once was substantial, at least regarding the Bible, but now is negligible. It seems that one of the last taboos in contemporary American culture is teaching the Bible without preaching it.

Students who seek to buck this trend by developing an accurate understanding of the big picture that includes these facts, texts, and interpretations, as well as the intellectual climates that they represent now and that they reflected over the ages (of which the aforementioned details allude to only small parts), usually are left to do so through personal exploration. Both they and the adults who succeed in grasping this broad reality are a small, atypical minority. Rabbis, scholars, well-educated students, and a few highly interested laypeople may achieve a more sophisticated and historically accurate understanding of all this, but the general Jewish population has not received adequate exposure to two worlds of valuable information about the Bible, one in the rabbinic commentaries and other books and the other outside them, and usually their study is expressed in inversely proportional measures. Nor do most Jews appreciate the contextual realities of the Bible or how its books represent the historical and intellectual worlds in which they were produced; the same problem exists for their interpreters. Usually these texts are taught because of their implications for contemporary ideologies and observances, which may be responding to different post-biblical and even non-rabbinic concerns and pressures.

And yet, according to many pious Jewish understandings, contextual influences on the Torah and its interpreters never existed, indeed could not exist and cannot, even now, and such non-traditional explanations (which is not to say anti-traditional ones, though often they are equated) should be ignored. According to such thinking these interpretations are unnecessary and misleading, work counter to spiritual treatment of Scripture, and have no place in religious education of any sort. Ancient elements that were supposedly misconstrued in this way presumably did not contribute to the content or direction of any biblical passage, commentary, or edition, and therefore such thinking should be ignored, disavowed, or discredited wherever it is alleged to appear. In short, for such readers, it is preferable to de-contextualize the Bible, to see it outside and above the world at large; for most others, the more the Bible, its characters, and its events can be linked to contemporary ancient ones, the more credible it is. According to the first group, verses such as Leviticus 18:1–2,

which prohibit the practices of the ancient Egyptians, whose land the Hebrews left, and those of the Canaanites, into whose land they were going, seemingly were really about the Romans, Greeks, and other post-biblical nations. Contrast the editorial statements in some rabbinic Bibles (e.g., Warsaw, 1860) to the effect that all internal references to nations were to ancient peoples and their practices, not contemporary ones, statements seemingly intended to deflect possibly negative statements about nineteenth-century European powers, not an acceptance of the relevance of ancient Canaanites and Egyptians.

Despite the enormous differences among individual rabbinic commentators that allow for such variations in contextualizing Bible interpretations, this analysis suggests two possibilities. According to the first, either rabbinic Bible interpretation must be totally different from and remarkably superior to all other types of scriptural analysis and the very best if not the only way to understand it, or Jewish intellectual history must be nothing more than a pale shadow of whatever the rest of humanity was thinking at any given time and not worthy of the emulation many pious people imagine it to deserve. The first attitude regularly is taught or assumed by a major segment of the Orthodox Jewish community; the second is often expressed by those who know little about the history of Jewish thought. Both opinions are exaggerated and less than helpful.

In fact, Jewish understanding of Scripture is a function of both the rabbinic tradition and the broad treatment of the Bible in the constantly changing contexts inhabited by its interpreters. The rabbinic interpretation of Scripture, though not equivalent to all other thinking about it, is not, for that reason, lacking in brilliance, creativity, or originality. Indeed, evidence of these qualities is present almost everywhere, while greater awareness of these external influences can be gleaned from the background noise in the many rabbinic books treated above than regularly is acknowledged. But the fact that few traditionalist religious leaders now seem engaged by it confirms that it played little if any role in their training and therefore even less in that of their students.[3] A careful comparison of various Jewish intellectual experiences with the corresponding (non-Jewish) Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Italian, German, French, Turkish, Russian, British, and American ones, for example, demonstrates that Jews neither ignored these cultures nor mimicked them and their reactions to the Bible, though they learned much from them and rejected some of their

treatments. Often they made original contributions to composing or to understanding the primary documents of these cultures and to synthesizing them with extant Jewish ones, much as biblical writers did with the societies in or against which they wrote. Thus Christian and Muslim contributions to rabbinic Bible study were extensive—particularly in the areas of grammar, history, philosophy, and science—though often they were secondary and ignored by Jews. Many of Abarbanel's commentaries, for example, are prefaced by short biographical sketches that relate directly to his professional experiences and ensure links between his commentaries and late-medieval historical reality.

Even today, one finds social and educational contexts in which some secular Jews and other Orthodox ones are actively directed away from Bible study for fear of being affected negatively by its contents, its messages, and the dynamics related to its engagement. These groups intend different things by such intellectual recoiling, but the effects are largely similar. This attitude may owe a debt to the challenges inherent in modern critical scholarship and the pious responses to it, which work like a magnet, repelling some groups even as they attract others, but surely this avoidance of the Bible is not solely the result of contemporary considerations. In one form or another, it has been a part of Jewish thinking for most of the past two millennia, and that includes the teachings of some unquestionable rabbinic authorities who warned their followers to distance their sons from concentrated Bible study.[4] Presumably such individuals utilized the Babylonian Talmud as a substitute for Scripture, while modern de-biblicized secularists seemingly have none at all, at least no Jewish one. Its absence from their educational platforms likely may lead to assimilation and, if not for the presence of certain Jewish cultural affinities, their total disappearance as Jews.

Many who take their scriptural legacy seriously feel that both these Orthodox and non-Orthodox groups, though motivated by very different considerations, should examine—nay, study—their shared scriptural legacy. Such activity could benefit from their intellectual contributions and enrich both groups of participants personally, at least in order to better understand themselves, if not the Bible and its interpretation. But for this to happen these individuals must trust others outside their immediate cultural orbits, experiment with new ideas, and explore a few that initially may be uncomfortable, including some that eventually will be

rejected. Such daring is unusual today (one noted exception is the advanced Bible study in certain Israeli yeshivot), and I find it more prevalent among students than teachers and educational leaders, many of whom actively discourage it, but it is akin to what many medieval writers did, and there are signs that it may be on the cusp of a revival, especially in a few Israeli yeshivot.

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Educators and rabbis use the Bible to teach Judaism as they understand it, usually following their convictions about how to live according to it. Often they see no reason to dwell on obscure details of cartography, agriculture, history, or even religion, and they seem equally disinterested in the analogous issues in both the commentaries and the other books that discuss them, unless they are important for teaching Judaism today. This reality is understandable but disappointing, because it does little to acknowledge that knowing the Bible and teaching it have independent value beyond what can be preached from it and that such a policy of careful selection and control of the issues that emerge from Bible study has done little and in the future will do even less to change the description with which this essay began.

Effective Jewish education needs to be constructed around inspiring religious experiences, but it also must involve extensive study of texts, in some cases their memorization. The Bible is one of the major textual subjects covered in elementary schools, where the Torah receives the lion's share of attention. High school curricula often consider it less important, and where students are segregated by sex, males often receive far fewer Bible classes than females (Talmud usually accounts for the imbalance). Even so, high schools often include parts of the Prophets, Psalms, Megillot, and other books in their curricula. The Historical Prophets may be read seriatim (often primarily as language exercises), or studied in the light of some rabbinic comments. Books that lack strong connections to the liturgy are downplayed, but scriptural readings also are associated with holy days and, throughout the year, many occasions are linked to the passages that deal with them: Esther, Jonah, Lamentations, Psalms, and parts of the Torah and Prophets are particularly important in this way. Bible study also includes *Parashat Ha-Shavua'*.

Undoubtedly the most commonly heard response to my university classes for more than 40 years has been the comment I (and probably many other professors) receive at the beginning of every semester: "This class was interesting and made sense, but I had 10 [or more] years of day school education before I arrived here. Why didn't anyone tell me these things before?" In fact, students often are left with immature and sometimes misinformed notions about some of what they have studied, and they rapidly fall victim to alternative, more academic and more critical-sounding, sometimes non-Jewish, anti-Semitic, or anti-Zionist ideas that circulate in the university and the adult world. How many students think that the rabbinic tradition necessitates fidelity to the notions that the ancient Israelites built the pyramids; that the text of the entire Torah was brought down by Moses from Mt. Sinai; that Abraham observed the entire Torah; that the Torah text is letter perfect; that midrashic interpretations always contain the literal meaning of the Torah; that Mordecai was Esther's uncle; and so forth? What upsets me is not that Judaism lacks sophisticated responses to such matters, but that that many students are not adequately exposed to them, often because teachers have not been, or they are fearful of dealing with them. One way or another, Christian students outgrow their belief in Santa Claus and the tooth fairy; *mutatis mutandis,* Jewish ones must do likewise.

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If today's realities differ from those that influenced the production of these books and the commentaries they contain, often by many centuries, can they serve the interests and needs of contemporary students of the material? Or must one require the replacement of such teachings with less reasonable and less defensible ones, solely because they are old or demand more commitment? Should educators require the production of new collections of sources that both anchor today's readers in the tradition and move them forward? Are they being created, and are teachers, much less students, regularly taught to use them? And do they actually advance the process, or merely circle back through some elements of the tradition in an attempt to limit what is being excerpted for use and, above all else, to avoid exhibiting any contemporary influence? Moreover, what should we say about critical thinking, the hallmark of numerous Rishonim and

Aharonim alike (which is very different from the modern concept of "biblical criticism") and its relevance to all of the above? Should names like Joseph Soloveitchik, Nehama Leibowitz, and Jonathan Sacks fill Bible classes alongside Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban—sometimes instead of them? And are we willing to allow the discussions of the Bible to be driven by the issues and methods of Moshe Shamah and Mordechai Breuer?

My brief response to all this is to encourage studying the Bible and the history of the interpretation of its passages, which necessitates that students understand how different answers to a question were legitimate suggestions in different contexts and, where possible, why they differed. This approach requires choosing and studying texts for the questions raised, a range of the solutions different authors offered, and how both reflected the thinking of their times. It does not necessitate studying the entire text or recapitulating all of Jewish intellectual history before exploring modern alternatives; and it does not necessitate believing in the binding nature of all the answers. Most of the time, it does not matter particularly if students study old commentaries or new ones, as long as they learn the languages in which they were written, master the texts, and are exposed to the best available interpretations. If the best are from early medieval times, teachers owe an intellectual debt to their authors to use them and to demonstrate their importance, historical priority, and longevity. If the best are later or even contemporary, teachers should use them and stress the continuity of the interpretative process and the validity of modern contributions to it. Whether this means they must study Rishonim, Aharonim, or scientific writings, they must deal with additional questions that may arise. Because few writers ever define what actually is "best," that too is an essential part of the quest for understanding.

Misrepresentations of the classical interpreters and their methods, coupled with fear of innovation and heresy and the inability to decide how to use properly either the ancient traditional materials, the sophisticated medieval rabbinic responses, or their contemporary analogues, reinforce the postmodern obsession with the "slippery slope," perhaps the most overly used argument in the contemporary traditionalist's ideological arsenal. Essentially, this line of reasoning consigns to oblivion any notion that seems in potential conflict with any pious assumption, however unnecessary, inauthentic, misguided, or subject to rabbinic debate, because it might anticipate a challenge or problem. Sometimes it even leads to cen-

soring presumptively offensive texts that express such notions, particularly during translation. Concomitantly, it prioritizes those assumptions of which it approves and interprets the Bible in accord with them. Unfortunately, educators often accept this battery of errors, as when they share, actively or passively, in a conspiracy of silence that avoids dealing with what they imagine to be potentially troubling Bible-related issues. What I find amazing is that they sometimes respond this way, even when these ideas have been discussed openly by the rabbis for a millennium or two, have been anticipated by students' questions, and remain compelling contemporary concerns. This leaves people with the impression that the rabbinic tradition is only a warm, fuzzy, homiletical mist that cannot cope with many of these classic if potentially challenging subjects, which it now enshrouds in a cloud of irrelevance, illegitimacy, and suspicion.

Nothing could be farther from the actual way the rabbinic tradition worked or works, in at least some yeshivot even today, but often teachers postpone such considerations to some advanced level of education that many who need them immediately will never experience. Even when both classic and modern treatments of a text or notion share the same data and approaches, often the teachers never let them get close enough to each other to appear in lockstep, because they themselves may not recognize these links, or because they prefer to ignore them for fear of validating "modern" study and thereby purportedly leading students astray. But if admitting the existence of a problem can cause massive defection by students or teachers—and I neither deny that possibility nor minimize its significance—something must be radically wrong, not only with the way it and similar problems have been handled but with much of the educational process that has been employed up to that point. Commitments properly instilled cannot be that shallow or that easily overturned; and, despite a widespread consensus to the contrary, admitting the existence of real challenges to accepted truths or assumptions often strengthens commitment more than it undermines it.

When students finally do learn about these links, and some eventually will (unless they are actively isolated from Western society and its institutions of advanced learning, or at least from the study of the Humanities, or from most good yeshivot), this lack of prior exposure, preparation, and legitimization can be devastating to their spiritual health, either because it forces them to ignore the thinking world around them—indeed, to disen-

gage from it—or it allows that world to absorb them, as it forces itself upon them and its appeals become irresistible. Instead of educating students satisfactorily by teaching them the full range of traditional responses and how to negotiate these sometimes thorny issues, religious leaders often encourage their systematic avoidance and shelter students indefinitely. But just as isolation from various stimuli often interferes with the development of the body's immune system, too much distance from these issues—even though they often have well-developed roots in the rabbinic tradition itself and important places in the thinking and writing of well-known sages—can leave students vulnerable to doubts and religious crises when they do learn about them.

For students who are willing to take on some or all of this academic work in conjunction with a spiritual quest, I would add one more point.

In the final analysis, and preferably *ab initio*, every student who sees the Bible as part of a personal spiritual quest—who seeks to determine what the text means, not merely what it says—must enter the lists as an individual combatant in its ongoing, indeed, never-ending study. The ultimate question of any engaged reader is "What does this text mean to me?" and finding the answer is a complicated process. Whether as shield-bearer for a talmudic rabbi, squire to a medieval interpretative knight, computer operator for a space-age textual scientist, or all three, the spiritually motivated Jewish student of Scripture cannot avoid the need to make discriminating, learned decisions about how to understand and apply to his or her personal life the many differing approaches to the Bible that have been enriched by both traditional and modern writers. The task is arduous, and, despite the intellectual and spiritual pleasures that accrue to the participant, uncertainty discourages many from enlisting.

Before ancient Israelite warriors went to battle, a priest addressed them (*cf.* Deut. 20:2–10). He released some, including the fearful, from participating, encouraged others in pursuit of the objective, and ensured adherence to religious standards during the operations. Dreams of success, honor, and riches may have added additional personal incentives, but the Bible did not prioritize them.

Encouragement, directions, and warnings, obviously are valuable to modern combatants in the struggle to understand the Bible, but few spoils are available to attract them, while many challenges and distractions, not to mention financial benefits for those who decline this opportunity, often

loom large. Despite all the supposed support for the Bible and its study, global Jewish failure to prioritize this aspect of religious and cultural learning makes conscription of the talented and the worthy a national priority.

Were a summons to this intellectual and spiritual battle possible, and were one to offer the participants an exhortatory address in the spirit of the ancient priest who did likewise in anticipation of military engagements, one could not provide a better model than that expressed in the Bible's beautiful tribute to the Torah associated with ancient Israel's greatest warrior, David:

> The teachings of Your mouth are dearer to me
> than thousands of gold and silver pieces...
> I rejoice over Your words
> like one who has found much booty.
>
> (Ps. 119:72, 162)

But perhaps this can be realized most fully through application of the initiatory message God reportedly gave another great military leader, Joshua:

> Do not allow this book of the Torah to be absent from your mouth; study it day and night in order that you be able to conduct yourself according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your path successful and be wise. (Josh. 1:8)

NOTES

This article contains sections from a much larger essay soon to be published by Urim. Thanks to Rabbi Hayyim Angel for selecting those sections he felt most appropriate for this volume. It is offered in memory of my recently departed dear friend, Joel Linsider, former judge in Albany, NY and *'oleh* to Jerusalem, whose greatest pleasures were to fulfill the words of the prayer *Ahavah Rabbah: le-havin u-le-haskil, li-shmo'a, li-lemod u-le-lammed, li-shemor, ve-la-'asot, u-le-kayyem.*

1. See the sources and discussions in Menahem (Marc) Hirshman, *Torah le-Khol Ba'ei Olam: Zerem Universali be-Sifrut ha-Tannaim ve-Yahaso le-Hokhmat ha-Amim* (Tel-Aviv: ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad, 1999).

2. *E.g.,* Meir Dan Plotzki, *Keli Hemdah,* Vol. 1–3 (Piotrkow, 1927; reprint, Brooklyn, 1986); and Barukh Rakovsky, *Birkat Avot* (Jerusalem, 1990).
3. Note the online uproar generated in October, 2010, by Artscroll's omission of Zalman Sorotzkin's harmless reference to *Robinson Crusoe* from the translation of his five-volume, Hebrew Torah commentary, *Oznayim la-Torah.* Sorotzkin (1881–1966) was and remains above all suspicion of being a modern radical; the omission typifies others by Artscroll editors and translators during the past several decades.
4. Frank Ephraim Talmage, "Keep Your Sons from Scripture: The Bible in Medieval Jewish Scholarship and Spirituality," in *Apples of Gold in Settings of Silver: Studies in Medieval Jewish Exegesis and Polemics,* edited by Barry Dov Walfish (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1991), pp. 151–171.

On Interpreting Midrash

Moshe Shamah

(Rabbi Moshe Shamah studied in several yeshivot, including Ner Israel Rabbinical College and Beth Medrash Govoha of Lakewood. He received a Master's degree in education from Loyola College of Maryland. He went on to found Sephardic Institute in 1968, which he actively heads till this day. Rabbi Shamah recently published a commentary on the Torah: Recalling the Covenant: A Contemporary Commentary on the Five Books of the Torah *(Ktav, 2011). The following is a lightly edited and abridged version of Rabbi Shamah's two-part essay, "On Interpreting Midrash," in his* Commentary, *pp. 336–358.)*

General Remarks

In this study we will address the subject of rabbinic Midrash and Aggadah (the latter term usually designated for talmudic "Midrashim") in the light of five of the leading authorities of the late Gaonic period and that of the early Rishonim, who lived in the tenth through the twelfth centuries. They are not in agreement with each other on all points, but they contain a common denominator regarding Midrash and Aggadah. In the second section we will survey a cross-section of Midrashim and Aggadot drawn from the Talmud and classical compendia of this material, restricting ourselves to those associated with *Parashat Beshallah*. It is our intention to point out that it is often clear from a careful reading of these sources that the authors did not intend their words to be interpreted literally.

Rab Sherira Gaon (906–1006, head of the Pumbedita Academy) wrote:

> Those points brought out from scriptural verses called Midrash and Aggadah are assumptions. Some are accurate—such as Rabbi Judah's state-

> ment that Simeon's portion was included in that of Judah, for we find it corroborated in the book of Joshua—but many are not. . . . We abide by the principle, "According to his intelligence is a man commended" (Prov. 12:8). As to the Aggadot of the students' students—Rabbi Tanhuma, Rabbi Oshaya, and others—most of them [the realities] are not as they expounded. Accordingly we do not rely on Aggadot. The correct ones of them are those supported by intelligence and by Scripture. There is no end to Aggadot. (*Sefer ha-Eshkol*, *Hilkhot Sefer Torah*, p. 60a)

Rab Hai Gaon, son of Sherira (939–1038, head of the Pumbedita Academy):

> Aggadah and Midrash, even concerning those written in the Talmud, if they do not work out properly and if they are mistaken, they are not to be relied upon, for the rule is, we do not rely on Aggadah. However, regarding what is ensconced in the Talmud, if we find a way to remove its errors and strengthen it, we should do so, for if there were not some lesson to be derived it would not have been incorporated. . . . Concerning what is not in the Talmud, we investigate—if correct and proper we expound and teach it and if not we pay no attention to it. (*Sefer ha-Eshkol*, *Hilkhot Sefer Torah*, p. 60a)

Rab Hai Gaon also stated: "You should know that aggadic statements are not like those of *shemu'ah* ("heard," a passed-down statement). Rather, they are cases of each individual expounding what came to his mind, in the nature of 'it can be said,' not a decisive matter. Accordingly we do not rely on them" (*Otzar ha-Ge'onim* to *b. Haggigah*, *Siman* 67).

Rab Shemuel ben Hofni Gaon (960–c.1034, head of the Sura Academy), in his *Introduction to the Talmud* (published in the Vilna edition at the end of *Massekhet Berakhot*, erroneously attributed to Shemuel Hanagid, translated and abridged by Rab Shemuel ben Hananya in the 12th century), stated: "Aggadah constitutes all the explanations in the Talmud on any subject that does not refer to a mitzvah. You do not learn from them except what seems acceptable to the mind…. Concerning the expounding on scriptural verses, each [sage] expounded what chanced to him and what he saw in his mind, so what is acceptable to the mind we learn from and the rest we do not rely upon."

Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164) in his Bible commentary often alludes to the importance of recognizing the inapplicability of Midrash to understanding the intention of the Torah. For example, concerning the variant between the two Decalogue passages in the Torah, wherein one states

"*zakhor* (remember) the Sabbath day to keep it holy" while the other has "*shamor* (observe) the Sabbath day to keep it holy," he comments:

> …The sages said that "*zakhor* and *shamor* were said in the same pronouncement" (b. *Shebuot* 20b). . . Heaven forbid saying that they did not speak correctly for our minds are meager in comparison to their minds, but people of our generation think that their words were intended to be taken literally which is not the case. . . . It is not possible that *zakhor* and *shamor* were uttered simultaneously except as a miracle, but we must admit that even so there is a question, why was it not written *zakhor ve-shamor* in both the first and second formulation? And what about those other verses [of Decalogue variants], were they also said simultaneously . . .? The explanation is that when Hashem uttered *zakhor* (to remember the Sabbath day) everybody understood it means in order to observe it, so [in Deuteronomy] Moses wrote *shamor*.

Rambam (Moses Maimonides, 1138–1204), in a number of statements, addressed the basic concept Ibn Ezra was dealing with in the previous citation. He explicitly pointed out that situations that, *by definition*, are impossible to exist, cannot exist. In his words: "It is no deficiency in the One [God] that He does not conjoin contraries in one substratum, and His power is not affected by this and by other similar impossibilities" (*Guide* 1:75 [Pines 1974, 224]). "We do not attribute to God, may He be exalted, incapacity because He is unable to corporify His essence or to create someone like Him or to create a square whose diagonal is equal to its side" (226). "It has then become clear that, according to every opinion and school, there are impossible things whose existence cannot be admitted. Power to bring them about cannot be ascribed to the Deity. . . . Accordingly they are necessarily as they are" (*Guide* 3:15 [Pines, 461]).

Rambam wrote extensively concerning the interpretation of rabbinic Midrash and Aggadah. In his *Introduction to Perek Helek* he points to the fact that the Mishnah sages themselves assume that even the Torah text must be read with logic and common sense. When confronted with a passage that looked impossible to take literally they resorted to allegorical interpretation. Rambam cites several examples. For example, in 1 Chronicles 11 the text relates some amazing deeds of King David's warriors, such as killing a lion in the pit on a snowy day, which the sages understood allegorically. The narrative of the book of Job and the account of resurrection in the book of Ezekiel (chapter 37) were also interpreted allegorically by some sages. How much more so, asks Rambam, is it imper-

ative to be rational when dealing with their own teachings, the aggadic and midrashic statements of rabbinic compendia?

Regarding those who interpret all Aggadot and Midrashim literally, he states:

> . . . they destroy the Torah's glory and darken its brilliance; they make God's Torah the opposite of what was intended. He stated in the perfect Torah regarding the nations "who will hear about all these statutes and say, 'What a wise and insightful people this great nation is'" (Deut. 4:6). But when the nations hear how this group relates the words of the sages in a literal manner they will say, "What a foolish and ignorant people this insignificant nation is." Most of these expounders explain to the public what they, themselves, really do not understand. Would that they be quiet or say, "We do not understand what the rabbis mean in this statement or how to interpret it." But they think they understand and endeavor to make known according to their poor understanding—not according to the sages' intention—and expound at the head of the assembly the derashot of tractate *Berakhot*, the chapter *Helek* and other sources, literally, word by word. (*Introduction to Perek Helek*)

The formulations of the sages teach all sorts of valuable lessons. Frequently, they use the Torah text as a springboard to elaborate an idea or as a mnemonic device to anchor an insight and assist in its being remembered. In doing so they are often engaging in moral education and inspirational edification that in their days would have been difficult to accomplish in a straightforward manner. As long as the reader or listener realizes that a proposed interpretation of a text is not necessarily its true meaning, the interpretation often having no genuine (*peshat*) connection to the actual intention of the relevant verses, and that the highly improbable, often fantastic and sometimes impossible realities portrayed are not literal, no harm is done and a benefit is derived from the lesson.

It may also be that some sages, contrary to Rambam's opinion, employed such methods even when they knew their audience thought that the literal message they expounded was intended to explicate the actual meaning of the passage. It appears that there were cases when they felt it necessary to do so. This would have been probable when they were dealing with minimally educated people who lived in social contexts that precluded them from access to scientific knowledge about realia or historical knowledge about events. Such people already believed in the fantas-

tic, such that their taking an impossible interpretation literally created no conflict for them and only provided the benefit of the lesson.

It is the case today that numerous traditional adherents of the Torah were taught and teach to uncritically subscribe to a literalist view of Midrash and Aggadah and take the details as factual. Some are greatly disturbed by other approaches despite the many writings of our greatest rabbinical authorities, including the Geonim and Rishonim cited above. Since the methodology employed in our Torah studies accords with the general perspective of the nonliteralists, this is an appropriate opportunity to comment on the matter.

With the enormous advances in knowledge in recent times the situation is radically different from what it had been in past centuries. The most basic general education in modern times—indeed, merely being an alert individual living in present-day society—provides an immense amount of information in many areas and insight into many subjects that the Midrashim and Aggadot continually touch upon. An average person cannot but be deeply impacted by this knowledge, as elementary education, interaction with others, and the mass media are involved in this process. And many people are now accustomed to read widely and critically, think rationally, and approach knowledge with intellectual integrity. Today, as has been the case for well over a century, taking Midrashim literally tends to cause sincere individuals prodigious conflicts between their religious faith and their knowledge of reality.

Attempts to avoid the difficulties have generally promoted apologetics with numerous false harmonizing resolutions. For many, particularly the more educated and rationally oriented, and most seriously for those with intellectual integrity, these explanations have served to merely postpone the problems for a time.

All this has contributed to mass defection from tradition on the one hand and to the development of defensive measures to prevent exposure to contradictory knowledge on the other. The latter often includes discouragement, if not prohibition, of advanced general studies, insisting the Torah be studied without the benefit of modern scholarly research as well as strictly limiting interaction with and participation in the life of the wider society. Of course, such measures create further serious, negative consequences, impacting the psychological, social, and economic well-being of many. The solution requires that it should be acknowledged that

the authorities cited above were basically correct and whatever consequences stem from that recognition must be confronted.

The teachings of the sages are often clearly recognizable as nonliteral to anyone who acknowledges that it is possible that they may be so. We will provide a sampling of different types of Midrashim and Aggadot that expounded on *Parashat Beshallah*. These Midrashim teach many wonderful and extraordinary lessons, which upon thoughtful consideration of text, theme and time frame will be seen as clearly not the intended meaning of the verses they are attached to. We will thus illustrate an important aspect of classic rabbinic methodology and help clarify the main point discussed above.

Examples of Classic Rabbinic Methodology

1. Rabbi Joshua the son of Levi expounded: *ve-lo naham Elokim*—God did not find it satisfactory (consoling) to bring Israel to its land quickly (Exod. 13:17). Why? It is comparable to a king who has 12 sons and 10 portions of land. If he distributes his lands then he will cause conflicts among his sons. He will wait until he acquires two more portions of land. Similarly, the land of Israel was not adequate for the 12 tribes. God decided to take Israel the long way around so that in the process they will conquer additional land which the two-and-a-half tribes will take, thus making the land of Israel sufficient for all the tribes (*Exod. Rab.* 20:14).

This may be good advice to a father but surely not the intention of the verse. It is based on translating the letters of the word *n-h-m* according to another meaning the word could have, but not in its present context. Additionally, the interpretation counters the verse's main message that the reason for taking the long route was so that the Israelites should not confront war soon. And if taken seriously, what does this comment say about the subject of the two and a half tribes?

2. Israel left Egypt *hamushim* (Exod. 13:18). The *Mekhilta* first interpreted that word as "armed" or "provisioned," citing Joshua 1:14 and 4:12, generally considered the more straightforward explanation. It continues with other homiletical explanations based on the fact that *hamesh* means "five":

> [*Hamushim* means that] only one-fifth of the Israelites left Egypt [the others died], some say one in 50 came out, some say one in 500. Rabbi Nehorai

> says not even one in 500 . . . as we expound . . . the Israelite women were giving birth to six children at a time. When did they die? During the three days of darkness, so that the Israelites buried their dead and gave thanks and praise to the Almighty that their enemies did not observe and rejoice in their destruction.

Several lessons are taught in this collection of explanations. It compliments the valor of a minority, in some times and places it is only a tiny minority, who hold fast to their beliefs against the assimilationist tendency of the many. Those who do not remain faithful do not share in the good that God brings to Israel. It stresses the value of keeping matters of national shame private. But surely the radically different interpretations of the "other explanations" are not addressing the meaning of our verse or describing the historical setting it presents.

3. Joseph had Israel swear they would take his bones with them out of Egypt (Exod. 13:19). Rabbi Levi stated: This is like a person who discovered that thieves had stolen his wine barrels and drank the wine. He told them: You drank the wine, but at least return the barrels. Joseph said to his brothers: You stole me alive from Shechem, please return my bones there (*Exod. Rab.* 20:19). This is valuable advice: A wrongdoer should be considerate of his victim and should minimize his wrongdoing. Even after a theft, the perpetrator could alleviate the harm he caused to the injured party. But this lesson has nothing to do with the true meaning of the verse.

4. Moses took Joseph's bones with him from Egypt (Exod. 13:19). The *Mekhilta* comments:

> How did Moses know where Joseph was buried? Serah, Asher's daughter, was still alive and she had seen them bury Joseph. The Egyptians had made a metal casket for him and sunk it in the Nile. Moses stood by the Nile, cast a pebble in and called "Joseph, Joseph, the time for The Holy One, blessed be He's fulfillment of His oath has arrived, give honor to Hashem, God of Israel, and do not delay us, for you are now holding up our departure. If you do not rise promptly we will be free from the oath." Immediately Joseph's casket floated to the top…Rabbi Natan says: Joseph was buried in the royal tomb of Egypt. . . . And how do we know they also took the bones of the other tribal heads (Joseph's brothers) with them, for he stated [in the oath he placed on his brothers], *mi-zeh ittekhem* ("from here with you" [Exod. 13:19]).

For some, the lengthy, fantastic account enhances the prestige of Moses and Joseph as well as of Serah, whose keen observation turned out to be so valuable. It highlights the value of proper burial and supports the concept that the individual survives bodily death. It brings out the importance of fulfilling vows made by parents. Rabbi Natan rejected the account outright for a more commonsense approach. In *peshat* there is no reason to assume that Joseph's burial place was not known.

5. Rabbi Johanan commented on the verse *ve-lo karav zeh el zeh kol ha-laylah* ("one could not come near the other all through the night," Exod. 14:20). When Hashem's angel moved from being in front of Israel's camp to the back of it, followed by the cloud—a defining moment in the Egyptians' downfall—the ministering angels desired to utter a song. "The Holy One, blessed be He said to them: 'The creations of My hands are drowning in the sea and you would utter a song?'" (*b. Megillah* 10b). It is a most elevating concept not to celebrate at the death of God's creations, but it is not the intention of the passage.

A brief digression is in order: Angels are not independent beings with ability to act contrary to God's will but are His messengers and manifestations of His activity. From the wind and burning fire (Ps. 104:4) to the "voice" that stopped Abraham from slaughtering his son (Gen. 22:11) to the appearance revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3:2), the angel represents an aspect of God's will and endeavors. The term for angel, *malakh*, related to *melakhah* (work), appears to designate its definition. In a strictly literary usage, angels served in parables to concretize certain thoughts. Concerning destruction of the wicked pursuers in our passage, an idealistic person would feel jubilation at the rescue of the righteous and sadness that it had to end as it did: with human beings, created in the image of God, dying. As Beruriah said, we should hope and strive to ensure that sins will be terminated from the land, not the sinners (*b. Berakhot* 10a). Rabbi Johanan represents the conflicting feelings by projecting them to God and the angels.

6. It was taught in a *Baraita* that Rabbi Meir said:

> When Israel stood at the sea the tribes were quarreling, each one said, "I will be first to enter the sea." The tribe of Benjamin jumped into the sea first, as it states, *sham Binyamin tza'ir rodem* ("There is little Benjamin their ruler" [Ps. 68:28]), *al tikrei rodem, ella rad yam* ("Do not read the word as

> '*rodem*' [their ruler] but as '*rad yam*' [he descended into the sea]"). Thereupon the princes of Judah threw stones at them, as it states [in the continuation of that verse], *sarei Yehudah rigmatam* (v. 28, a play on *rigmatam*, reading it as *ragemu otam* ["stoned them"]). Therefore, Benjamin was selected to become the "host" for the "Might" (i.e., the Holy of Holies is located in Benjamin's portion of land), as it states: "*u-ben ketefav shakhen*" ("As he rests between His shoulders," Deut. 33:12).
>
> Rabbi Judah said, that was not how it was. Rather, each tribe said, "I will not be first to enter the sea," whereupon Nahshon the son of Amminadab (the prince of the tribe of Judah) jumped into the sea first. This is as stated, "Ephraim surrounds Me with deceit, the House of Israel with guile. But Judah stands firm with God and is faithful to the Holy One" (Hos. 12:1), which is elaborated [by expounding several verses in Psalms] as follows: "Save me O God, for the waters have reached my throat, I am sunk in deep mud and have no standing" (Ps. 69:2–3) together with "Do not let the floodwaters sweep me away" (v. 16). Meanwhile, Moses was lingering in prayer. The Holy One blessed be He said to him, "My beloved are drowning in the sea and you are lingering in prayer before Me? . . . 'Speak to the Israelites that they should travel and you raise your staff and incline your hand over the sea and split it' (Exod. 15:15 ff.)." Therefore Judah merited rulership in Israel, as it states, "When Israel left Egypt . . . Judah became His holy one, Israel, His dominion" (Ps. 114:1-2), Why did Judah ascend to the status . . . because "the sea saw [the he descended into the sea first] and fled" [ibid. v. 3]). (b. *Sotah* 36b–37a)

There are several lessons here in faith and courage, in psychology and in proper behavior in an emergency. But neither side in the dispute between the sages is expounding the straightforward meaning of the Exodus passage or the other passages marshaled for evidence.

7. Upon the defeat of Pharaoh and his troops, the Torah states (Exod. 14:28): *lo nishar bahem ad ehad* (generally translated: "there did not remain from them even one"). Taking *ad ehad* to mean "until one remained," Rabbi Nehemiah in the *Mekhilta* states that Pharaoh was spared. *Pirkei Rabbi Eliezer* (42) added in the name of Rabbi Nehuniah the son of Hakaneh:

> When Pharaoh said, "Who is like You among the *elim*, Hashem, Who is like You, majestic in holiness" (Exod. 15:11), the Holy One, blessed be He saved him from the dead so that he would relate His power to others, in accordance with what is stated: "for this purpose have I allowed you to stand

> . . . and in order that My name be recounted throughout all the land" (9:16). Pharaoh became king in Nineveh. . . . When the Holy One, blessed be He sent Jonah to prophesy that Nineveh will be destroyed, Pharaoh heard, rose from his throne, rent his garments, donned sackcloth and ashes [and brought the city to repentance].

Surely this is a most potent cluster of messages about repentance. It also is an extravagantly imaginative tale spreading over many centuries based on a most fanciful interpretation of a verse.

8. Israel called out, "Who is like You among the *elim*, Hashem?" (15:11). Among its explanations of the difficult word *elim*, the *Mekhilta* proffers the following:

> "Who is like You among the *illemim*?" (interpreting *elim* as *illemim*, "mute," based on their having similar letters and sounds). Who is like You that You can hear Your sons' humiliation and be silent, as it states, "I have been silent from ages ago, I have been still and restrained, I will now cry as a woman in labor, both gasping and panting" (Isa. 42:14). That means to say, in the past God was silent and restrained, but from now on it will be different. "I will scorch mountains and hills, and dry up their vegetation, make rivers into islands and dry the pasture lands, I will lead the blind by a route they knew not, by a path they did not know will I guide them, I will make the darkness before them into light and the craggy places into a plain" (vv. 15–16).

This is a beautiful thought concerning the Exodus in the light of Israel's past affliction. It is also a relevant hope and inspiration during the crushing difficulties the Jewish people were enduring at the time of the author of this Midrash, but surely it is not the meaning of the verse it is expounded upon.

9. Following the crossing of the sea, the Torah states: Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds (*va-Yassa Moshe et Yisrael mi-Yam Suf*) (Exod. 15:22). In a masterly synthesis of Midrashim, Rashi comments on the active causative verb: "Moses had to force Israel to travel because the Egyptians had decorated their horses with ornaments of gold, silver and precious stones, and Israel was finding them in the sea. The spoils of the sea were greater than the spoils in Egypt." This constitutes an insightful commentary on the folly of the haughty and overconfident, as well as on the huge temptations Israel must rise above in order to serve Hashem. These include the problems often presented by opportunities, even those

stemming from Hashem's graciousness. But this interpretation is not an actual description of the circumstances of the verse being expounded.

10. Regarding the manna, "When the sun became hot it would melt" (16:21). The *Mekhilta* states: "Melted manna would flow into rivers and into the great sea, animals would drink that water, hunters would capture the animals and members of other nations would eat them and get a taste of the manna that descended for Israel." This is an instructive lesson regarding indirect influence, perhaps reflecting the *Mekhilta*'s view of how the Torah's message spread to the world, but not a depiction of a particular physical process.

11. In the battle against Amalek, Moses' hands were faithful until the sun set (17:12). *Midrash Tanhuma* (*Beshallah* 28), cited by Rashi, asserts: The Amalekites were calculating through astrology the propitious time that they could be victorious. Moses stopped the sun and confused their calculations. The message is clear. The enemy may possess many skills and use all sorts of means against Israel, but steadfastness in commitment to Hashem will thwart them. The scientifically knowledgeable individual knows that such a statement, were it literal, would be depicting a miracle of the very highest order, which is not even hinted at and has no foundation in the text, and which was not cited by the other schools of sages. Clearly, it was not intended to be taken literally. And God cannot be manipulated by astrology or by any other means.

12. The following passage, dealing with topics of our *parashah*, appears in a talmudic discussion on the Mishnah's statement of reciting Hallel toward the conclusion of the Passover *seder* (*b. Pesahim* 118b):

> Rabbi Natan said, the verse "The faithfulness of Hashem is forever" (Ps. 117:2), was said by the fish in the sea. This is in accordance with Rab Huna, who said that Israel in that generation [of the Exodus] were of little faith. This is as Rabbah bar Mari expounded: What is the meaning of the verse "They rebelled at the sea, the Sea of Reeds" (Ps. 106:7)? This teaches that the Israelites were skeptical at that moment [upon crossing the sea] and said: "Just as we are ascending from the sea on one side so are the Egyptians ascending on the other side." The Holy One, blessed be He then told the Minister of the Sea to spew forth [the dead Egyptians] upon the dry land. He answered, "Master of the Universe, does a master give a gift to his servant [the many corpses, food for the fish] and then take it back?" He

> responded, "I will give you [in the future] one and a half times their number." He replied, "Can a servant make a claim to collect from his master?" He told him: "The Brook of Kishon will be My guarantee." Immediately he spewed the bodies forth upon dry land and Israel came and saw them, as is stated, "Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore" (Exod. 14:30). What is the meaning of "one and a half times their number?" Regarding Pharaoh it states, "six hundred choice chariots" whereas in the case of Sisera it states, "nine hundred chariots of iron" (Judg. 4:13). When Sisera came . . . The Holy One, blessed be He brought the stars out of their orbits against them [Sisera's army] . . . they became heated whereupon they went to cool themselves in the Brook of Kishon. Holy One, blessed be He said to the Brook of Kishon, "Go and deliver your guarantee." Immediately, the Brook of Kishon swept them away and cast them into the sea, as it states, *Nahal Kishon gerafam, Nahal Kedumim* (5:21). What is the meaning of *Nahal Kedumim*, the ancient brook?" The brook that had been the guarantee in ancient times. At that moment the fish said, "The faithfulness of Hashem is forever."

Major values are expounded here. In the midst of an enormous miracle on behalf of the Israelites, God regarded and alleviated their skepticism by further altering the natural order. Since this action clashed with another's expectations of a benefit for his charges, God repaid the latter's loss with interest. He accepted the argument that it was proper to have a guarantee and gave one. He permits His creations to think independently and present their viewpoints to Him. And He is interested in justice even for the fish. Many precedents for appropriate human behavior are exemplified here, particularly to counteract the hubris and disregard of others sometimes found among the affluent. Nobody should disappoint another with merely, "Sorry, I changed my mind, something came up." Nobody should say, "I'm good for my commitment, you do not need a surety." People are expected to argue for those who cannot do so for themselves. And everybody should be concerned with the welfare of even lower creatures, how much more so the lowly among man. But this finely crafted homily has nothing directly to do with the intention of the verses being expounded or of the existence of heavenly ministers complaining to God. As midrashic interpretations generally do, it views the whole Tanakh as one integrated unity from which snippets of verses may be expounded and linked with other snippets of verses regardless of their literary context or historical setting to produce a moral that is independent of the verses expounded.

Between the *Talmudim* and classical compendia of Midrash there are many thousands of statements commenting and elaborating on words and verses of Tanakh that contain great wisdom but are not the actual interpretation of those words and verses. And in subsequent times many rabbinic authors wrote in that style. Great caution must be taken in studying and teaching this material to gain the benefit without the harmful consequences described in the first part of this study. Rambam's words are as relevant today as ever.

Reading Abraham's Stories

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Teaching Torah Today

In his comments on the importance of incorporating a literary approach into our study of Tanakh, R. Aharon Lichtenstein notes,

> We should learn to recognize archetypal forms and techniques of thematic development; to discern patterns of imagery and principles of structure; to be sensitive to narrative flow and dramatic interaction; to observe rhythmic movement and verbal texture. In short, I propose, first, that we discover—or rather, rediscover—*kitvei ha-kodesh* as literature; and, second, that, in order to deepen our appreciation of them as such, we seek to approach them critically. . . .
>
> What we readily acknowledge with respect to language generally is certainly true of *kitvei ha-kodesh*: form and substance, manner and matter, are directly interwoven. To understand, to experience a *pasuk* fully, we best approach it both cognitively and aesthetically. Words are not numbers nor verses equations. The structure of a *perek* and the response induced by it are part of what it presumably is intended to communicate to us. The symbolic import of a phrase or a *pasuk*—what we call its "meaning" —is a function of the sum total of associations elicited in its specific context; and that context is a matter of form as well as of substance, of form insinuated in substance.[1]

Not surprisingly, this attitude is reflected in R. Ezra Bick's Preface to the new collection of Bible studies from Yeshivat Har Etzion's Herzog

College. R. Bick outlines its contemporary approach to the study of Tanakh:

> First and foremost is the belief that Tanach is meant to be read and understood by the reader, without the absolute necessity of outside interlocutors.… If we are reading the text directly, then we are reading it as a text meant to be read, and this introduces the need to read using the tools of literary analysis. Of course, if the Torah is not a book, but a code or a mystery, it would be illegitimate to read it with the same eyes and mind that one reads literature. For this we have the oft-repeated principle, *dibra Torah belashon benei adam*. The Torah is literature, divine literature, written not in a special divine language but in the language and style of man. . . . Another result of the above is that the field of interest is not focused on the single verse, but on the story, the entire narrative, and in some cases the whole Tanach.[2]

The Torah is a book of teachings, and teachings assume many forms and employ a variety of strategies. For example, to teach children to be ethical we might tell them to tell the truth or not to lie. Or we might tell a story about someone who always told the truth and someone who lied—and let them draw the appropriate conclusions. Alternately, we might tell children a story about someone who grew in self-understanding and personal integrity and let them absorb the lesson as a role model. Each strategy has its own advantages and disadvantages, and in the book of Genesis the Torah makes almost exclusive use of storytelling as its mode of teaching.

In reading these narratives as a whole, it is worth noting what R. Mosheh Lichtenstein wrote regarding his own analysis of Moses' life:

> The interpretive approach adopted throughout this work is undergirded by the basic presumption that human nature in the Torah is basically similar to the human nature we are familiar with. Our view of the biblical drama, and our suggestions for analyzing the narratives, are based on an understanding that emotions like love, hate, envy, compassion and the whole gamut of human emotions with which we are familiar, are identical to their counterparts in the inner world of our forefathers. . . .
> Human events as well as metaphysics are woven into the text [of *Bereishit*]. This is true of Noah, Avraham and Sarah, Yitzhak and Rivka, Yaakov and his family, and many others. . . . The characters are living people with real emotions, coping with the whole range of situations with which human existence challenges them. The Torah wants us to study these stories for a number of reasons: because these are the basic experiences that shaped our

> ancestors, because they help us to understand the Torah more fully and accurately, and so that we can better understand the human condition as reflected in their lives and actions.[3]

Indeed, this was surely the approach taken by Hazal and various Rishonim and Aharonim when they pointed out the human component in the actions of the forefathers and foremothers, even highlighting our biblical ancestors' shortcomings and the resulting consequences. As R. Samson Raphael Hirsch notes:

> The Torah never presents our great men as being perfect; it deifies no man, says of none 'here you have the ideal, in this man the Divine becomes human'. . . . The Torah never hides from us the faults, errors and weaknesses of our great men. (*Commentary to Genesis* 12: 10–13, Levy translation)

This should not undermine our respect for these spiritual giants, but rather should humble us. We often think—alas, mistakenly—that we are above petty considerations and self-serving strategies. Beware of such hubris, we are warned. Even giants such as our biblical ancestors can fall prey to such pitfalls. Stay on guard. If they could not always live up to their great potential, surely you might fail, too.

Of course, it is true that presenting the human side of the forefathers and foremothers might distort a sense of their greatness—but only if the presentation is made in too early a grade, when youngsters are appropriately forming a "heroic" view of these individuals. Indeed, negative numbers would confuse first-graders learning subtraction, and imaginary numbers would confuse middle-school students learning signed numbers. But woe to the high school math student whose teacher really thinks that there is no such thing as imaginary numbers! A Bible teacher must know when to introduce these human portraits of our Torah greats and how to maintain a proper sense of respect and awe toward them.

It is also true that some of those who portray our biblical heroes in human terms do so from a perspective that simply lacks respect for the grandeur of the Tanakh and the greatness of Hazal. We must distance ourselves from them as we would from fire, says R. Aharon Lichtenstein.[4] On the other hand, he continues,

> There are those . . . who totally erase the human side [of the biblical heroes]. They know that Ramban spoke of this, but they partially put aside the Ramban and work with other commentators. . . .

> This dehumanization is dangerous for two reasons. They erase the descriptions of these giants like Moshe as Hazal saw him. And what is even worse in my eyes is their reason. Why are they so opposed to seeing the emotional side of Moshe Rabeinu or Avraham Avinu? It is because they oppose feelings and emotions! . . . Hazal knew of emotions; the biblical text knew of emotions, but they do not. . . . They distort the Tanakh. . . .[5]

Distorting the teachings of Hazal is no way to develop students who are sensitive to the values of Hazal and the Torah they teach. The Torah had an educational purpose in showing us the human side of the forefathers and foremothers, and we should be open to it.

With this is mind we wish to turn to the stories the Torah chooses to tell us about *Avraham Avinu*. The purpose of some of these stories is clear enough: We must be told that God chose Abraham and we—his children—have a certain destiny that includes inheriting a special land. Indeed, that point is reassuringly made over and over again. But there is another series of intertwined stories whose purpose is less obvious. Our aim here is not to give a close reading of the text of each of these individual stories or expose their literary techniques. Rather we wish to understand the sequence of stories as part of a larger coherent whole that reflects an educational strategy, one that drives home the fact that Abraham—a great spiritual giant, to be sure, an individual whose attainments may be well beyond our reach—was still a human being, and we should not be intimidated from trying to emulate him.

Introducing Abraham[6]

The first Abraham story in this latter group is the story that is *not* there. The Torah introduces Abraham and God's revelation to him with little fanfare:

> Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah came to 205 years; and Terah died in Haran. The Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing: I will bless you, and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves from you. (Gen. 11:31–12:3, NJPS translation)

This short story is remarkable in the absence of the material that we would find most interesting and valuable. For example, how did Abraham become the type of person to be chosen by God? What education did he have? Maimonides (Rambam) fills in some of the gaps:

> After this mighty one was weaned, he began to explore and think. Although he was a child, he began to think incessantly throughout the day and night, wondering: How is it possible for the sphere to continue to revolve without anyone controlling it? Who makes it revolve? Surely, it does not cause itself to revolve. . . . Ultimately, he apprehended the way of truth and understood righteousness path through his accurate comprehension. He realized that there was one God who controlled the sphere, that He had created everything, and that there is no other God to be found exclusive of Him. He knew that the entire world was making a mistake. . . . Abraham was forty years old when he became aware of his Creator. (*Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* 1:3)

This, though, is not the only external description we have of Abraham's training. For example, as Avivah Zornberg points out, according to the *Midrash ha-Gadol*, "The recognition of God is not a final conclusion reached after a long private philosophical odyssey, but . . . an unlocated passion which inspires him with energy for hope and disillusion that takes him through the phases of his experience."[7] Which of these or other descriptions is true, and why would the Torah take such deliberate pain to hide the truth from us?

We suggest that the description is omitted because it is important that we *not* know it. Maimonides was a philosopher and he naturally saw proper training in philosophical exploration. But what of us who lack philosophical acumen, inspiring passion, or any of the other possible useful qualities that Abraham might have possessed? Should we be discouraged from aiming to be able to hear God's call? Abraham was far from "everyman," but he is introduced as such so that we not be discouraged from identifying with him. Any of us might be headed toward our promised land without realizing it, and many of us stop along the way without realizing that we have unwittingly abandoned our destiny. God speaks to Abraham to tell him to keep moving; He may speak to any of us, and we have to know that we too can hear His call.

The Descent to Egypt

No sooner does Abraham enter Canaan and begin to wander through it does he hear God's promise that this land will be given to him and his descendants. We then read the following story:

> There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I am well aware that you are a beautiful woman. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'She is his wife,' and they will kill me, but let you live. Say then that you are my sister, that it may go will with me because of you, and that I may live thanks to you." When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how very beautiful the woman was. Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's palace. And because of her, it went well with Abram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels. But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram. Pharaoh sent for Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me! Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her as my wife? Now, here is your wife; take her and be gone!" And Pharaoh put men in charge of him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he possessed. (Gen. 12:10–20 NJPS)

Is this what we would expect from someone who had just heard God's promises? Disloyalty to the land promised to him and disloyalty to his wife? When Jacob will later condemn Laban for his duplicitous actions, he will use Pharaoh's charge to Abraham: "What is this you have done to me!" Is the Golden Calf what we would expect from those who had just heard God's voice at Sinai? Are our own actions what we would expect from one who merits many blessings each day? In what way are we the better for knowing that Abraham failed?

Soon after this story in Egypt is told, God once again reassures Abraham that the land will be his. That, we suggest, is the real point of the story. Abraham does not forfeit God's promise and continued loyalty by not living up to his ideals—and neither do we. This point is missed if we do not acknowledge Abraham's failings, and that is why Nahmanides (Ramban) explicitly points it out:

> Know that Abraham our father unintentionally committed a great sin by bringing his righteous wife to a stumbling-block of sin on account of his fear for his life. He should have trusted that God would save him and his

> wife and all his belongings, for God surely has the power to help and to save. His leaving the Land, concerning which he had been commanded from the beginning, on account of the famine, was also a sin he committed, for in famine God would redeem him from death. It was because of this deed that the exile in the land of Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh was decreed for his children. (Commentary to Gen 12:10, Chavel translation)

Had this story been left out, we might have been left with the mistaken impression that God calls only on saints. The Torah quickly tells us that even Abraham can misjudge a situation. If that could be said of him, it can be said of his descendents who, while far from his high stature and closeness to God, need not despair of meriting the promised blessings despite their faults.

Separating from Lot

Abraham emerged from Egypt with his values intact, but Lot did not. Abraham realizes that he and Lot must part geographically, but he does not yet appreciate the significance of the move. He offers Lot to go to the right or the left. In a society facing the eastern rising sun, it is an offer to go south or north. Abraham assumes that Lot will want to stay with him in the north-south mountain range, where the need for rain accentuates one's dependence on God's grace. But Lot eyes the plains of the Jordan where, as in Egypt, water is plentiful. It is not relevant to him that the people of Sodom are evil and sinning to God. The Torah tells us that because it will help us understand a subsequent contrast with Abraham.

Abraham Rescues Lot

The next episode in Abraham's life that the Torah chooses to relate is a war story. Lot had left Abraham to go to Sodom, and he got caught up in a local war and taken captive. General Abraham rallies his troops and rescues him. An academic secular commentary such as the Anchor Bible[8] sees this story as "an intrusive section within the patriarchal framework," one in which Abraham is depicted as "a resolute and powerful chieftain rather than an unworldly patriarch." But the story is hardly an intrusion. On the simplest level, this story shows us that the Torah will not allow us to form a stereotype of this complex spiritual giant. The man who found God can also field an army—and the man who fields an army can also find God. We are not allowed to picture Abraham as emerging from any particular educational

experience. We are not allowed to picture him as completely trusting and brave. And we are not allowed to picture him as meek and subservient. Indeed, whatever picture we form will turn out to be wrong. And whatever excuse we have for not trying to reach his heights will be undermined.

But there is more to this story. There is a striking parallel between this story and the descent to Egypt episode. In both there is danger—there to Abraham and here to Lot. In both there is a response to the danger—there by passing off Sarah as his sister and here by gathering an army and going to war to rescue Lot. In both there is a financial award—there quickly taken and here refused in an act of *Kiddush HaShem*. One cannot help but see tremendous transformational growth in Abraham's response; and one cannot help but understand that that if there is room for growth in Abraham—a spiritual giant who found God and who was found by God—then there is no excuse for our not always trying to reach higher in our own lives. Indeed, rather than being "an intrusive section," the story fits well within the educational strategy of Abraham's Stories.

Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael

The Torah tells us two stories about Sarah arranging for the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael. We understand easily the reason for the second. The Torah must inform us that despite the fact that Ishmael is Abraham's son, he is not the promised son—and his descendents are not the promised people. But what is the purpose of the first story?

Abraham has been promised a son and Sarah apparently cannot deliver him. So she offered her maidservant Hagar to him to be a surrogate. We cannot help but be touched by Sarah's altruistic behavior. "Abram listened to Sarai" without any reservation or protest.

Regretfully, Sarah could not live up to her magnanimous gesture. She soon became jealous of Hagar and mistreated her. Nehama Leibowitz acutely sums up one reason for the Torah's telling of this story: We must have high ideals, but they must be realistic ones.

> Perhaps the Torah wished to teach us that before a man undertake a mission that will tax all his moral and spiritual powers, he should ask himself first whether he can maintain those high standards to the bitter end. Otherwise man is liable to descend from the pinnacle of altruism and selflessness into much deeper depths than would ordinarily been the case. . . . Had Sarah not wished to suppress her instincts and overcome every vestige of jealousy for

> her rival . . . there might not have been born that individual whose descendants have proved a source of trouble to Israel to this very day.[9]

However, there is an additional reason for the telling of this story, for without it the second story would have been less poignant:

> Sarah saw the son, whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham, playing. She said to Abraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you." (Gen. 21:9–12, NJPS)

Sarah again tells Abraham to banish Hagar, but Abraham has grown from his past experience: "The matter distressed Abraham greatly, *for it concerned a son of his*." This was not only an intellectual response but an emotional one—he was being asked to send away his son. But Abraham was wrong again! This time Sarah was right and, significantly, she had learned something very valuable from her previous experiences (something we cannot fully say of Abraham, who later repeats trying to pass off Sarah as his sister).

Sarah had learned that we need not be paralyzed by our mistakes. She had been wrong in first banishing Hagar, and that might have made her lose her confidence when she now realized that Hagar and Ishmael had to be sent away. At this point it was right to banish her—God confirms it—and she had the confidence to act. And what was it that gave her the insight to realize that Isaac cannot be raised in the presence of Ishmael? It was, we suggest, the intervening story of Lot. Sarah saw what happens when one lives with people who mock Abraham's teachings.

Lot in Sodom

We understand well the importance of major parts of the story of the three messengers visiting Abraham. Part of the story is the continued assurance that God's promise will be fulfilled. Part of the story is to add a clarification of sorts to God's promise to Noah (Gen. 9:11) that there will never again be a flood to destroy the whole earth. That promise was not a "free pass" for evil doers: the *world* may never again be destroyed, but a *city* of

evil doers can still face devastation. Part of the story is the message is the universal concern for justice that Abraham has come to represent. He pleads not for his nephew in Sodom, but for the righteous. But why must we be told the venue and menu?

> The Lord appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, he said, "My lord, if it please you, do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves; then go on—seeing that you have come your servant's way." They replied, "Do as you have said." Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Quick, three measures of flour! Knead and make cakes!" Then Abraham ran to the herd, took a calf, tender and choice, and gave it to a servant-boy, who hastened to prepare it. He took the curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set these before them; and he waited on them under the tree as they ate. (Gen. 18: 1–8, NJPS)

Lot is Abraham's literary foil who serves in contrast to point out Abraham's traits. Abraham sits alone in the desert at his tent's door; Lot sits "in the gate of Sodom" where the judges of the city sit. He thinks he will judge them but it is they who will have distorted his judgment. Abraham is leisurely and gracious in welcoming them; Lot has them rested, washed, up early and out in a rapid staccato of verbs. Abraham offered a morsel of bread and gave them a feast; Lot offered a feast and gave them matzah. (Rashi comments, "It was Pesah"—Lot's holiday of freedom, that is, as the messengers come to free him from the existential slavery of being in Sodom.[10]) Lot thinks he has remembered all the lessons gained from his time with Abraham, but living in Sodom has corroded them. So corrupted was his sense of hospitality, that he offers his daughters to be raped to spare his guests! Sarah, having seen what happened to Lot in Sodom, will not raise her son in anything but a fully wholesome household.

Lot's Daughters

While the educational value of the story of Lot's rescue is clear, the epilogue concerning his daughters is at first puzzling. Why should we be told

the sordid story of their raping him, almost *mida ke-neged mida*? Thinking that the three of them were the only ones left in the world, the daughters serially get their father drunk so that he would impregnate each of them. Why must we know the origins of their descendants, the Moabites and children of Ammon? Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explains:

> Lot's daughter had something beautiful to contribute to the emerging personality of the King Messiah. What did this primitive girl possess that the Almighty, gathering virtues and noble traits from all over the world, picked up? She was uncouth and primitive, she committed incest, and yet she was the great-great-grandmother of Ruth [the Moabite]. The Messiah will be her descendant!
>
> She was under the impression, says Rashi (Gen. 19:31), that a cosmic cataclysm had struck and only three human beings had survived. . . . She acted as she did because she wanted to save humanity. This girl wanted to rebuild the world, to start from scratch and raise another race to take the place of the human race, which she believed had been destroyed simultaneously with the destruction of Sodom. This was heroism of an undreamt caliber. Instead of giving up, she had the courage to try to rebuild the world, to make a new humanity arise from the ashes of Sodom. She convinced her younger sister. Never mind that their method was primitive and crude. These two girls took upon themselves an impossible task, something staggering and awesome. . . .
>
> Mattan Torah is bound up with the Messiah, who will possess the heroism of his grandmothers [including Ruth] whom the Almighty found in the non-Jewish world. They represented the heroism of loneliness, the heroism of universal commitment, and the heroism of faith and waiting. The ideal of mattan Torah will be fully realized only in the time of the Messiah. This great vision of a redeemed world would have been impossible had Lot's daughters been destroyed in Sodom.[11]

To fulfill God's ultimate plan, the descendents of Abraham will have to draw on the strengths of descendents of Lot. We are who we are because God chose Abraham, but He did not discard the value of the rest of humanity—and neither should we.

Abraham's Final Test

Abraham's final test was the *Akedah*, a narrative that needs its own comprehensive analysis, if only to understand why Abraham pleaded for the innocents of Sodom and not for his innocent son Isaac. But it is not this

complicated matter that concerns us here; it is rather the epilogue to the story:

> Some time later, Abraham was told, "Milcah too has borne children to your brother Nahor: Uz the firstborn, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram, and Chesed, and Hazo, and Jidlaph, and Bethuel"—Bethuel being the father of Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, also bore children: Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah. (Gen. 22:20–24, NJPS)

How shall we understand this anti-climax to the drama of the *Akedah*? Rabbi Soloveitchik explains:

> After the Akeida, some questions began to bother Abraham. Why was I required to constantly bring sacrifices and always undergo these bitter tests? Why am I different from my bother Nahor and his wife Milcah who had so many children without suffering long-standing heart-rending yearnings, without taking his mother's only son to the Akeida?[12]

Abraham's whole life centered around God's promise regarding his children. For decades he held firm, fighting his doubts, and God then tests him once more regarding his children. And then he hears that his idolatrous brother had such an easy time with having progeny, that his pagan brother Nahor will, through Rebecca, share in being the father of God's people. To be able to continue to believe that he was nonetheless right, that his struggle was worth it, that was the real test. And the response was: "Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son" (Gen. 22:13). He realized that a Jewish life is one of sacrifice. "His fate was clear to him: Judaism has a tremendous tradition; it is not simple and easy to live a life of Torah and mitzvot. One must be willing to sacrifice on its behalf many things and to bring sacrifices, small and large."[13]

Here then is the denouement of the Abraham Stories. One need not have a particular pedigree to become an Abraham. One need not necessarily be a weak or strong person. One need not be free of misjudgments or doubts. One need not be at a place that demands no further growth or help from others of a different community. But one must be prepared to sacrifice for a life of Torah and mitzvot.

NOTES

1. R. Aharon Lichtenstein, "Criticism and *Kitvei Kodesh*," in *Rav Shalom Banayikh: Essays in Honor of Rabbi Shalom Carmy*, ed. Hayyim Angel and Yitzchak Blau (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 2012), pp. 19, 22–23.
2. R. Ezra Bick, "Preface," in *Torah MiEtzion: New Readings in Tanach*, vol. 1: *Bereshit*, ed. Ezra Bick and Yaakov Beasley (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books/Yeshivat Har Etzion, 2011), pp. xv, xvi, xviii.
3. R. Mosheh Lichtenstein, *Moses: Envoy of God, Envoy of His People* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2008), pp. 250, 244f.
4. R. Aharon Lichtenstein in R. Haim Sabato, *Mivakshei Panekha, In Quest of Your Presence: Conversations with Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot Books, 2011), p. 200.
5. *Ibid*., my translation. Of course, in quoting Rav Lichtenstein on the appropriateness of this approach, I do not suggest that he would necessarily agree with any specific readings I have proposed here.
6. I use the name Abraham throughout this essay, even when referring to the time when Abraham was still called Abram.
7. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginnings of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (NY: Doubleday, 1991), p. 81.
8. *The Anchor Bible: Genesis*, trans. and notes by E. A. Speiser (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co, 1964), pp. 105–109.
9. Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Genesis*, trans. Aryeh Newman (World Zionist Organization, 1974), Lekh-Lekha 7, pp. 156f.
10. As R. Yoel Bin-Nun points out, "The many parallels between the overturning of Sodom and the plagues of Egypt practically shout out, 'Pesah!' There is the closed house, the angels of destruction/deliverance, and the events that continue "all night and until the morning," when the day dawns and the sun rises (which is the same timetable followed in the exodus). Most specifically, there is the command, 'Get up, get out,' and the word 'linger'; these are expressions that are intrinsically bound up with the exodus. *Benei Yisrael* 'could not linger—because they were driven out of Egypt.' Similarly, in leaving Sodom, Lot could not linger because the angels held firmly (perhaps forcibly) onto his hand, and his wife's hand, and the hands of his two daughters, 'and they brought him out and left him outside the city'… The Midrash recognizes expressions characteristic of the exodus in Egypt within the story of Lot's exodus from Sodom. Indeed, 'It was Pesah.'" See his "Lot's Pesah and Its Significance," in *Torah MiEtzion: New Readings in Tanach*, vol. 2: *Shemot*, ed. Ezra Bick and Yaakov Beasley (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books/Yeshivat Har Etzion, 2012), pp. 151–154.
11. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, ed. David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler (Toras HoRav Foundation, 2008), pp. 177f, 183.
12. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Yemei Zikaron* (Hebrew), trans. Moshe Kroner (World Zionist Organization,1986), p. 162. My translation.
13. *Ibid*.

Reflections on the Use of Non-Orthodox Wisdom in the Orthodox Study of Tanakh

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Introduction

In the mid-1980s when I was completing my undergraduate studies at Yeshiva University, Thursday became a weekly highlight for many students in the Bet Midrash. On that day of the week at the end of his regular Talmud discourse, one of the popular Talmud instructors would give a *hashkafah* or *mussar* talk on some contemporary topic. A good number of students from other *shiurim* (Talmud classes) would often attend to hear these talks. On one occasion, I recall that the rabbi spent a good portion of his time strongly critiquing the works of Professor Nehama Leibowitz *zt"l*. While recognizing that Nehama was a learned woman and sincere, he was extremely disturbed by the fact that she would quote quasi- and fully non-Orthodox thinkers and scholars such as Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Yehezkel Kaufmann,

Umberto Cassuto, Shemuel D. Luzzatto, Benno Jacob, and others. He urged his students to refrain from using her material and to stick to books that were written *al taharat ha-kodesh* (in holy purity).

This presentation shook me greatly at the time, for it flew in the face of my deep engagement and love for the works of Nehama. As a high school student, I had become involved with serious Tanakh study primarily through hearing *shiurim* from Rabbi David Silber and being introduced to the work of Nehama Leibowitz by my high school principal and my synagogue rabbi. Reading Nehama's books and various essays in the late 1970s and early 1980s had expanded my knowledge and appreciation of *parshanut ha-Mikra* (biblical exegesis). It was also my first introduction to concepts such as close reading of texts, chiastic structure, and the important idea of *milah manhah*—the key or guiding word in a section. My experience with the works and ideas of Nehama had been one of expanding my knowledge and love of Torah and *parshanim* (commentators), adding to my sense of the sacred, insight, and creativity of the *parshanim*, and increasing my *yirat Shamayim* (fear of Heaven). This sense became sharpened when I had the great privilege to hear Nehama in the early 1980s at a few public lectures in Israel. It was solidified even more when Nehama came to visit Yeshivat Har Eztion in the early 1980s (where I was then studying), and I witnessed the great respect and deference that were shown to her by the rashei yeshiva and other teachers during her visit and *shiur*.

As time went on and I researched the topic more fully, I came to understand the more conservative approach and its sources, even as I did not adopt that point of view in my own learning and writing. It is clear that the overwhelming majority of the Haredi, semi-Haredi, and right-wing Modern Orthodox world both in the United States and in Israel, subscribe to the more restrictive point of view and strongly educate toward that perspective.[1] From my perspective, that is unfortunate as it limits the opportunities of the *lomdei ha-Torah* in those communities to fully enhance their engagement with the word of God.

This short article is not a scholarly treatment of both sides of the issue. Rather, it contains some reflections on the topic, some of which are adapted from portions of an essay in my recently published volume *Mikra and Meaning: Studies in Bible and Its Interpretation* (Maggid Publishers, 2012).[2] Before we turn to the heart of the issue, it is also important to note that

our treatment does not only concern the use of non-Orthodox Jewish scholarship in the study of Tanakh. The discussion goes beyond that and must also address the use non-Jewish scholarship in its various forms.

Kabbel et ha-Emet mi-Mi she-Amaro

Today it is becoming more and more clear that one of the sharp dividing lines between the methodology used by the Haredi, semi-Haredi, and religious-Zionist Haredi (popularly referred to in Israel as *Hardal*) worlds on the one hand and the Modern Orthodox world on the other is the willingness to make use of non-Orthodox and non-Jewish scholarship in the study and teaching of Tanakh. The "traditional" position articulated by leading thinkers of that camp argues that our belief in *Torah min ha-Shamayim* (Torah from Heaven, i.e., Revelation) precludes citation of any comments or suggestions, even in neutral matters, from the pens of those not committed to that tenet. They assert that the ideas presented by these scholars are tainted and one is not permitted to use their teachings in any form. Moreover, a number of thinkers suggest that by citing the comments of non-Orthodox scholars or ideas derived from the Anchor Bible or the International Critical Commentary series alongside the comments of the *parshanim*, one is blurring the distinction between *gedolei olam* (our great rabbinic thinkers) and secular scholars, unwittingly setting up an equivalence between them that may lead students to adopt the secular scholars' positions and attitudes in other, more controversial areas.

Elements of this debate go back to antiquity, with the *locus classicus* being the famous episode of R. Meir's continued study with R. Elisha ben Avuya after the latter's abandonment of traditional life and dogma. The Talmud formulates the dilemma as a question of the legitimacy and applicability of "eating the fruit and discarding the peel." Our discussion is somewhat different; in religious settings, we are not discussing direct contact with non-observant or non-Jewish scholars, but rather exposure to their written works and ideas. This issue has agitated various rabbinic writers throughout the ages and continues to be a fault line until today.

Embedded in the notion of *dibberah Torah be-leshon benei adam* (the Torah speaks in the language of humans) is, of course, the result that insight into the text can be fathomed not only by observant Jews, but by any and all human beings who seriously study the text. The question of at

what age and at what stage of intellectual and religious development a teacher should present insights from those writers is an educational one. In general, the Modern Orthodox world and its leading lights of Tanakh study, such as Prof. Nehama Leibowitz, the authors of the *Da'at Mikra* series, R. Yoel Bin-Nun, R. Shalom Carmy, and many others, have generally adopted the approach articulated most forcefully by Maimonides in the introduction to *Shemonah Perakim* in his defense of his citation of Aristotle and others in his commentaries: "*kabbel et ha-emet mi-mi she-amaro*—Accept the truth from wherever it originates."

That this concept was not a Maimonidean innovation is evident from the fascinating tradition cited by R. Yosef ibn Aknin in his commentary to the Song of Songs:

> We find in the books of R. Hai Gaon . . . that he made recourse to the words of the Arabic scholars . . . and made use of the Quran . . . and such was the custom of R. Saadyah before him in his Arabic commentaries. . . . In this regard, the Nagid describes in his book . . . after citing many comments of the Christian scholars that R. Matzliah b. Albazek . . . told him upon his arrival in Bagdad…that one day they were discussing the verse "*shemen rosh al yani roshi*" (Ps. 141:5) in the yeshiva, and a debate ensued as to its meaning. R. Hai directed R. Matzliah to go to the priest of the Christians and ask him what he knew about the meaning of the verse, and it was evil in his eye. And when R. Hai saw that R. Matzliah was distraught over this, he reprimanded him and said that the forefathers and the early pious ones, who are for us exemplars, would inquire of members of other faiths about the meaning of words and interpretations.[3]

This openness to the use of non-traditional scholarship can be seen in the writings of other great *parshanim* in our tradition. R. Abraham Ibn Ezra is well-known for challenging many Karaite interpretations of the Bible. At the same time there are numerous instances sprinkled throughout his commentaries where he cites Karaite commentaries of specific words or phrases without any opprobrium, and in some instances quite positively. This attitude is also reflected most famously in the writings of Don Isaac Abarbanel, who frequently cites Christian interpreters, quite approvingly, in his commentary on Tanakh.

In the more recent past, the monumental commentaries of R. David Zvi Hoffmann are a modern example of this approach. While vigorously engaging in battle with Bible critics of his day, he did not hesitate to use

the full panoply of Jewish-traditional and non-traditional as well as non-Jewish scholarship to arrive at his understanding of *peshuto shel Mikra*—the plain sense of Scripture. Moreover, there is no doubt that great towering figures of the recent past, such as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zt"l* and *yibadel le-hayyim tovim* (may he be separated for good life), my revered teacher Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein were strongly influenced in their readings of biblical texts by the works of Kierkegaard, Shakespeare, Milton, and other thinkers.

Nehama herself articulated her philosophy on this topic in a letter written over thirty years ago:[4]

> It is true that I cite the words of people who are not observant of the mitzvot, if their words seem correct to me, and can reveal the light of Torah and display its greatness and holiness to the student. [I work] according to the principle: "Accept the truth from wherever it comes."
>
> What can I say? Benno Jacob was an extreme Reformer, who served in the Sontag Gemeindev[5] and certainly transgressed an enormous portion of our holy Torah's mitzvot (in addition to the fact that he was an anti-Zionist, etc.). Yet, I learned from his books (*Aug um Auge* has excellent proofs that "an eye for an eye" according to the simple meaning refers to monetary compensation; *Quellenkritik und Exegese, Genesis, Exodus* is a forceful work against the Documentary Hypothesis) more than from many books written by bona-fide God-fearing Jews. His claims against biblical criticism and his proofs of their frivolousness and their errors—no one has ever written things better than them, even Rav David Hoffmann, *zt"l* (as difficult as it is to mention the name of this gaon together with B. Jacob) as well as Yissachar Jacobson, *a"h* and Dr. Muriel who wrote a work on the Torah. Many of my friends—among them, Rabbi David Carlebach *zt"l* who for many years taught with me in the Seminar in Jerusalem—also learned from his works. He opened our eyes to see things which we had not seen before, and [therefore] toward a true understanding of the Torah.
>
> Prof. [Umberto] Cassuto *z"l*, who was God-fearing and scrupulous regarding the mitzvot, said a number of things that are very far from my belief in *Torah mi-Sinai*, and I won't be part of their dissemination. And therefore I will not pay heed to who said it, but only to what is said.
>
> There is no need to say that [Martin] Buber was not a "good Jew"—according to the normal understanding of this concept. I knew him—and he was not in any way a man after my heart! Absolutely not . . . . But what can I do, as I and many religious teachers learned many correct things from him in Tanakh, especially the whole concept of the key word, Leitwort, and

the deep meaning that its application in Torah hints to, and although our Midrash also recognized this principle ("*ne'emar kan . . . ve-ne'emar sham*," and similarly "*midah ke-neged midah*" and more), it is nevertheless the merit of Buber, and even more so Rosenzweig, that they expanded this concept and revealed several places that I have not found in any early sources. I will not withhold this good from students by hiding this from them.

In truth, even non-Jews, at times, (though in my opinion, rarely) offer an interpretation that is good and sharp and proper to present, and even Abravanel in select places brings the words of a Catholic bishop, and accepts his opinion over the opinions of Radak and Ralbag.

Several times, I showed *talmidei hakhamim* details from Benno Jacob's important book, *Aug um Auge*, and they thanked me and rejoiced as if discovering a great treasure.

Should I then hide the name of the author? This I cannot do. "Who are those whose waters we drink and whose names we don't mention?" This is my opinion, which I have held to my entire life.

The Educational Dimension

A forceful and vigorous defense of this more open approach with an emphasis on some of the educational issues at stake was penned by the noted Israeli Bible scholar and educator, Dr. Moshe Ahrend *z"l* in 1968.[6] After presenting the essence of the conservative critique of citing non-traditional scholarship he writes:

As great as the level of the sharpness of this critique, is the potential danger and mistake inherent in them. First, let us not be so hasty to disqualify! It is not simple to decide who is or is not a "heretic"? . . . Those who today disqualify Mendelssohn, Weisel, and Shadal [from citation] may tomorrow disqualify Ibn Ezra, the Moreh, Rashbam, the Arukh and many others who wrote things that do not neatly correspond to the literal sense of what Maimonides wrote in Hilkhot Teshuvah (3:8) [as to the definition of the heretic]. . . .

We cannot ignore that most people, who are part of the modern world, cannot abide by such extremism . . . they want to know what has been discovered in every field that helps us understand the Bible: Semitics, archeology, the study of the ancient Near East, the geography of the land of Israel, epigraphy, literary criticism, etc. They see no obligation to close themselves and ignore the discoveries [in these fields] . . . just as our ancients did not hesitate from using the results of the inquiries of the scholars of their day and age. . . . We must admit that in essence and regarding

> the very meaning of entire sections of our holy Torah we are not actually able to understand them in any meaningful way without the assistance of the modern scholars. . . .
>
> Of course, caution must be taken in selection of the commentaries. However, without intellectual caution all the words of the commentators are dangerous, and the words of the Bible itself are seven-fold more dangerous. The distinction between the truth itself and the people who discover and present it, is a primary demand from anyone who aspires to understand and reach an independent spiritual life. It is only with the second critique [of Nehama] that we are fully obligated to identify with: It is necessary to clearly distinguish between the words of Torah sages, medieval as well as later ones, who are a lodestar for our behavior as well, and those scholars who we know led lives that were corrupted by sin or were consumed with the religious doubts of the era [in which they lived].[7]

Based on anecdotal evidence as to what actually goes on in the Modern Orthodox religious frameworks in which recourse is made to non-Orthodox sources, this issue does not seem to be one that causes a diminution of *yirat Shamayim* or *ahavat Torah*. On the contrary, the ability to integrate the best and most insightful comments to achieve a richer and more profound understanding of the text is often appreciated by students and helps to solidify the notion that one is seeking truth and honesty in the intellectual pursuit.

At the same time, I appreciate the concern that we should not inadvertently give students of high school or college age the sense that Nahmanides and M. Segal are on equal footing in our eyes as religious role models. The best way to avoid this problem is through two simple moves, both of which, I believe, are generally employed.

First, it is important that the use of these materials be integrated into a holistic context—careful study of the text and extensive use of Hazal and *parshanim*, only then supplemented by other resources. Indeed, a Genesis class in which the only positions quoted are those of M. Buber and F. Rosenzweig or H. Gunkel and Y. Kaufmann would present a skewed focus and lead to some potentially troubling results. But that is not what actually happens on the ground. For opponents of the use of this material, however, even one citation of a non-Orthodox source in a book of 600 pages is deserving of censure and calumny.

Second, it is important to maintain some distinctiveness between the *parshanim*, whom we view as reflecting our ultimate religious commit-

ments and those who do not, especially in teaching younger adults. This can be accomplished either through the classical "*le-havdil*" formulations or by noting biographical and ideological information about the particular scholar under discussion. An example that I have used in my own teaching from time to time is: "The following solution to our problem is suggested by Benno Jacob, a modern Bible scholar who was a Reform rabbi, and many of whose beliefs and practices are, of course, in sharp conflict with our worldview. At the same time, it must be noted that he waged a fierce battle with the Bible critics in his day, was a close and excellent reader of the *Humash*, and often has very important comments that help us understand the Torah more profoundly.

This is one model of both appreciating and making use of "the best that has been thought of and written" (to borrow Matthew Arnold's famous formulation) in our study of the word of God while maintaining our commitment to our bedrock principles. The seal of God is truth, and we follow in His ways when we pursue truth, since truth is the essence of the Torah (*Torat Emet*). As Rav Kook taught us so many decades ago, we live in an epoch that requires *emunah gedolah*—a broad and encompassing faith that can hold and nurture many competing ideas and see the beauty and holiness emerging out of the complexity. An educational approach that is too restrictive and narrow will stifle our students and ourselves with the resulting bitterness and alienation that has the potential to lead many of our students to drop out of engagement with *devar Hashem*.

NOTES

1. For a representative example of this perspective see Y. Copperman, *Al Mekomo shel Peshuto shel Mikra be-Shelemut ha-Torah u-Kedushatah* 1:15–20 (Jerusalem, 2002).
2. For a more in-depth discussion of much of the halakhic material related to the topic see N. Gutel, "*Ben Kabbalat ha-Emet mi-Mi she-Amarah le-Ven Kabbalatah mi-Malakh Hashem Tzeva'ot*" (Hebrew), in *Havanat ha-Mikra be-Yamenu* ed. Leah Frankel and Howard Dietcher, pp. 129–158.
3. Joseph Ibn Aknin, *Hitgalut ha-Sodot*, ed. Abraham S. Halkin (Jerusalem, 1964), p. 495.
4. The following is an excerpt of a Hebrew letter written by Nehama in response to a letter from Rabbi Yehuda Ansbacher z"l (1908–1988), who served as the

rabbi of the Ihud Shivat Zion community center on Ben Yehuda Street in Tel Aviv for many decades. It originally appeared in *Alon Shevut-Bogrim* no. 13 and was translated by R. Avidan Freedman and printed in *Milin Havivin* (Vol 1, 2005), the Torah journal published by YCT Rabbinical School.

5. A Reform congregation that held prayers on Sunday rather than on Shabbat.
6. Many decades later, Dr. Ahrend became a close friend and co-author of an important two-volume work on the methodology of Rashi with Nehama herself.
7. *Ha-Katuv Tzarikh Iyyun*," *Besdei Hemed* 11:1-2 (1968), pp. 30–37.

Part II:

Tanakh Education

Teaching Tanakh in the Twenty-First Century

Richard Hidary

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The Bible has topped the best-seller list every week since the invention of printing. It has directed the course of human civilization and has served as the foundation of faith for billions of people. Its content and style are recognized by believers and non-believers alike as the most profound and inspirational writing in the history of humankind. For observant Jews, Tanakh is nothing less than the Word of God. With these credentials, one might expect that teaching Tanakh would be an easy sell.

However, as in all teaching, bridging the gap between the subject and the student is a task that requires careful thought and continual reimagining. Students must overcome not only a language barrier when studying Tanakh in Hebrew, but also historical, cultural, and philosophical differences between the world of Tanakh and that of modern Western civilization. The teachings of Tanakh are certainly eternal; but their relevance is not always obvious to children and teenagers immersed in the digital age.

In previous generations, teaching *Humash* and Rashi sufficed to imbue students with the fundamentals of Jewish faith and law. Advanced students would also study the Ramban and—especially in Sephardic lands—pride of place was given to Ibn Ezra. However, I believe that our students today deserve and require a greater range of commentaries and methodologies. We have already seen this expansion of the canon take place in the past few decades in Modern Orthodox education, primarily through the writing and influence of two people:

1) Professor Nehama Leibowitz has opened up for us the full range of traditional Jewish commentaries, ancient and modern, with a talent for zoning in and clarifying the differences between them on various exegetical issues and their methodological considerations. Nehama also had a unique ability to make those issues relevant to modern society to the point where her classes could be appreciated by a wide range of Israeli society—both religious and secular.

2) The effort spearheaded by Rav Yoel bin-Nun and continued by the many talented faculty members of Yeshivat Har Etzion and Makhon Herzog to bring a literary appreciation for Tanakh in terms of structure, themes, and parallels within a context dedicated to *peshat*.

These are but two prominent examples of individuals who have advanced our understanding and appreciation of Scripture through their innovative methodologies that successfully combine traditional and modern sensibilities. Many others have similarly made remarkable contributions to our understanding of Tanakh in a way that is respectful of its integrity. This is especially true in the recognition of the value of setting Tanakh in its ancient Near Eastern context, not only for the similarities but more importantly for the differences. The revolutionary messages of the prophets of monotheism and morality shine when viewed on the background of ancient paganism. Such efforts abound in the halls of Yeshiva University, Bar-Ilan University, and many other institutions.[1]

These developments have opened a pathway toward selectively integrating modern Bible scholarship into mainstream Judaism. It is true that biblical scholarship presents certain challenges to traditional Orthodox belief, and recent thinkers have proposed a number of ways of dealing with these challenges. However, these issues are mostly irrelevant in a yeshiva high school setting where the goal is to inspire students about the eternal lessons of Tanakh and provide them with a basis upon which to

build a lifelong commitment to Judaism and continued study.

Rather than focus on the problems of academic Bible study, the approach of the writers mentioned above is to take advantage of the array of ways recent scholarship can enhance our appreciation and teaching of Tanakh. David Berger has argued that literary analysis of the Bible can help deal with problems of the morality of the Patriarchs as well as issues of higher criticism.[2] But we should teach such literary approaches not only in order to "provide the cure before the calamity" but also because it reveals more of Tanakh's prophetic depth.

Unfortunately, these wonderful discoveries and helpful methodologies developed in academic circles in recent decades do not always trickle down into traditional educational settings. Nehama Leibowitz has certainly transformed generations of Modern Orthodox teachers, and Makhon Herzog is also making a major impact on teachers who study there and who access their resources. Nevertheless, there is much more to be done in this regard, and there is especially a need to create curricula specifically designed with a classroom teacher in mind and that can guide a teacher as to how to transform this material into a structured and effective lesson.

Curriculum Development

A few years ago, I started a project to prepare curricula for teaching Tanakh in high school. So far, my colleagues and I have written teacher's guides for all or parts of *Shemot*, *Devarim*, *Yeshayahu*, *Yirmiyahu*, and *Tehillim*. Each lesson includes a step-by-step guide of suggestions for how to present the material, including worksheets, source sheets, PowerPoint presentations, and other multimedia resources. All of this material is freely available at www.teachtorah.org, and many dozens of teachers in schools around the world have successfully made use of this material. Below, I present a small selection from these lessons that highlight the approach we have taken to integrate use of multimedia, derive insights from archaeology, make the subject matter relevant to contemporary sensibilities, and use analysis of structure to discover the essential lesson of a given chapter.

Using Multimedia

With most high school classrooms now equipped with projectors and Smart boards, teachers can enhance their lessons with pictures, music, and

interactive presentations. One way to vivify Tanakh is to show medieval paintings of biblical scenes.

The Finding of Moses by Orazio Gentileschi (1633)

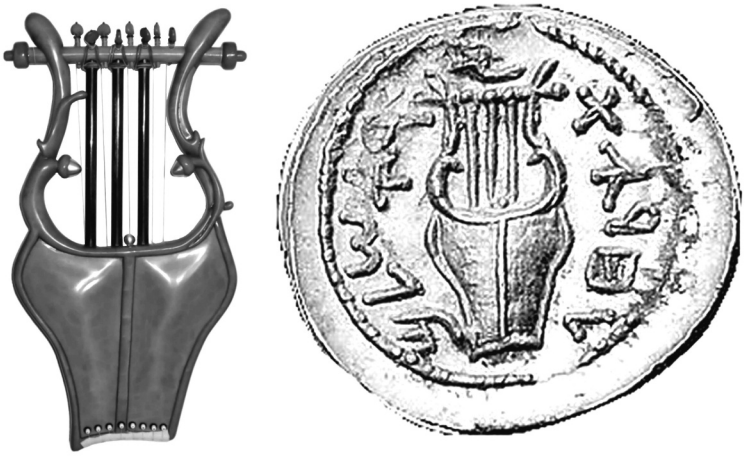
For example, *Shemot* 2:5 narrates: "The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it." The question arises, what role do the maidens play in this story? A wonderful trigger for this discussion is *The Finding of Moses* by Orazio Gentileschi (1633). This painting depicts tension between the princess and her maidservants. While the princess and one of the maidservants point to the circumcision as evidence for the need to murder the baby, the maidservants on the other side show caring and seem to plead for compassion.

Compare this painting to the Gemara at *Sotah* 12b, which says that all but one of the maidservants were punished for encouraging the princess to follow her father's orders and murder the baby. Sforno explains that by God's providence, the maidens, who would have murdered the baby, did not see the ark; instead only the princess saw it and she sent her personal maidservant to save it. While most Christian paintings of this scene depict

a reluctant princess who is urged by her compassionate maidens to save the child, Jewish commentators take the opposite position. This viewpoint can lead to a conversation about peer pressure and doing the right thing even when those around us may encourage us not to.

It is noteworthy that one opinion in the Gemara takes *amatah* to refer not to her maid but to her arm, which stretched forth to take hold of the ark. This is a creative poetic way to portray the enthusiasm of the princess in wanting to save the baby and the miraculous nature of the event. However, this is obviously not the *peshat*, as Rashi and Ibn Ezra prove.

When learning *Tehillim*, we should emphasize their performative aspect. Just as one cannot appreciate the experience of being at a live concert if all you have are the lyrics, we have to try to reconstruct what it must have been like to experience the Leviim performing *Tehillim* in the magnificent *Bet ha-Mikdash*, Temple. Archaeologists have actually found the earliest musical notation in ancient Ugarit and have reconstructed what is sounded like. They have also uncovered mosaics with pictures of ancient instruments and figurines playing those instruments. Here, for example is a *kinor*, an eight stringed lyre, as depicted on a Bar Kokhba coin:



A Kinor Depicted on a Bar Kokhba Coin. (Photo courtesy of MusicOfTheBible.com)

By playing recordings of ancient world music, as well as *Tehillim* chanted by modern Hazzanim according to the *te'amim*, one can get some sense of how *Tehillim* may have been sung in the *Bet ha-Mikdash*. Modern

musicians have also set many *Mizmorim* to music and playing these recordings in class can help make the study of *Tehillim* not only intellectually interesting but also emotionally inspiring.

Archaeology

Archaeologists in the Middle East have made amazing discoveries in the past century—both of material remains and inscriptions—that can help shed light on the Tanakh. These findings can also be a valuable pedagogical tool for filling in the context of biblical times and making the events come to life.

A drawing at Beni-Hasan from the tomb of Khnumhotep, who served in the royal court of pharaoh Senusret II in the nineteenth century BCE. This drawing depicts a group of Semitic people entering Egypt.

To cite a couple of examples, the Hyksos were a conglomeration of Semitic people who infiltrated Egypt starting from the twenty-first century BCE. They then gained supremacy in 1700 BCE and ruled Northern Egypt until 1550 BCE, when the Egyptian Pharaoh Ahmose I chased most of them out of the country and reestablished native Egyptian rule. Although these events are too early to identify the Hyksos with the Israelites, as Josephus did, this history nevertheless does help fill in the context for several aspects of the biblical story:

- The migration of Jacob's family to Egypt was part of a larger movement of Semites making the same trip.
- Hyksos rule of Northern Egypt explains how Joseph, a foreigner, could rise to great power and marry an Egyptian noblewoman since he was a Semite just as they were.
- It further explains why Pharaoh was so paranoid about the Israelite nation increasing and joining enemies to conquer the Egyptians. Such an event had already happened with the Hyksos and the memory of their revolt would still be prominent in his mind.

The second example is from Dr. Shawn-Zelig Aster's teacher's guide for *Yeshayahu* and is based on his own original research. Isaiah 6 has the prophet experience the sights and sounds of God's throneroom. Isaiah sees God seated on a throne and six-winged emissaries attending Him and pronouncing His holiness. One emissary purifies the prophet by touching a hot coal from the altar to his lips. What is the meaning of this deep prophetic vision?

In 879 BCE, King Ashurnasirpal II of Assyria built a magnificent palace that was still in use over a century later in Yeshayahu's time. Like all other nations in Assyria's power grip, Israel and Judah had to send emmissaries to the Assyrian palace with protection money if they wanted to avoid being conquered. Such an emmisary would have been impressed by the many scenes of Assyrian battle victories etched in the palace hallways. In the Assyrian throneroom, he would see this relief:

Drawing from throne room of Ashurnasirpal II.(© Trustees of the British Museum)

- In the center is the tree that represents the world. At its top is a winged image of the god Ashur, the chief Assyrian god. The message is that the god Ashur is in charge of the world.
- On either side of Ashur is an image of the Assyrian king (with beard), whom the Assyrians consider king of the world.
- On either side of the Assyrian king is the four-winged figure that protects the king from impurity.

The emmisary would probably have concluded that the Assyrian king is more powerful than Israel's God and would have reported this when he returned home. This would lead the nation to give up its hope, faith, and identity. Isaiah's prophecy counters this false impression. In fact, it is Hashem who sits on the throne and is king of the world: "His presence fills all the earth" (Isaiah 6:3). Significantly, while the Assyrian king is himself susceptible to impurity and requires protective angels to keep him pure, the angels in Isaiah's prophecy are necessary only to remove Yeshayahu's impurity. Hashem requires no protection for He is Eternal, Holy, and beyond all human power.

Dr. Aster suggests that teachers connect Yeshayahu's prophecy to their own lives. Teenagers can often feel a sense of sensory overload and be impressed by the power of technology, movies, rockstars, international politics, and big business. This prophecy of Yeshayahu, however, which the rabbis incorporated into the daily siddur, can help students re-evaluate their priorities and loyalties and thereby reset their moral compass.

Contemporize

Every lesson in a high school setting should have an enduring understanding so that students can relate it to their own lives and contemporary society. By contemporizing the Tanakh we not only ensure that students will internalize its teachings but we also provide a motivation for studying Tanakh and a way to make it relevant to their life concerns.

Studying the opening chapter of *Shemot* provides a fitting opportunity to understand dictators, ancient and modern alike. As Ramban points out, Pharaoh gradually enacts harsher and harsher decrees against the Israelites in order to slowly turn the Egyptian populace against their Israelite neigh-

bors. How can people who were on good terms with their neighbors for generations suddenly become enemies? We see the same phenomenon occur in our own times in the Bosnian war and in Nazi Germany.

A teacher can provide to the students a few sources on the history of the Holocaust and ask students to find parallels in *Shemot*. For example, Goebbels refers to the Jews in Germany as "guests" who are "misusing our hospitality," and Julius Streicher spreads propaganda that the Jews are responsible for World War I and are enemies of the state. This reminds us of Pharoah's accusation in *Shemot* 1:9–10: "The Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us."

We must be vigilant in recognizing propaganda whenever we read a newspaper, watch television, or listen to speeches. A teacher can easily find examples from current events whether relating to local news, Israel, or pop culture. Politicians, businesses, religious leaders, and intellectuals of various kinds constantly try to convince us that their view is correct and all other views are wrong. It is up to us to distinguish between the sincere and the self-serving, between good and evil, between accuracy and propaganda.

It might seem that nothing could be further from the lives of American teenagers than Moshe's prophetic encounter in the middle of the desert at the burning bush. In fact, however, this can be a foundational lesson for students about finding themselves and achieving their own leadership potential. Many elements went into the emergence of Moshe as a leader: his family, background, birth and childhood, a strong sense of justice, and passion to take action. While these attributes took many years to develop and mature, there was one single moment at which they all came together. In *Shemot* 3:4, we read that Hashem only calls to Moshe after He sees that Moshe turns to examine the bush. In order to hear the divine calling, one must be attentive and on the lookout for it. This is when the hero finds his calling and resolves in earnest to follow a plan to accomplish his or her set goal.

Although we are not prophets, each of us can receive a divine calling at his or her own level. A teacher can ask students to identify issues in their own schools, communities, or in the world where there is injustice or something that needs attention. What talents and tools would someone need to help that problem? How can we develop ourselves to develop our

own talents and be sensitive enough to take notice of the "burning bushes" all over the world today? How can we develop the confidence to step up and become leaders?

Structure

Mizmor 145, known as *Ashrei*, is a highly structured alphabetic acrostic. That it is missing a *pasuk* for *nun* therefore stands out as a glaring omission. The classic answer given in *Berakhot* 4b explains that *nun* is omitted because it represents the fall of Israel as seen in Amos 5:2, "Fallen is the virgin of Israel," which begins with a *nun*. This answer is not convincing for a few reasons. Just because there is a negative verse in Amos which begins with *nun* does not mean that *nun* is forever tainted. There are many positive verses that begin with *nun* and many negative verses that begin with other letters. If *nun* really is unusable, why is it found in other acrostic Psalms such as 111, 112, and 119? As I explain further in the teacher's guide, this midrash is not meant as a commentary to Psalm 145 as much as a way to deal with a difficult verse in Amos.

Most scholars think there was originally a verse for *nun* but it was mistakenly omitted by sloppy scribes. For evidence, they point to a copy of this Psalm found in the Dead Sea scrolls, which does include a verse for *nun*: "*ne'eman Elokim bi-dvarav ve-hasid be-khol ma`asav*—God is trustworthy in His words and faithful in all His works." However, it is highly unlikely that this is the original missing *nun* verse considering that its second half is a duplicate of verse 17. More likely, an overzealous scribe invented this verse to "correct" what he thought was a mistake.

Rather, we should seek out a literary explanation for why this psalm intentionally omitted a verse for *nun*. This emerges upon analysis of the structure of this Psalm. This Psalm begins and ends with the word *tehillah/tehillat*. Verses 1 and 2 both end with "Your name forever and ever" and the last verse similarly ends with "His holy name forever and ever." The verb *brk*–bless occurs four times in the *mizmor* in vv. 1, 2, 10, and 21. Taking all these words together, we find that the first two verses and the last verse form an envelope around the rest of the psalm. Since the only other occurrence of *brk* is in v. 10, this middle verse too is linked to the opening and closing. Once we compare these *pesukim* side by side we find that there is a progression from one to the next:

1 – I will extol You, my God and king, and *bless* Your name forever and ever.

2 – Every day will *I bless* You and praise Your name forever and ever.

10 – All Your works shall praise You, Hashem, and *Your faithful ones shall bless* You.

21 – My mouth shall utter the praise of Hashem, and *all creatures shall bless* His holy name forever and ever.

In the first two verses, the singer blesses Hashem by himself. In the middle verse, a small group of faithful ones bless Hashem. By the end, all creatures bless His Holy Name. We can picture someone beginning to sing by himself, then being joined by a few devotees, and finally rallying everyone to sing together. These four verses act as a refrain at the beginning, middle, and end of the Psalm.

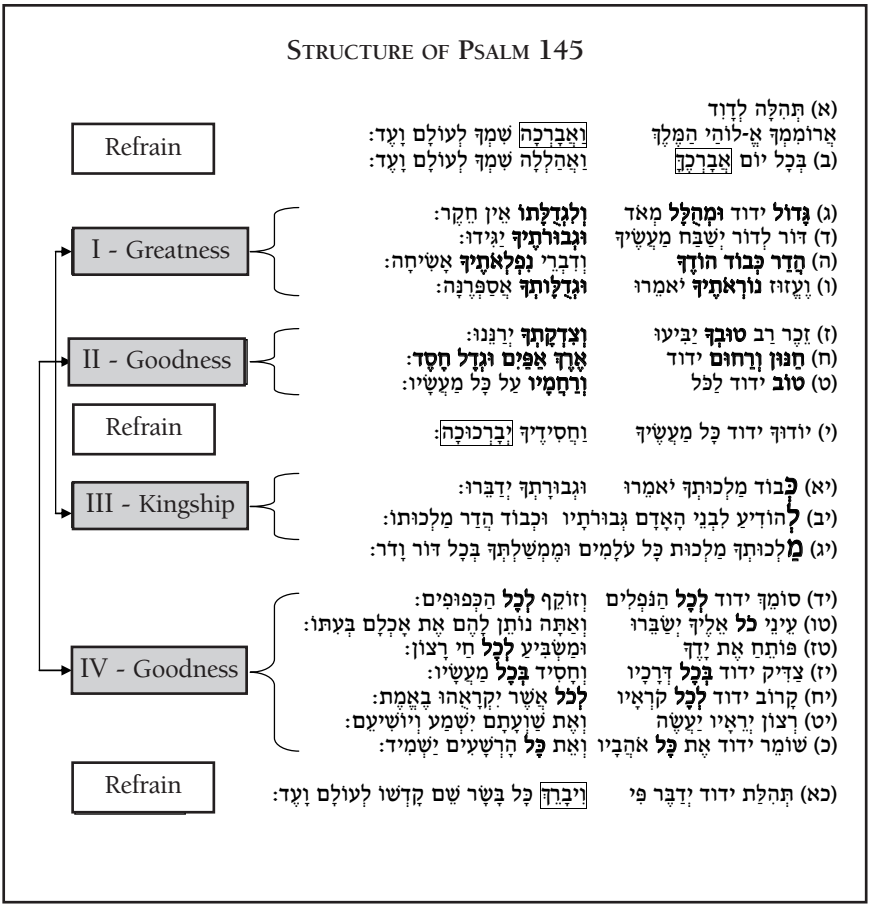
There are four sections in the *mizmor*: two before the refrain and two after it. Section 1 consists of vv. 3–6 and focuses on God's greatness. The key words in this section are: greatness, might, glorious majesty, splendor, wondrous, and awesome. All of these words praise the great works of God in creation and nature. They relate to God as transcendent, powerful, and beyond reach.

Verses 7–9 comprise section 2, which is a celebration of God's goodness. The key words in this section are goodness, beneficence, gracious, compassionate, kindness, and mercy. Verse 8, in particular, paraphrases God's 13 attributes of mercy (*Shemot* 34:6). In this section we feel Hashem's closeness to us, His care, and His accessibility.

Section 3 spans vv. 11–13, and its key words are: majesty, kingship, might, majestic glory, and dominion. This section shares many of the words and themes from section 1 but emphasizes God's kingship in particular. Like section 1, this section also gives off the sense of Hashem as transcendent just like a human king is beyond the reach of the ordinary citizen. Remarkably, the three verses of this section begin with the letters כ, ל, and מ. When read backward, these letters spell מלך—king!

Section 4 is the largest section at vv. 14–20 and parallels section 2 in its theme. This section describes how God provides help and sustenance to the needy (vv. 14–16) and responds to and protects the deserving (vv. 18–20). The middle verse of this section sums up its central message—

"Hashem is beneficent in all His ways and faithful in all His works" (v. 17). The predominant word in this section is "*kol*–all," which is repeated 10 times. It emphasizes that Hashem is not just selectively good to some people sometimes but rather all-good all the time to all living beings.



Some philosophers speak of God as a transcendent, infinite, all-powerful being about whom we can know nothing and from whom we would not expect special favors. Others think of God as a close, ever-compassionate father-like figure who thinks about us and cares for our every need. In philosophy, it is difficult to reconcile these two conceptions. However, when meditating or when in a state of prayer, our emotions can often shift

from one to the other and back. The four sections of this *mizmor* similarly vacillate between these two extremes. Sections 1 and 3 conceive of God as transcendent and therefore call to proclaim His greatness and kingship. Sections 2 and 4, on the other hand, consider God to be near at hand as they praise His goodness.

We can now trace the movement of the reader as he or she experiences this *mizmor*. At first alone, the reader begins by thinking of God's greatness and awesomeness in section 1 but does not feel close to Him. Once the reader begins to fathom God's mighty acts in creation, the reader begin to think of acts He performs for the world. In section 2 the reader begins to sense God's mercy. The reader now reaches a higher level where he or she feels connected with a group of "faithful ones" in the refrain. We then think about God as an infinite king in section 3. But even a king must take care of his subjects, and the infinite king provides infinite care for all beings. It is significant that the last section is the longest and most detailed. It is clearly the climax of the *mizmor* and contains its most essential message.

Getting back to the missing *nun*, we now see that this verse is omitted right at the juncture between sections 3 and 4. This omission makes the reader pause and serves as a literary device to indicate a section break. In fact, as we saw from the structure above, section 4 is the climax and essence of the *mizmor* and so it is fitting to mark a section break between it and everything that precedes it. In fact, vv. 1–13 are also marked off as a unit by the envelope created by the word *melekh* in v. 1 and the repetition of the same word in section 3, vv. 11–13. Furthermore, when reading the acrostic backward from the end, the absence of the *nun* verse calls attention to the beginning letters of section 3, *mem*, *lamed*, *kaf*—king.

The main idea of the *mizmor* is a total praise of Hashem by all people at all times. This is summed up in the progression of the refrains and in the repetition of the key word *kol*. The psalm takes the form of an alphabetic acrostic in order to poetically convey this message. By using every letter of the alphabet, we sense that we are praising God using all possible language. It is complete praise from A to Z. This is a truly magnificent example of how appreciating structure, even—or especially—when it deviates from our expectations, is a necessary and inspiring method for uncovering the wisdom and perfection of Tanakh.

I hope that this selection of lesson summaries will suffice to prompt the reader to visit www.teachtorah.org. I would further request that readers provide feedback on this material, and I invite teachers to join in participating in and contributing to this project.

NOTES

1. A recent and significant contribution to this approach is by my Rabbi, Moshe Shamah, *Recalling the Covenant: A Contemporary Commentary on the Five Books of the Torah* (Jersey City: Ktav, 2011).
2. David Berger, "On the Morality of the Patriarchs in Jewish Polemics and Exegesis," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah,* ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996), 131–146.

Engaging Students with *Torah Mi-Sinai*: Creating Tanakh Curricula in Jewish High Schools

Beth Wiesenberg

(Beth Kirshner Wiesenberg is the Chair of the Tanakh department at Ida Crown Jewish Academy in Chicago. She completed her teacher's training at Orot Israel College, and earned degrees in Judaic Studies and English from the Blitstein Institute of Hebrew Theological College. Beth has taught Tanakh to students in grades 4 through 12, and she considers herself fortunate to send new generations of Torah scholars and Jewish leaders into the world. Beth's current area of interest is Tanakh curriculum development that is meaningful to students in Orthodox high schools.)

We recite the original command for Jewish education daily in the *Shema*: "You shall teach them diligently to your children and speak in them" (*Devarim* 6:7) . . . "and you shall teach them to your children" (*Devarim* 11:19). The Sages learned from these verses that parents are obligated to ensure that their children receive a Torah education, and if the parents are unable to personally provide this instruction, they must hire a teacher in their place. Shimon ben Shetah was the first to establish a mandatory elementary education system in Israel during the Second Temple era, and the success of this directive was ensured by Yehoshua ben Gamla, who installed teachers in every city for children ages six and older (*Bava Batra* 21a). Since then, establishing and maintaining Torah schools has been a mandate to Jewish communities as they are built and wherever they are established throughout the

world. As the Talmud states, "The world stands on the breath of schoolchildren. . . . Any city that does not have (a place of learning for) schoolchildren is destroyed" (*Shabbat* 119b).

As educators, we seek to inspire students to believe, yet we also encourage them to look critically at the texts with which they are engaged. The study of Tanakh in high school should be structured to make each student's experience meaningful and relevant, and to foster a connection to God and the Jewish people through study of divine words.

Our first teachers are our parents, from whom we learn by example what it means to be committed to Judaism. It is through extreme passion for, and commitment to, formal Jewish education that parents enroll children in the Day School system. This system of education feels natural to the children, and that is the first key to the schools' success: Torah education is a given right to every Jewish child. This is the true meaning of the verse in *Devarim* 33:4, "*Torah tzivvah lanu Moshe, morashah kehillat Yaakov*—Moshe commanded the Torah to us as an inheritance for the Jewish people."

In preschool and early elementary school, students are taught to decipher and create letters in two languages, one that reads left to right while the other reads right to left. Students learn to give Hebrew names to things that they had, until now, only identified in English. Teachers during this stage provide the foundation for their students to become learners of Tanakh through exciting storytelling, which makes Torah vibrant and engaging. In upper elementary school, Tanakh learning skills begin through introduction to Hebrew root words and letters, prefixes and suffixes, and basic sentence structure. In the Chicago Day School system, the *Humash* curriculum moves from the more familiar stories contained in *Bereshit* and *Shemot* to the more complex ideas and laws through the Israelites' experience in the wilderness in *Bemidbar* and *Devarim*. As *Humash* teachers provide their students with skills to explore, and not just decipher and decode, biblical text, they must also give students the confidence in their own abilities to identify and solve problems; to ask questions, and to feel as if they will be able to find resolution.

Once students graduate from their respective Day Schools, then, it is assumed that they possess the skills they need for continuing their Torah education. But to ensure that these skills are actually put into use, we need to design a high school Tanakh curriculum that both challenges and inspires the next generation of Jews (though, of course, a skill-building

agenda in text and *parshanut*—classical interpretation—persists). While some students choose to dedicate time after high school at yeshivot, seminaries, or programs in Israel to focus exclusively on Torah study, for many students, this is their last opportunity to study Tanakh in a formal, structured classroom as they graduate and move on to secular universities. Both of these groups must rely on their own motivation and acquired skills to continue their pursuit of Torah study once it is no longer essential to maintaining their GPA; it is therefore the job of Jewish high schools to build upon the foundations of skills and knowledge laid for students in elementary school and to foster love for learning Torah in its own right.

The modern Jewish high school serves as the bridge between a sheltered Day School life and the realities of a world in which graduates must face multiple perspectives with clarity and conviction. It is for us, as educators and administrators, to determine what will be the most effective and important planks to include in building that bridge. When conducting a Tanakh curriculum review, each school makes choices based on its theological and educational philosophies, and on the needs of its student body. When my school's committee set to work on the courses we had in place, we questioned whether each class was fulfilling our stated mission of "inspiring *b'nei* and *b'not* Torah to thrive in the modern world." We found many reasons to be proud of what we were accomplishing; our courses were challenging, and some were innovative. However, we were concerned when we did not necessarily see our students connecting with the texts they studied. Upon investigation we realized that part of the reason for this was that they lacked fluency and perspective in the story of Tanakh. With that as our goal, we evaluated each *sefer* (biblical book) that had been included and that we felt should be included. We rearranged course structure at each grade level and selected units within each *sefer* that would have greater relevance to our students. We created a four-year continuum that shows students that the books of Tanakh create a picture of our history, and we hope that, when they have completed their course of study, our students will have gained increased textual and analytical skills while also seeing their place within that history.

Administration members must look not only at the course of study, but also at the role of the high school Tanakh teacher, which continues to evolve with each generation of learners. Successful implementation of any curriculum requires the support of faculty, and continuing education for all teachers is essential to establishing universal standards among staff.

One curriculum model recommended by Dr. Jeffrey Glanz was developed by Ralph Tyler in 1949. "[This] model is practical in the sense that principals can work with teachers to establish curriculum goals that can then be translated into instructional objectives. Through curriculum development, teachers identify learning activities to provide students with meaningful learning experiences."[1] There are some teachers who feel their job is primarily to provide a good feeling about Judaism in general, and they use the text to segue into personal homiletics rather than focusing on textual interpretation and analysis. Other teachers view their classes as being just another course of study, and they either teach text dispassionately or, at the other extreme, are relentless in drilling memorization and dissection of words without imparting meaning. Neither ideology is effective in a Torah classroom. Our students are not passive recipients of knowledge. We cannot, and should not, expect them to take whatever we teach them and accept it without question. Indeed, the entire structure of the Oral Law, beginning with the Talmud and continuing through written commentaries on Tanakh and halakha, center around *shakla ve-tarya*—a debate of details in the text. Jewish students should be encouraged to ask questions when they are not satisfied with the text at hand. The Mishna states, "*lo ha-bayshan lamed*"—one who is embarrassed to ask questions will not learn (*Avot* 2:5). It is our imperative to create a classroom environment in which students are encouraged to debate and question what they learn until it makes sense to them. Students do not have to agree with everything they learn, but they should understand and appreciate multiple perspectives on what we teach them. When teachers are involved in the changes to curriculum, they are more likely to create the classroom climate necessary to engage students.

Chicago's Jewish elementary Day Schools teach the books of Tanakh in sequential order. *Humash* begins with *Bereshit* in first or second grade and finishes in eighth grade with *Devarim*. Logically, then, one might assume that high school *Humash* classes would re-start the cycle with a new look at *Bereshit*, through which students can ease into learning at the high school level with familiar stories, and then continue to learn the subsequent books in order. Indeed, many schools follow this model. However, even at the ninth-grade level, there is a depth to *Bereshit*, especially to *parshiyot Bereshit* and *Noah*, that cannot be uncovered with 14-year-old students. Although they may be capable of learning complex ideas and

debating morality theoretically, they lack the maturity and awareness to understand and internalize it practically. Because of this, schools that study *Bereshit* with freshmen often avoid those *parshiyot* and begin instead with the stories of Avraham and Sarah at the end of *parashat Noah* or the beginning of *Lekh-Lekha*. By doing so, students are deprived of any opportunity in their formal education to delve into the mysteries of creation from the Torah's perspective. Even in studying the stories of the forefathers and foremothers, freshmen are unable to truly obtain the insight into the characters' lives and relationships with God, each other, and the people around them in a meaningful way; in the words of Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, "to discover the ways in which life and text inform each other."[2] Dr. Leon Kass also writes that studying *Bereshit* as adults "invite[s] our active participation in a world larger than our own. We are drawn into the stories only to discover there a profundity not hitherto available to us. When we analyze, ponder, and discuss the text and when we live with its stories, the enduring text comes alive, here and now. We . . . are offered a chance to catch a glimpse of possibly timeless and transcendent truth about . . . whatever matter the text has under consideration."[3] As the book in which students can connect so much of the material to their personal lives, and as the source of a great deal of unexplored textual depth, it makes sense that *Bereshit* be learned by seniors who are more emotionally and intellectually mature.

Many schools would agree that their *Humash* curricula should include full-year studies of *Shemot*, which, Ramban writes, begins the fruition of God's promise to the forefathers,[4] and *Devarim*, which contains, among other things, a review and explanation of mitzvot and Moshe's final charge to the Jewish people. However, *Vayikra* is the *sefer* of *Humash*, aside from *Bereshit*, that creates the most pedagogical questions. It deals heavily with the laws of *korbanot*, sacrifices, the reasons for which, according to Nehama Leibowitz, we do not understand in the absence of the *Bet ha-Mikdash*, the Temple.[5] It is a shame to completely omit *Vayikra* from the curriculum, though, as there are tremendous lessons in other sections, including *parashat Kedoshim*, which has so many well-known laws and practical applications. Additionally, one may gain from studying the story of Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon who died after bringing an erroneous offering at the dedication of the *Mishkan* in what my teacher, Rabbi Michael Myers, calls "the 9/11 tragedy of the gen-

eration in the *midbar*." Since we only have four years of high school, it does not make sense to take up an entire year of study with *Vayikra*; it is best paired with another *sefer*. *Bemidbar* makes the most sense for this, both chronologically and thematically.

Determining *Humash* curricula predicated on what we have discussed so far gives us several options. Schools may choose to review the story of *Humash* chronologically, with one year each dedicated to *Bereshit*, *Shemot*, *Vayikra-Bemidbar*, and *Devarim*. Another curriculum model is for the entire school to learn the same *sefer* at the same time on rotation. The latter creates unity and a sense of camaraderie in the school's learning and prevents faculty from becoming stagnant in their teaching, but at the cost of anyone becoming experienced at teaching a particular content. In both of these designs, where seniors are not studying *Bereshit* as their primary *sefer* of focus, it behooves the administration to consider adding a seminar for seniors on issues in *Bereshit*, or to dedicate part of senior year to an exploration of under-learned and misunderstood passages. The model that best supports learning the greatest number of units in each *sefer* would have freshmen learning *Shemot*, sophomores tackling *Vayikra-Bemidbar*, juniors studying *Devarim*, and seniors doing an enhanced *Bereshit* course.

Nakh can be the harder part of the program in which to set the curriculum just because of the number of *sefarim* that can be included. Many students who attended Day Schools learned the *sefarim* of early *nevi'im* beginning in third or fourth grade with *Yehoshua* and finishing with *Melakhim* in eighth. In theory this would allow the high schools to go straight into learning the later *nevi'im* and the *ketuvim*; however, unless the stories are reiterated over time, it is unlikely that students will remember a narrative that was learned up to nine years earlier. The question becomes each school's goal in teaching Nakh. Where the school's focus is to be innovative and to introduce students to the most diverse *sefarim*, the options are tremendous. In such cases administrators tend to create themes based on authorship or time period, such as "the writings of Shelomo" or "books of the exile," and they must consider whether students will relate more to the prophecies of Habakkuk or the dreams of Daniel. If the school's primary goal is that its students graduate knowing the story of Tanakh, they should have a review of early *nevi'im* while simultaneously delving into the later *nevi'im* and *ketuvim*. Examples include learning the story of Ruth, which takes place in the time of *Shofetim*; studying *perakim* of *Tehillim*

when learning about the troubles and triumphs of David in *Shemuel*; and reading the attempts of Yonah to avoid helping the enemy of the kingdom of Yisrael, and the exhortations of Yirmiyahu and his personal experience with the people and kings of Yehudah while learning of the downfall of these kingdoms in *Melakhim*. This program of studying Nakh adds greater depth and perspective to the earlier texts. Older students would also benefit from the practical wisdom imparted in *Mishlei* and *Kohelet*, whose messages lead to discussions on Jewish philosophy and the timeless question of humanity's role in this world.

When properly implemented, the experience of learning Torah in a strong Jewish high school program will send our students into the world with a greater knowledge of the story of Tanakh: where we come from, who we were, who we are because of it, and how to apply these lessons to our lives. In developing a curriculum for learning Tanakh, each school must choose the proper *sefarim* for each grade level and appropriate *perakim* and units within each *sefer* and at each level that will both motivate and challenge students. It is our goal to foster a connection to the books of God and the Jewish people, and to inspire Jewish youth to remain dedicated to their heritage, to become leaders within their communities, and to feel they are part of the legacy of our forefathers and foremothers, not just as links in a chain of transmission, but as contributors to Torah and its practice, *le-hagdil Torah u-le-ha'adirah*.

NOTES

1. Jeffrey Glanz, "Improving Instructional Quality in Jewish Day Schools and Yeshivot: Best Practices Culled from Research and Practices in the Field," New York, 2012, 60.
2. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995), xi.
3. Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 19.
4. Ramban, Introduction to *Sefer* Shemot.
5. Nehama Leibowitz, *Iyyunim Hadashim be-Sefer Vayikra* (Israel: *HaSokhnut HaYehudit*), 9.

Coaxing the Waters from the Rock— Tanakh Education in Yeshiva High Schools: The Real and the Ideal

Yitzchak Etshalom

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Four Models

The primary question any educator must ask him or herself before determining *how* to teach particular material is *why* it should be taught at all, which will lead to *what* should be the "take-away" for the student. Is the teacher a *purveyor of information* that is vital for the students' success in acceptance to college? Is the teacher an *educer of values* that the student already holds dear, and will that teacher only feel a sense of success if the students identify his or her own ethical anchors? Is the teacher, perhaps, a *demagogue* (rather than pedagogue) who measures his or her success by the percentage of students who end

up subscribing to his or her particular value system? Or, is the teacher a *facilitator of skills and knowledge*, who sees his or her own job as empowering students to feel a sense of comfort with difficult texts and, ultimately, the ability to master those texts and synthesize them into their own worldview as they use critical judgment (fostered along the way) to evaluate those self-same texts and the lessons learned from them?

Most of us—committed teachers, invested parents, and members of the community alike—would dismiss the first three "teachers"—especially the middle two—as failing in their educational mission. Nonetheless, the reality that many who inspire our children in their Judaic studies in yeshivot—from elementary through secondary schools—fall short of the educational ideal is a shortcoming we recognize and admit. How often are our students given reams and reams of information to commit to memory, some of which strains credulity while much is of questionable relevance to the student? Questionable teaching is a phenomenon I have encountered in meetings with students from numerous communities. More crushing are the reports we hear, too frequently, of teachers who use their position as well as the text, as a vehicle for promoting (sometimes questionably appropriate) dogmas and viewpoints. This could be ascribed to teachers from insular viewpoints (commonly called "Haredi"), who are teaching in institutions where the students ostensibly come from "Modern Orthodox" families, and the teachers feel themselves obligated to preach "proper" values that are often at odds with those stated by the school and those held dear by the parent body. On the other hand, we occasionally meet teachers who seem to have walked "right out of the 1960s," and intuit, Rogers-style, that all the truth lies within the student and the text is a great vehicle for allowing the student to find that "truth within." It should be noted that in the descriptions above, a "text" may be a passage in Tanakh, a particular commentary on that passage, a secondary source—in a sense, the vehicle matters little when it has little to do with the end-goal. At least the "information-purveyor" is concerned with a particular paideia (curricular body of knowledge) that he or she wants the students to master—but they master by memorizing and the text remains foreign to them and, teflon-like, bounces off of their souls.

We often make the mistake of thinking that students will find relevance in a text if we can show them why it is meaningful to them. However, this doesn't work, as relevance is something that must be intu-

ited, not explained. No one can convince me that I ought to feel that news about elections in Israel ought to be relevant to me; rather, it is relevant because I have a deep emotional, familial, social, and/or spiritual investment in the welfare of Israel, which determines its relevance to me as opposed to, say, the rise or fall of the GDP in Niger.

Before moving on to explore how our hero, teacher #4, the "skills-and-knowledge facilitator," succeeds where others fail, one note must be sounded about the role of the personality of the teacher in the classroom. There is no doubt that the charisma, warmth, humor, personal connections (including home hospitality for Shabbatot, ability to play guitar, lead a kumsitz, play basketball with students, and so forth) play a helpful role in the teacher's success in the classroom. Ultimately, however, the classroom experience is one that succeeds best if it is one that ties the student to the discipline, not to the "middleman." While having a relationship with a teacher is a central component in the life of any Ben or Bat Torah, it is chiefly due to that teacher's role as a "matchmaker" between the student and a body of texts, which, ultimately, the student must personally embrace. Sometimes, counter-intuitively, the charismatic teacher is at a disadvantage as he or she can paper over a lack of substance with a thrilling classroom experience—but the students still leave class no richer in knowledge or skills than 40 minutes (or a year) earlier.

The Model

Our ideal educator, the "skills-and-knowledge facilitator," is a far more complex construct than we may wish to imagine. This type of teacher must combine a clear sense of what needs to be accomplished with an awareness of who is doing the accomplishing; a group made up of an entirely different set of students than the previous year—and each individual student comes to the table of Torah with unique background, expectations, abilities, fears, and attitudes. We will be able to flesh this out by studying a small piece of Tanakh together.

Let's take, as an example, the brief story of Moses and Aaron at the waters of Meribah (Numbers 20:1–13):

> 1. And the children of Israel, even the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month; and the people abode in Kadesh; and Miriam died there, and was buried there. 2. And there was no water for the congregation; and they assembled themselves together against Moses and

against Aaron. 3. And the people strove with Moses, and spoke, saying: 'Would that we had perished when our brethren perished before Hashem! 4. And why have you brought the assembly of Hashem into this wilderness, to die there, we and our cattle? 5. And wherefore have you made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us in unto this evil place? It is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; neither is there any water to drink.' 6. And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly unto the door of the tent of meeting, and fell upon their faces; and the glory of Hashem appeared unto them.

7. And Hashem spoke unto Moses, saying: 8. 'Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes, that it give forth its water; and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock; so thou shalt give the congregation and their cattle drink.' 9. And Moses took the rod from before Hashem, as He commanded him. 10. And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said unto them: 'Hear now, ye rebels; are we to bring you forth water out of this rock?' 11. And Moses lifted up his hand, and smote the rock with his rod twice; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their cattle.

12. And Hashem said unto Moses and Aaron: 'Because ye believed not in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.' 13. These are the waters of Meribah, where the children of Israel strove with Hashem, and He was sanctified in them.

The information-purveyor may be concerned that each student know—perhaps by heart—the various approaches among the classical commentators as to exactly where Moses (and Aaron) sinned; he or she may focus on the Midrashim that connect Miriam's death with the "thirst" that (seemingly) occasioned the events that led to the striking of the rock, and so forth.

The *values-educer* may wish to enable the students to explore their own feelings about divine justice, higher standards to which great leaders are held, or the impact of the death of a loved one on even the greatest human beings.

The *demagogue* (or *values-inducer*) may choose to highlight the greatness of Moses—in that he was held to such a high level of perfection that even a minor slip cost him dearly, or to underscore the powerful impact of great leaders and the terrible loss felt at their passing (the midrashic well of Miriam and its disappearance at her demise).

The *skills-and-knowledge facilitator* wouldn't necessarily be put off or feel a lack of success if his or her students were to learn and internalize any or all of these approaches. Rather, this teacher is far more concerned with *how* the knowledge is attained than by the amount of knowledge gained. In a sense, this educator may be the least result-oriented of our four models, as he or she measures success by how well the students have become *part of the process* of developing information, as opposed to end-users—which is the real key to developing a sense of "relevance" about any text.

Relevance—A Function of Excitement, Anticipation, and Success

Relevance is directly related to the excitement the students feel when they anticipate success at a task that is a challenge—yet that they can succeed in mastering.

When students walk into a classroom where they are asked to internalize information given to them—there is no challenge, except for "making room" in their heads, among the terabytes of social, cultural, and assorted academic data, for a list of opinions about why Moses and Aaron were punished. To an inquisitive mind, this is the essence of ennui. Students may appreciate having their opinion solicited, but when it is requested on the basis of no work, no research, and no background—the students themselves have little respect for the process. If, in the case of the *demagogue*'s classroom, the students can anticipate being told what conclusions they ought to draw from a particular story, law, or comment—there isn't a whole lot to make it feel relevant.

If, however, the students know from experience with this teacher that in each session they will learn a new skill, review and strengthen an already taught-skill, or find a new way to utilize that skill—they will find immediate relevance and be excited about what comes next.

Two critical points to maintain relevance and keep students excited about the next skill—the exercises and the skill must be immediately tied in to the material being studied so that the students will see that mastering that skill will reap immediate benefit in their studies. Secondly, the skill ought to be integrated into regular study, such that each skill taught becomes a regular part of their "learning arsenal" and they continue to use it such that it becomes as natural an instinct.

Back to the Quarrelsome Waters

In order to illustrate how our *skills-and-knowledge facilitator* would instruct, let's go back to the wilderness of Zin and see how the story of the "quarrelsome waters" (*Mei Merivah)* might be taught. There is much more to investigate about this passage; we will limit our observations to those germane to the method highlighted herein.

As a prefatory note, any of the skills assumed to have been internalized and habituated below could just as well be brand new to the class; in which case, this passage is a perfect opportunity to teach that particular skill.

A: For openers—the panoramic view

Students will have learned, during the course, to read the passage, looking for words they don't understand (and given translation strategies, such as context clues, looking for the radicals ["roots"], anticipating the word, and so forth) and learning two critical "big-picture" strategies:

> 1) To place themselves "inside the narrative" and read it from the perspective of an Israelite living in the first month of the (presumed) 40th year of wandering.
>
> 2) Look for anomalies in the text—unexpected turns, odd juxtapositions, and the like.

Immediately when reading the text, besides the obvious question of the gravity of the punishment meted out to Moses and Aaron and identifying the particular sin for which they are held liable—are two other oddities. The mention of the death and burial of Miriam seems to have nothing to do with the rest of the story and doesn't seem to belong here.

One critical note must be injected here—for us to be successful in facilitating skills, students have to learn to look at a text with fresh eyes. That means temporarily withholding interpretations and applications that are not found in the text but have become very popular and identified with the text. A case in point is the midrashic device of Miriam's well (*Tosefta Sotah* 11:1, *Seder Olam Rabbah* Ch. 10). The well seems to have been reported here in order to answer a question—which is the exact oddity that we've noticed—since Miriam's death, on the face of it, has nothing to do with the encounter between the people and Moses, perhaps her death

occasioned an unexpected thirst that caused the crisis. A cursory look at the sources cited above will bear this out.

By now, the students may have realized (or been coached into seeing) that deaths and burials are never inherently significant enough—any death and/or burial mentioned in the text is reported due to a secondary consideration. Often as not, it is a demonstration of the fulfillment of a divine promise (for example, the funeral of Jacob was a direct fulfillment of God's last words to him in Genesis 46:4; the death of Sarah was occasion for Abraham to finally realize God's commitment of over 60 years that he will inherit the Land). Those students who have internalized this lesson will immediately realize that the mention of Miriam's death and burial seems to be unnecessary here.

Next, the students, placing themselves "inside the story," should notice that the complaint of the people *isn't about thirst*—they only mention "*u-mayim ayin lishtot*" (there is no water to drink) as an apparent afterthought—strangely enough, their main complaint is about the desert not being a land for seed, figs, grapes, and pomegranates, which the students should immediately recognize as an odd premise. Why would the Israelites think that this way-station on their way to the "good, wide land" should have any of those resources?

The students, by now, should have understood a principal reason for the need to become "part of the story"—we, the omniscient reader, know how everything is going to turn out; we know that Pharaoh will refuse Moses' requests; we know that Esau will discover Jacob's masquerade; we know that Rachel will die on the road—and we know that Moses will never enter the Land of Israel. We have to remember that none of the players know that until they do—either when it happens or when they are prophetically given that information.

The Israelites do not know where they are—just that they have been traveling for a long time with a beautiful land awaiting them at the end of that journey. They may have heard that the land to which they are traveling is "flowing with milk and honey;" they may have even heard about the famed seven species (although only adumbrated in Deut. 8:8)—but all that they've seen is grapes, figs, and pomegranates. If they don't remember this from chapter 13 (if, for instance, they are only studying selected passages and didn't recently delve into the story of the "scouts"), then a quick concordance-check will lead them straight back to 13:23, which, surpris-

ingly, lists exactly the same three types of fruit, the absence of which they bemoaned here. (This is usually when a few students are heard to mutter, under their breath: "cool"—that's when "relevance" kicks in!)

So . . . the Israelites must have thought they were in Israel—and that's why they are complaining about the lack of fig and pomegranate trees and grape vines. What might have given them the idea that they had already reached their destination?

If the students have effectively walked into the narrative, they can be prodded—"What have we been carrying with us since we can remember"? They may first answer that the Testimony (*"luhot ha-Edut"*) has been with us—but we can ask them about another box that we've been carrying—and they will readily remember that Joseph's bones have accompanied us since we quit Egypt. Why didn't we bury our ancestor in Egypt? Evidently, we bury important people in the Promised Land—Joseph has a special location (cf. Gen. 48:22), but no one is buried "out there" (except for the entire generation that passed away in the dessert and whose death was a fulfillment of a divine decree). So…if Miriam died and was buried "there" (*"sham"*), we must have arrived at the Land of Israel!

We can now understand the catalyst for the crisis—the people believe that they've arrived—but the "beautiful land, flowing with milk and honey, boasting fantastic fruit" is nowhere to be seen. "And what of the grapes, figs, and pomegranates that we've seen with our own eyes (or our parents saw and related to us)?"

B: Assessing what we've discovered and anticipating further

Now that the students have addressed the text from the "long view" and found the people's misjudgment (that they've already entered the Promised Land) and its cause (Miriam's burial "there"), they should be able to anticipate what *should* come next. We would expect that Moses' response—or that directed by God that he take—would be to assure them that they are still on the road, not yet arrived and that, indeed, the land to which they are coming is truly filled with luscious fruits and grains.

It takes a strong imagination to be able to see the text as it is *not*, to imagine what *might* have come next and then to "be surprised" at what actually ensues. This is nothing less than the traditional approach of Midrash (especially Midrash Halakhah), which is built on what *should* be written and then allowing what *is* written to teach additional lessons. By

training our students to recognize a rhetorical pattern in Tanakh, whether it be nomenclature (see Rashi's comment at Gen. 1:1 noting that the "unexpected" use of *Elokim* followed, in chapter 2 (v. 4 ff.) by *Hashem Elokim* indicates a change in "divine policy" vis-à-vis creation), presentation of laws or any other genre of biblical literature, we train them to notice what is "off" about a particular passage and what that unusual twist may be signaling. This also makes reading the classical medieval commentators that much more empowering and impactful, as the students can already identify with "what's bothering Rashi/Ramban/ibn Ezra (etc.)?"

As such, we are surprised that God neither instructs Moses to march them into the Land or to inform them that they haven't yet arrived—which we can take in one of two ways. Either our hypothesis is wrong and the confrontation between Moses and the people isn't about the Land, but about thirst—or we may be right, but there may also be something bigger going on, beneath the superficial complaint, and that is what God is instructing Moses to address.

C: Back to the panoramic view

If we take a look at the passage, we can see that the people's complaint doesn't jibe with what we know about the narrative. We know that God took the people out of Egypt, that God is leading them through the desert and directing their travels—but we are so accustomed to hearing the people's plaint to Moses (and Aaron): "Why have YOU brought the assembly of Hashem into this wilderness. . . . And why have YOU made us to come up out of Egypt. . . ." that we don't necessarily pick up on the incongruity of their complaint. Why aren't they angry at—or disappointed with—God, who has led them to this place?

There is a simple answer that the student may discover and, when he or she does, that "magic moment" happens; the student realizes that the Israelites of this new generation believe, as did their parents, that it was Moses and Aaron who led them out of Egypt and who are leading them through the desert. In effect, nothing has changed since the complaints first registered just after we were miraculously brought through the Sea (Exodus chapters 15–17).

Pedagogic interjection: Much of this development may be beyond the independent scope, background and ability of the students, even at an advanced level; but, with training and a bit of coaxing or Socratic-style

questioning, they can put most of it together on their own. There may be a point, here or there, that needs to be bolstered and proven. To that end, the teacher may choose to assign homework or to give an inquisitive student who asks a sharp question an opportunity to earn "extra credit" by researching the topic with guidance.

D: Discussion—the meaning of conflict

At this point, in order to help the students discover the next layer of meaning in the text, the teacher may choose to direct a discussion about conflict; it is easy to draw students out once they are sufficiently invested in solving an enigma—and we still haven't addressed the "big" question of the sin imputed to Moses and Aaron. Conflict is a universal experience and one that can be described in terms common enough to apply elsewhere—in our case, the point that every conflict is really about something deeper (couples who fight about sleeping with the window open or closed are invariably experiencing a much deeper conflict).

The students can then identify three different issues going on in our passage—

1) An elemental and existential need for water—as confirmed by v. 2.

2) A disenchantment with the "Land" that they believe they have come to (v. 5).

3) A gross theological error about who (or Who) is leading them.

Once the students have identified these three, they can create a causal chain of malaise (peeling the layers off the onion)—the lack of water opens up the wounds about the place, which in turns reveals a festering problem of belief.

E: Testing the hypothesis

If our students are right (and this entire process may have taken several days), then we should expect God's response to address the ultimate problem of belief; He does so (as we will discover forthwith) without sacrificing a solution to the most immediate problem of water. He directs Moses to act in such a way that belief in God's all-encompassing role in their deliverance, journeys and eventual destination would be confirmed.

The command to take the staff implies that Moses should use it to strike the rock (as Ibn Ezra argues, and based on the parallel story in Exodus 17); what are we to make of the directive *"ve-dibbartem el ha-sela."* Here again, the students' familiarity with the rest of Tanakh, their learning to focus only on the text (and suspend interpretive memories) and to read with anticipation will help. As there is no other occasion in all of Tanakh when anyone is commanded to speak to (and command) an inanimate object, the students may be willing to challenge the usual translation of the prepositional *el* and to read, rather *al* (once guided, using the concordance, dozens of examples where the two are interchanged) and read, rather, "speak *about* the boulder" and understand that Moses and Aaron were directed to speak to the people, in front of the rock, about that selfsame boulder. But what were they to say?

Once we recall the underlying crisis of faith that lies at the heart of our textual onion, the students may, of their own accord, come to the conclusion that Moses and Aaron were to use the rock as a way of showing the people that it was God, not they, who were directing the people's lives, feeding them, leading them and protecting them through the desert.

Our hypothesis, developed with the students, that the real cause of the crisis was the people's misconception about Moses and Aaron's role in their destiny, can now be substantiated and, at the very least, we can continue to use it as a tentative approach as we come to the denouement of the passage.

F: The "sin"

This is a wonderful opportunity to open up a discussion about leadership and the need for a shepherd to know his flock and for his communication skills to be apt for his following. What do we expect Moses to say at this point? "I will bring water from the rock, something no human can accomplish. Therefore, you all see that it is God Almighty who is protecting and leading us" . . . or something to that effect.

Instead, Moses used the device of a rhetorical question to make his point *"ha-min ha-sela ha-zeh notzi lakhem mayim?"*—but a rhetorical question will only work if the intended audience knows how to interpret it. When a teen's mother declares "Do you call this a clean room?"—her son understands that she is calling it a mess—but if an immigrant has just moved in and she says the same thing—he may think that she is impressed

with his work or even asking him what he thinks about the room.

Evidently, the new generation of Israelites didn't properly understand Moses' intent and his opportunity to inspire belief was lost—they could have been moved by his words to renew their belief in God, but instead (evidently) understood his words as anger, or defiance; either way, as confirmation of their belief in Moses as the "wizard" who was leading them.

The students, again guided to read the text carefully, will notice that Moses and Aaron were not punished with being condemned to die in the desert—but were stripped of their leadership. Read not *"lo tavo'u"*— you shall not come—rather *"lo tavi'u"*—you shall not lead; the inability to lead this new generation, evidenced by a communication gap between the old leader and the new community, necessitated a removal of Moses and Aaron from the helm of leadership.

Afterword

I have presented four models of instruction, each of which has ample representation in Jewish secondary schools; I have argued that the facilitator of skills and knowledge is the only one whose method and goals will generate interest, mastery and a love of the material—all of which spells the relevance that we always seek to engender in our students. The texts will speak to our students if we teach the students to interact, in class, in *havruta* and alone—with the texts themselves.

Reading Tamar

Erica Brown

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We are in our second year of studying women in Tanakh every Thursday afternoon for an hour. The class takes place in one of the participant's homes in memory of her late mother. The oldest woman in the class is in her 80s, the youngest in her 30s. There is a range of educational backgrounds around the table, from Day School graduates to women whose own observance is evolving. We study everything in Hebrew and English with a smattering of traditional commentaries and modern scholarship. Mostly, our focus is on a primary reading of Tanakh; we slowly dissect the words, paying careful attention to repetition, alliteration, and odd words or unexpected phrases. We spend a lot of time on biblical cross-referencing, moving to other passages or verses that present parallel stories or language. The class is no different, in certain ways, from any other in Bible through a thematic and literary lens. Yet, as the teacher, I find myself stepping back in observation at critical junctures to watch modern women judge ancient matriarchs. Do they see themselves refracted in the behind-the-scenes female manipulation of a narrative? How objective are they in removing themselves when doing a character analysis? Can they study a swath of text about women in compromising sexual situations and remain neutral? After all, gender is not an insignificant aspect of personal identity.

Yet I would not ask any of these questions during class. It is a safe space to express opinions, but such questions would be a digression we cannot afford given our limited time together. Then from a pedagogic standpoint, I wonder if I have made the right choice in ignoring the bridge from text to life. We certainly engage in what I call life/text dichotomies and entertain spiritual lessons so that the words can jump off the page and into our lives, but we do this more in the style of Aesop's fables than a direct confrontation with an underlying gender bias. It would not dawn on me to pause, look up and ask: "Does this offend you?"

This is not a group of people who revel in feminist readings, although some of them struggle with a woman's place in Judaism; they are mostly women steeped in tradition, and who have largely accepted gender limitations in their faith commitments or at least made some peace with ritual exclusion. They may not be content with every gender-based prohibition thrown their way, but they have accepted the total package of meaning and lifestyle that comes with Orthodoxy. Would this resignation manifest itself in their reading of the Tamar story, I wondered? Tamar was a risk-taker embroiled in a serious and morally trying tale. Sexual taboos were broken for the sake of succession. One value was pitted against another in an ethical and emotional tug-of-war that almost cost Tamar her life. It is hard to retain objectivity and not personalize texts in some way when faced with such turmoil. Life seeps in between the lines as we read the words together.

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Tamar is the protagonist of Genesis 38. Judah picked her as a wife for his first-born son Er. God did not like Er; for some unstated reason, he was "displeasing to the Lord," and God subsequently took his life, leaving Tamar bound by the levirate laws of remarriage. Judah then adjured his next son Onan to "do his duty by her" to "provide offspring for your brother." The obligation is presented with a paradox. The duty is described as a relief for her when, in actuality, it benefits a dead man by keeping his name and property intact in the family. The ambiguity of who this act of marriage is for may contribute to the puzzling way Judah proceeded. Onan was troubled that the seed would not technically count as his so instead of normal cohabitation, he spilled his seed outside of her. He was willing to undergo intercourse as an act of pleasure but not as an act of responsibility, "so as not to provide offspring for his brother" (Gen. 38:9). He did exactly the opposite of his father's wishes.

Tamar's own feelings, loss, and future desires were not vocalized by Judah. After Onan died—because the Lord also found him displeasing—Judah told his daughter-in-law to stay a widow in her father's house until his third son, Shelah, grew up and could fulfill his commitment: "Stay as a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up…" (Gen. 38:11). Judah's suggestion that Tamar return to her father's house shows that he felt little responsibility for her welfare in the intervening years and yet expected her to stay faithful all the while. The continuation of Judah's line through Er depended on Tamar's commitment to a family that had little regard for her. This disregard is cemented by the side-thought communicated in the passage; even as he told Tamar to wait, Judah knew that he would never actualize the duty because he feared for his last son: "He might die like his brothers" (Gen. 38:11). God found Judah's sons displeasing, but Judah conveniently blamed Tamar.

Scholars who struggle to understand the odd placement of this chapter between Joseph being thrown into a pit and Joseph being seduced by his Egyptian master's wife should note that this is another story about fatherhood and brotherhood that takes many wrong turns because filial and fraternal bonds were weak or severed. The displacement of seed is not unlike the displacement of an actual brother, another act that stops the family line from natural continuity. The private ruminations of a brother who is not willing to give provide children for a dead sibling is paralleled by a father who would dispose of a brother with nary a concern and force a daughter-in-law into prolonged widowhood with no escape.

Over time, Judah's wife died and after mourning for her, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers with his friend Hirah, a minor character who surprisingly appears many times in the chapter. Tamar was told that her father-in-law was coming to the area. She was not informed directly. We are unsure how much time had elapsed but enough for her to understand that Shelah was never to be hers and that her garments of widowhood would be worn as a life sentence. Taking destiny into her own hands instead of waiting any longer, she exchanged her widow's garb for the clothing of a prostitute to seduce Judah and make him give her the child that she deserved. Rather than seduce Shelah, the brother who should have been rightfully her husband, she tricked her father-in-law, perhaps literally coupling obligation with revenge. To add to the curiosity, the garments she donned as prostitute were not revealing, as we might expect, but concealing:

> So she took off her widow's garb, covered her face with a veil, and wrapping herself up, sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him as a wife. When Judah saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face. (Gen. 38:14–15)

In three different ways we are told that Tamar was covered, ostensibly to conceal her identity from Judah but also a subtler signal to the reader that she was far from a prostitute in her manner. This identity was not one she wore comfortably. The ironic location of the encounter makes the reader smirk. *Enaim* in Hebrew means eyes. Tamar saw the future ahead as a spouse-less widow and saw an opportunity precisely because her father-in-law did not see what was coming.

The use of a veil in conjunction with the name of the place, presents many opportunities for playful readings. One feminist commentary on the story speaks in the words of Tamar herself:

> I exposed Judah's shallow grief by subtly playing upon the irony of veils. When I dressed as his son's widow, I was invisible to Judah. He sent me away; he ignored my legitimate claim on Shelah. But when I voluntarily hid myself behind a veil, then he noticed me and unwittingly fulfilled his duty as his son's redeemer.[1]

Veils reveal and conceal; it is no coincidence that the word for clothing in Hebrew "*beged*" is related to the word for traitor: "*boged*." Clothing creates identities but can also disguise identities.

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I spoke with several of my students between classes about studying the Tamar story together. Does it make them angry? It does not. One woman finds Tamar inspiring:

> I perceive Tamar to be brave. She must have been in a lot of pain. As a woman, I could imagine her feeling unfulfilled and experiencing the loss. I imagine the loss was different. She must have been in a very emotional place, feeling blame on top of loss. I don't think I felt anger when we were studying this; it was more admiration for her than anger against the situation. There wasn't much time to get angry because the action took place very quickly in the text. It's very powerful that she figured out something to move her life along.

This class participant did not feel angry about what happened to Tamar because she saw her as a woman who fought back and was able to "achieve her purpose without hurting someone else." To her, Tamar was a symbol of empowerment since she admires those who struggle with a character deficit or adversity and find ways to overcome challenges. In this instance, Tamar, like other matriarchs and female characters in the Bible, plays a supporting role to the larger story, helping us forge a nation but not as an overt, public leader. "The woman is not the leader in a religious or tribal sense, but what she does or does not do becomes a defining moment that changes the course of history. It's important not only to pay attention to the headlines but the sub-text."

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The text confirms that Judah did not know that this woman was his daughter-in-law when he invited her to sleep with him. Tamar knew that to corner her father-in-law she needed to exact an identifying object. Judah did not pay in advance for this prostitute's services but suggested that he would send an anonymous kid from his flock later. Tamar, shrewder than Judah, told him that she needed to secure a pledge from him, another ironic statement since Judah was not one to keep his promises. The "*eravon*" or collateral she seeks has the same Hebrew root as the word for responsibility, a subtle way to suggest that Judah betrayed his responsibility to her.

Judah did not know what to give her but she knew exactly what she wanted: "Your seal and cord and the staff which you carry" (Gen. 38:18)—all signature items of the one who holds them. Rashi explains that the seal was the ring by which Judah signed documents and the cord was a garment that he covered himself with; she could not have asked for identifiers stronger than these. Hizkuni mentions that these were items of regular use; the cord for him was an object used to weave wool. Taking away that which was basic and used often would remind Judah of the absence and perhaps bring Tamar's dilemma to a more expedited solution. Nahum Sarna believes that the seal and cord were a unit:

> The reference is to the widely used cylinder seal, a small object made of hard material, engraved with distinctive ornamentation. The center was hollowed out and a cord passed through so that the seal could be worn

> around the neck. When the cylinder was rolled over soft clay, the resultant impression served as a means of identifying personal possessions and of sealing and legitimating clay documents.[2]

This explanation helps us understand why Tamar suggested these items. In Sarna's words it was "a kind of extension of the personality" since it was had the function of a signature. It uniqueness was unmistakable.

The staff is regarded as a symbol of power and makes its first appearance in the Bible in this chapter, fitting in with the blessing that Jacob gave Judah on his deathbed, namely that Judah would assume the mantle of leadership and that the scepter would not depart from his legacy. In taking it, was Tamar also suggesting that his leadership might rise and fall depending on his capacity to act with both compassion and justice? Taking these objects together was symbolically divesting Judah of authority by which he presented himself to the outside world. In essence, although Tamar played the prostitute, it was Judah who stripped himself bare of that which is most essential as a leader, all for momentary gratification.

Tamar asked for three items, not one. Tamar wanted the paternity of the child to be certain, with no taint of ambiguity. Even though Tamar suffered years without pregnancy on the horizon, she was absolutely sure that this one sexual liaison would end with conception, and she was right. She then "took off her veil and again put on her widow's garb" (Gen. 38:19). She quickly left the identity she temporarily donned for the long-suffering identity of the widow. But this time, something was growing under her widow's robes: a child and a delicious secret.

The Adullamite appears again and is the one sent to pay the pledge. Clearly Judah's act was known to at least one person besides Tamar. When Hirah could not find her, he made inquiries about town, connecting himself and his cohorts with prostitutes publically. The text belabors this point. Hirah is seen asking about the prostitute. The townspeople replied in the negative, and then Hirah reported this all to Judah. Judah then made an ironic observation: "Let her keep them, lest we become a laughingstock. I did send her this kid, but you did not find her" (Gen. 38:23). The fear of being ridiculed did not occur to him beforehand. Judah was self-satisfied that he did his best by her since he tried to deliver on his pledge, without understanding that she had what was truly valuable: the damning evidence.

Next Judah was told that his daughter-in-law was pregnant with another dose of irony: "Your daughter-in-law has played the harlot; in fact,

she is with child by harlotry" (Gen. 38:24). All of the chatter that embodies the chapter tells the reader that this seemingly private encounter was the subject of gossip. Where news of Judah's visit allowed Tamar to seek justice, news of Tamar's pregnancy presaged an act of injustice. Judah was prepared to have Tamar brought out into the public square and burned. Burning is a very specific type of punishment. Its destructive powers are total. If Judah had paid Tamar little mind before, now he would have her literally obliterated without the residue of personal guilt that he should have carried. He could project his guilt onto her shame and feel blameless.

"As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law, 'I am with child by the man to whom these belong.' And she was dragged out to her public execution she added, 'Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?'" (Gen. 38:25). The moment of drama is acute; her walk of public shame is the physical approximation of the secret that was about to become public knowledge. Instead of the badge of shame brought on by pregnancy, we imagine Tamar's head held high as she grabbed the objects that would save her and condemn Judah. Tamar immediately referenced the man who fathered the child so as not to bear the shame alone. It was as if she had said directly to the audience of voyeurs, "It takes two to have a child. Let me tell you who else should be punished with me." To his credit, Judah recognized the objects and took the blame: "She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah" (Gen. 38:26).

The chapter then turns from this scene of revelation to the birthing moment. The drama of the breech birth also involves the danger of twins, taking the reader from Tamar's perilous risk in masking her identity to a sudden, breath-holding birth of two children. Since nothing takes place in an ordinary way in the chapter, the birth is no exception. One child placed his hand outside Tamar, and the midwife quickly encircled it with a crimson thread, a color associated elsewhere in the Bible with sin. The midwife assumed that this brother would come out first. Since the first-born is entitled to certain fiscal privileges and burdened with certain responsibilities, determining the first-born is not insignificant. The red bracelet would have been a sign of early victory. But, because nothing turned out as expected, the hand of this child went back into the womb, and his brother came out first instead. Just like the rest of the narrative, the one who is expected to triumph is vanquished to be eclipsed by another. Judah who

thought he had the hand of power ended up bested by a powerless woman. The hand that grabbed life first went back into the womb to emerge second.

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"I consider myself a pretty spiritual person and I know that she wants to continue the line, but I had a problem with this," remarked another woman from the class. "Obviously she is a very holy woman willing to sleep with her father-in-law to continue the line, to produce a future king but personally, that couldn't have been me. Maybe it's because I'm thinking of my own father-in-law." She laughs.

> I guess I admire her for it because it's not something I think I could have done. I am in awe of her. She had a mission. She did it. I can feel the text very personally. I think studying texts about women is different than studying other texts. I can identify with the women we study. I love hearing a woman's point of view. It's different than sitting in a room with men and talking about what Tamar was willing to do. I don't know how men would react to this story. I think studying this with women creates more openness with other women. I don't think women would have talked the same way if men were in the room.

For this student, studying with women creates a sensitive space for exploration. "The comfort level is different, and maybe even the thought level is different. Maybe the conversation is going to go in a slightly different direction with a group of women." Safety is one feature of gender-based learning as is topic selection and discussion, but this woman was making a more radical suggestion: "the thought level is different."

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The context of Genesis 38 is critical. Sandwiched between the throwing of a brother into a pit and the seduction of that brother by a woman in power, we have the story of a brother's abdication of responsibility and a seduction by a relatively powerless woman. Genesis 38 begins with Judah's lone descent. "About that time, Judah left his brothers and camped near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah" (Gen. 38:1). Grouped together as a unit, Judah and his brothers made poor decisions with long-term conse-

quences; their brutality fed off each other. Suddenly, the text singles out Judah, perhaps, as some commentaries believe, to understand the kind of brother who would allow his own flesh-and-blood to squander in a pit. He was not the first brother to be singled out from the group. Reuben took his own walk back to the pit and discovered that Joseph was missing, ripped his clothes and reported it to the others. When he painfully cried, "The boy is gone! Now what am I to do?" may indicate that Reuben thought this a mere prank driven by rivalry until it turned into something more sinister, and he, as eldest, would be held accountable. In an anxious huddle, the men contemplated their next move and took Joseph's coat to their father. Once the deed had been done and its consequences unraveled, the linear movement of the story pauses and turns to Judah alone and a drama that involves him to the exclusion of any brothers.

Judah's only close company in this chapter is his friend Hirah. Judah took a wife, had children, then lost a wife, had sons who died and a daughter-in-law who was banished to her father's house. Hirah is the only character who stays at his side throughout the entire narrative. If Genesis 37 warned us about evil in company and the rabble-rousing that complicity can create, Genesis 38 continues the lesson. It is Hirah who Judah camps near, Hirah who Judah goes sheep-shearing with and Hirah who went to pay the prostitute. Judah's decisions and actions throughout are self-absorbed. Even his friend is only regarded in service of him, and an ignoble service at that. This is the kind of man, the chapter suggests, who might just throw his brother in a pit, who is groomed for leadership himself and blessed with it by his father but he failed to initiate moral leadership, both with his brother Joseph and with his daughter-in-law Tamar.

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Women studying about women with other women naturally precipitates conversations about women. One woman who prefers learning in a mixed-setting said that she does not necessarily view the texts from a woman's perspective, making a study of women in Genesis undifferentiated from, say, an exploration of major themes in Numbers. "I've always liked talking with males about things, and in some of the mixed groups I've been in—without stereotyping men or women—I've liked the rigor and the logic that I don't always find in learning with women." Even as she

says this, she hesitates. She does not want to stereotype the way that women learn and struggles to find the language to explain her preferences. She was aware as a child that when men studied separately she felt left out and didn't want to feel left out. But then she pauses because there are times when the women-only learning setting and the cast of female characters does impact her more:

> When we're learning about a woman who is in a difficult position, either she doesn't have the freedoms to do what she wants with her life or she doesn't have children, I think that there's an identification with what she might be experiencing which is more personal than with other characters. I think it's easier to imagine oneself in the inside of a female character. It's not seeing myself in her position currently as much as like when you're little and you play imagination games. You play another character, and I could envision myself that way. But sometimes I do identify more with a male than a female depending on the circumstance.

Infertility, rape, nursing, birth, marriage, and mothering have come up as themes in the class. Could these be explored in the same way with men? "I think there might be a level of discomfort with the topics if we were studying with men. It's not really about modesty but about privacy." It allows for a comfort level for sensitive topics that surface in discussion.

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The interpolation of this chapter in the Joseph narratives has led many scholars to view this story as an imposition or digression on what would otherwise have been a linear tale about the rise of Joseph's power. The scholars who arbitrarily dismiss the placement as a result of multiple authors miss many of the more profound linguistics and thematic connections in the chapters before and after the story of Judah and Tamar. Robert Alter draws attention to a Midrash that regards Judah as the deceiver deceived (*Bereshit Rabbah* 84:11,12) and comments on the way that the assumption of interconnectedness makes us more careful readers:

> The difference between the two is ultimately the difference between assuming that the text is an intricately interconnected unity, as the midrashic exegetes did, and assuming it is a patchwork of frequently disparate documents, as most modern scholars have assumed. With their assumption of interconnectedness, the makers of the Midrash were often exquisitely

> attuned to small verbal signs of continuity and to significant levels of nuance as any "close reader" of our own age.[3]

Specifically in reading this narrative, Alter places great weight on the repetition of the infinitive *le-hakir*—to recognize or to identify— in its various forms. Jacob was asked to identify Joseph's coat dipped in blood in Genesis 37 and then Judah was asked to identify his seal, cord and staff in 38. Although Alter does not point this out, identifying objects surface again in Genesis 39 when Joseph runs away from the wife of Potiphar's nefarious clutches and leaves his garment as evidence.

One critical emphasis in each of these chapters is the way in which an object tells a story. Although Alter stresses the verb "to recognize" that runs throughout these narratives, he does not note an inherent difference which the juxtaposed texts force upon the reader. The brothers, when handing Jacob the bloody garment did not lie. They let the coat lie for them in the visual shock it presented to their father: "They had the ornamented tunic taken to their father, and they said, 'We found this. Please examine it; is it your son's tunic or not' He recognized it and said, 'My son's tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph was torn by a beast!'" (Gen. 37:33).

In one chapter, an object lied. In the next, an object told the truth. There are many ways to tell a story and many props that lend themselves to non-verbal reporting. All Potiphar's wife had to do to incriminate Joseph was hold up what he once wore. In her case, the object both lied and told the truth. It was indeed Joseph's garment, but it was not left there as the remains of a sordid tryst. It was in this nameless woman's hands because she took it forcibly, exerting her considerable power over a vulnerable servant who rejected her.

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> "In our class, when you learn with women there's a lot of discussion about the psychology of what's going on, and I doubt we'd get that in a mixed class." She was sure studying as a man would not be the same. "It might be on a different level; it might not look much to the interpersonal. The comments and questions people make inform our learning."

As an instructor, I struggled and still struggle with this question. Does learning in a uni-gender classroom change the learning and possibly even

change the thinking? I am familiar with the psychological research presented in *Women's Ways of Knowing*:

> Women pose questions more than men, they listen to others, and they refrain from speaking out—these have long been considered signs of powerlessness, subjugation, and inadequacy of women. When women's talk is assessed against standards established by men's behavior, it is seen as tentative, vacillating, and diminutive.[4]

Perhaps women in the company of men invalidate their own intellectual confidence, stunting their own exploration of an idea. I am aware that many women experience this, but generally I never have. Through high school, all of my own learning took place in a mixed-gender setting. My study partners were usually male by preference because, like the learner in the class who unwillingly made assumptions about the way men and women learn, I fell into the same trap. I felt comfortable with the confidence of boys and was anxious to be in their intellectual company. I shied away from what I regarded as "girly" topics and even studied and taught Talmud at the expense of my love of Bible, feeling it to be the intellectually superior discipline, not because it is but because I bought wholesale into that stereotype.

I appreciate the diversity of discussion that comes from different life-experience, different points of religious observance and non-observance, different ages, and, of course, different genders. I rarely teach women-only classes and have often turned down opportunities to privilege mixed-gender learning. But I did not turn down the invitation to teach this class in my neighborhood and soon found it growing into a highlight of my week. Try as I might to minimize the act of a woman teaching other women about women I could not resist its attractions. This is a community of learners in the best sense of the word. They care for each other and use the class as platform to honor a deceased parent on a *yartzheit* or to think about a member of the class who is ill. They know about each other's families and have been through bat mitzvah celebrations, the birth of grandchildren, and even the passing of class members. They remind each other to pray for others and discuss communal issues before and after our learning. They learn in the most powerful way that ideas have staying power, when they are studied among friends.

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"She is more in the right than I. . . ." Tamar does not get the last word in her narrative. Judah does, speaking about Tamar and validating the risk she took, understanding that she did it with the most noble of intentions. Trapped in limitation, Tamar modeled responsibility, justice, and compassion for Judah, a man blessed with future leadership. Those who wear the seal and cord and carry the staff must use power judiciously and righteously. And those who follow Tamar and study her story see in her the ultimate female empowerment, leadership not for the sake of authority alone but for the sake of continuity.

NOTES

1. Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam* (New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1996): 77.
2. Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001): 268.
3. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981): 11.
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Teachers Talk about Introducing Academic Bible Study Methods in Their Classrooms

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During my first teaching experience (it was the Frisch School in 1983) I was asked by one of the parents at a Parent-Teachers meeting why Biblical Criticism was not included in my curriculum. The parent argued that his son would surely encounter the questions raised when he was in college, and it would be important to discuss the ideas in a traditional Jewish framework.

I do not recall what I answered at the time, but Biblical Criticism was not part of my teaching repertoire.

In an article that appeared in the Journal of Jewish Education, *Dr. Susan Tanchel argues that teaching the Documentary Hypothesis is an essential part of her school's curriculum.*

Do you have it in yours?

I raised this question on the virtual pages of Lookjed, an online discussion aimed at Jewish Day School educators. In 1999, when high-speed internet could only be dreamed of and modems that connected to the internet were rarely found in private homes, the Lookstein Center of Bar-Ilan University launched this ongoing conversation. Today more than 3,500 teachers, administrators, lay leaders, and even occasional students weigh in and debate topics of current, and, occasionally, recurrent interest. Threaded archives of those conversations appear at http://lookstein.org/lookjed/.

The subject of academic Bible study has been discussed in Lookjed on a number of occasions. In the course of a conversation about how to teach "the strange *malon* story" (when Moses stopped at an inn en route to Egypt, see Exodus 4:24–26) a reader suggested that James Kugel's *How to Read the Bible* might be used to shed light on the matter. This led to a heated discussion on the place of such works in a Day School library. At some point the conversation turned to whether college-age students in a yeshiva environment should be studying Biblical Criticism, and, indeed, whether the invitation tendered to Professor Kugel by one of student clubs at Yeshiva University should have been rescinded by the administration.

In this brief article I do not intend to discuss theories of Biblical Criticism, which can be found elsewhere. The focus here is on attitudes toward the introduction of modern literary and academic methods to the Tanakh classroom, as expressed by classroom teachers, administrators, and educational leaders. Although much of this information is based on the discussions that took place in Lookjed, I will also devote a few words to the "parallel universe" of Day School education, that is, the *mamlakhti-dati* religious public school system in Israel.

The brief quotations that appear in this article are all taken from the Lookjed discussions. I am sharing them here without attribution, but their sources can be found in the online threaded discussion archives.[1]

The question of teaching Biblical Criticism is one that depends on the outlook and affiliation of a given school, its mission, and its constituency. In most cases the responses that came to the list identified the type of school in which the writer worked. The Lookjed list, reflecting the values of The Lookstein Center, is open to a multiplicity of voices. Although many of the Day School educators who participate in these online discussions come from an Orthodox perspective, in this particular conversation, whose beginnings were rooted in an article about a Community School setting, contributions were received from across the ideological spectrum.

Once of the first replies that I received commented in strong terms on the appropriateness of raising the question in the manner that I did. It read:

> I am a little shocked at the rather offhand way you threw out a question about Biblical Criticism: "In an article that appeared in the *Journal of Jewish Education*, Dr. Susan Tanchel argues that teaching the Documentary Hypothesis is an essential part of her school's curriculum. Do you have it in yours?"
>
> You could be asking about whether our school uses indirect lighting, or shares a certain math program, rather than striking at the absolute essence of what it means to be a believing Jew. "Do I have it in mine?". . . Do I relish systematically undermining the faith of my students to pay homage to the modern god of "pluralism?" Um, no.
>
> It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that if the authorship of the Torah is undermined, all observance falls like a house of cards. Inoculating college-bound students against Biblical Criticism is responsible if done properly. Destroying their faith so we can pretend we are intellectually honest and enjoy splashing in the shallow waters of heresy is quite another.

Although this respondent rejects the possibility of systematic study of Bible Criticism in school, he does allow for the possibility that in the context of preparation for the challenges that are found on college campuses, a presentation of the tenets of Biblical Criticism would be appropriate. This response was echoed by a number of educators affiliated with Orthodox Day Schools.

A Yeshiva University professor wrote to affirm that when teaching Torah "belief in *Torah mi-Sinai* is fundamental to Orthodoxy. Adopting a neutral position on the subject is equivalent to adopting a neutral position on the divinity of Jesus." He allows that for a student today to understand the writings of twentieth-century Orthodox thinkers such as Rabbis David Zvi Hoffmann, Mordechai Breuer, or Yoel Bin-Nun, it is necessary to have some familiarity with elements of Biblical Criticism. Nevertheless, he laments:

> Unfortunately, the vast majority of high school students do not have the basic knowledge of Tanakh to master these thoroughgoing, profound controversies. Very simply—how many know the Torah well? How many know the rest of Tanakh well? Without such knowledge can one follow the back-and-forth debates? Can one easily discuss how different versions of a story or a legal theme appear in different sections of the Torah if the basic mate-

rial is not yet familiar, if one has no familiarity with the thousands of years of tradition and analysis that precede the modern period?

One Orthodox high school administrator described where modern literary methods fit into his school's curriculum:

> Our Tanakh curriculum is certainly informed by modern scholarship, but does not teach the Documentary Hypothesis.
>
> We began a program where we explore a variety of topics in symposium-style discussions. This is aimed to prepare the students for different challenges of life after high school, and to stimulate intellectual curiosity by making learning exciting without tests. We refer to it as either the Senior Seminar, or the Lishma program.
>
> It is in this context that we discuss higher and lower criticism, and the insights these methodologies have uncovered. We also, of course, discuss why we can still faithfully maintain our belief in Torah Mi-Shamayim. It has always been a well received unit in the senior seminar.

In fact, the general approach of Day School educators, even in non-Orthodox settings, was that the introduction of a class on Biblical Criticism as a systematic course of study would not be welcome in their schools.

One long-term administrator from a Solomon Schechter school rejected the suggestion that such a course be introduced for a number of different reasons, among them:

- Educators must focus on the ultimate goals of Tanakh study, which he argued should be "to equip students with the text-access and text-analytical skills they need to be confident, independent, and resourceful students of Tanakh." The introduction of a year-long course in Biblical Criticism will ultimately raise many serious theological questions that will force a teacher to talk "about the text" rather than focus on the text itself.
- Invoking James Fowler's *Stages of Faith*, he argued that introducing the Documentary Hypothesis to adolescents "is likely in many cases to produce an explosive reaction at an age at which non-traditional perspectives should be at most gently and tentatively introduced," concluding that it is, therefore, both risky and unnecessary.
- Why must students of Tanakh be taught the intricacies of how the Documentary Hypothesis works any more than computer users need to understand the coding of the software that they use or drivers the wiring of their automobiles?

Rather than rejecting "non-traditional" study out of hand, the author makes suggestions of what should be taught in order to prepare students for "more advanced study," suggestions that he attests are used in the schools where he has worked. These include the following:

> 1. Training in identifying literary features such as repetition, irregular structures, parallel passages, enigmatic expressions, and non-linear chronology.
> 2. Training in using textual evidence to propose their own explanations of, or commentaries on, problematic literary features.
> 3. Exposure to multiple commentaries that explain literary anomalies differently, ideally including both classical and modern voices.

All of this is to be introduced in grades 1 through 8. Beginning in high school, two additional features are introduced to students:

> 4. Aspects of biblical society and culture in the context of surrounding societies and cultures.
>
> 5. Reference materials, including biblical atlases, encyclopedias, primary and secondary historical sources, and archaeological artifacts, as additional ways—over and above the classical and modern commentaries—to deepen understanding of Tanakh.

The author concludes,

> It should be noted that, on this model, the aim of introducing modern commentaries and understandings is in service of the text, in order to uncover its rich and layered meaning. The nontraditional beliefs and assumptions underlying these perspectives are never in the spotlight, never the focus of study, but are rather the nearly always unarticulated background and context of student learning.

An individual who teaches Tanakh in the Abraham Joshua Heschel School, a non-denominational Day School in New York City, weighed in on this discussion, stating at the outset that "the Documentary Hypothesis is an exercise in theology, not Bible." He argued that introducing the Documentary Hypothesis to students in high school—as is done in the Heschel School—requires the students to have not only advanced text skills but also "a meta-textual mindset and background: significant substantive experience grappling with one's own approach to Tanakh study; exploration of the tenuous and often shifting boundaries between subjective and objective readings; separation between self and text in order to recognize where they meet; and aptitude in distinguishing between facts

and conclusions, between weak and strong interpretations."

He writes that as taught in his school, this is a course

> . . . for students who have already come face to face with their own conception of God, who are accustomed to pushing at theological comfort levels, and who welcome tension, encountering the Documentary Hypothesis creates a climactic moment: How does my conception of Torah, of God, of religious studies, withstand, absorb and react to its stiffest challenge? As such, reacting to the Documentary Hypothesis is not the portal into these questions, an early overt foray into one's theological and religious identity; it is the capstone.

As such, the Documentary Hypothesis is introduced in his school not as a value in and of itself, but as part of a course whose goal is to explore what it means to learn Torah. To accomplish that, Biblical Criticism is presented in the context of other approaches that offer a variety of possible entrances to its study:

> To that end, students engage with four differing approaches: classical commentary highlighting the peshat-derash divide, modern literary analysis, archeology, and biblical scholarship.

In explaining the rationale for this he writes:

> [The theory of] multiple authors is not the only answer. It may be the best—it may not—but that's irrelevant if it is presented on its own, with no alternatives as part of a dialogue. The question is not 'here is the Documentary Hypothesis, how do you react?' but 'here is a problem with a range of approaches, how do they fit with the rest of your complex understanding of the book that is the most important to your religion?'

It is interesting to note that when I shared the Lookjed discussion about *How to Read the Bible* with James Kugel, he responded by saying that the book was not intended for high school students—for that matter it may not be appropriate for all adults—and that he was unsure whether it had a place in a Day School library. He did share his own thoughts about an appropriate high school curriculum in Tanakh, writing:

> I do have my own curricular ideas for high school, mostly based on my own kids' sometimes disappointed reaction to classes [in Tanakh]. I think it's fine for very little kids to do Humash and Rashi the way they do in elementary school. But I think I've noticed that by the time these kids get to

> high school, if you keep teaching them the same way they were taught in elementary school, the best of them soon develop a strong interest in chemistry or social studies. Although they don't often formulate the idea in words, I think what bothers them is the disconnect between what the Hebrew words of the biblical text say—by now their understanding of Hebrew is much stronger, along with their common sense and self-confidence—and what Rashi (and a lot of other commentators) sometimes say those words mean.
>
> So I think what I would do, at that point in the curriculum, is not go to modern biblical scholars, but try to get students to understand the exegetical problem from Rashi's point of view, or, for that matter, that of the early rabbinic midrashim on which he relied. To begin with, this would require them to understand that the Torah and Rashi, or even midrash, are not simultaneous, and that the interpreters are confronting a text that has been around for some time and cannot be changed or rejected. Basically: 'You be Rashi. How are you going to explain this verse in a way that is consistent with the other things you know from the Tanakh and from halakhic practice, everything that we believe and follow?' ... I admit, this approach might not pass muster in Meah Shearim, but I really think it's honesty that kids want and need; so do we all.

A few words about the new Tanakh curriculum introduced by the Ministry of Education in Israel: For those of us who grew up in the United States, where Separation of Church and State is an axiom of faith, the fact that the State of Israel offers Jewish education in its public schools is somewhat disconcerting. Nevertheless, the fact that the official Ministry of Education in Israel concerns itself not only with general studies but with religious studies as well, means that for many religious schools in Israel (there are some religious schools that choose to operate outside of the state-sponsored system) there are educational experts who develop formal curricular goals, syllabi, and standardized tests. Diaspora educators appear to be largely unfamiliar with these materials, and I often link to them in response to Lookjed queries asking for support materials on Tanakh or Talmud.

Aside from the religious public school system, the Ministry of Education in Israel also runs an ordinary public school system—*mamlakhti*—that is not "religious," although it does include Jewish studies as part of its unit on Jewish culture and Jewish heritage. A wide range of topics are included among the goals of teaching Bible on the high school level. They enumerate, among them, "Biblical criticism, editing changes to the

Torah as a means to understanding the text, the authors' intentions, their world and their views" (My translation. To see a full description of the *mamlakhti* curriculum and its goals, see http://cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/Units/Tochniyot_Limudim/MikraMam/AlYessodi/).

While the *mamlakhti* system has no problem including Biblical Criticism in its curriculum, the *mamlakhti-dati* system has never attempted to introduce modern literary methods into its classrooms. Until recently, the religious school Bible curriculum followed a time-honored course, whose focus was largely on covering a wide range of material with medieval commentaries (e.g. Rashi, Ramban, Ibn Ezra) and other traditional sources (e.g. Netziv, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch). With a change of leadership, a new curriculum has been developed that is to be introduced in the upcoming academic year (5773).

A description of the goals of the new curriculum reads as follows (my translation):

- Interaction of students with the Word of God
- Developing a connection with the moral values and behaviors required by the Torah
- Strengthening Jewish identity and strengthening students' ties with the Land of Israel
- Imparting ways to learn Torah and to love Torah in a traditional manner

(A full description of the new curriculum, including links to support materials, appears at http://www.lilmod.cet.ac.il/).

According to a recent article that appeared in the Shabbat broadsheet *Olam Katan* (available online at http://www.olam-katan.co.il//all_gilyonot/359.pdf), the new curriculum was accompanied by a set of enrichment materials that were available at the abovementioned website, that have since been removed. Four different types of materials were posted:

1) Ordinary articles on biblical themes written from a traditional perspective

2) Articles written by Torah scholars that can be understood as relating to biblical characters in a contemptuous manner (a reference to what is called, pejoratively, *Tanakh be-Govah Enayim*—"*Tanakh* at eye-level"; see below)

3) Articles that grapple with questions raised by Biblical Criticism

4) Articles that present Biblical Criticism as a legitimate reading of the Torah.

As noted, these enrichment materials were posted as supplementary reading for teachers, and were not an intrinsic part of the new curriculum; they were removed after complaints were received by the Ministry of Education.

The author of the *Olam Katan* article, who is clearly sympathetic to the more traditional approach to teaching, presents both sides of the argument regarding the introduction of Biblical Criticism—should it be viewed as an evil that questions the very basis of the Torah and Judaism, or must it be taught, given the reality that any student who leaves the four walls of the traditional study hall will be forced to face that challenge at some point in his life. Moreover, there is the idea—one that is accepted by the adherents of the *Tanakh be-Govah Enayim* school generally and by the students of Rabbi Mordechai Breuer specifically—that although we may disagree with the answers given by Bible critics, their questions are legitimate ones, and we can enhance our understanding of Torah by accepting them and developing our own, traditional responses to them.

Removal of the articles that discussed Biblical Criticism notwithstanding, the heated debate regarding the new curriculum continues.

Part of this is related to the belief is that this new curriculum aims to introduce an approach to Tanakh that is based not so much on the theories of Biblical Criticism, but on modern literary methods, and specifically a method of study that has become known in Israel as *Tanakh be-Govah Enayim*—"Tanakh at eye-level." This method, which approaches biblical characters as extraordinary characters with human foibles, albeit from whom we can learn life lessons, has been popularized by the teachers and students at Herzog College, which is affiliated with the Hesder Yeshiva, Yeshivat Har Etzion, in Alon Shvut. It is based on a close reading of the text together with a willingness to explore possibilities that do not appear in traditional commentaries, and has been the source of tension between different factions in the National Religious camp in Israel for a number of years.

This debate promises to become more heated as the new curriculum is introduced in *dati-le'umi* classrooms in the coming months.

Although neither the contributors to the Lookjed discussion nor the educators who developed the new curriculum for the religious public schools in Israel were interested in developing a systematic course in Biblical Criticism for use on a high school level, it is clear that there is a

wide range of attitudes with regard to the introduction of modern literary and academic techniques in the classroom. There appears to be the widespread agreement—even in the liberal camp—that at least some of the theories of modern Biblical Criticism are antithetical to Jewish belief and should be taught only as one approach among many or offered so that students will be prepared for the challenges presented by those theories at some point in the future. At the same time, it is hardly surprising to discover that the more traditional schools have been reluctant to introduce modern literary methods, while less traditional schools view such methods as basic to the understanding of the biblical text in contemporary times.

In closing I would like to share the thoughts of Professor Kugel, who is well aware of the challenges that his research and writings present for many a believing Jew. In answer to a questioner who asked how a religious person can maintain his/her faith and fealty in and to a rabbinic system that is so directly based on the belief of a divinely revealed text, given the conclusions presented in Professor Kugel's books, he responded, in part, with a parable.

> [U]ltimately, any Jew must admit that at some point the divinely-given text leads to the human interpreter and the poseq, indeed, to this specific taqqanah and that specific gezerah shavah. And frankly, we don't really seem to all that aware of, or even care much about, where the dividing-line falls. This is our "prepared table," the work of many hands. If someone wants a different table, let him go ahead—but this is the Jewish table, the way Jews serve God.
>
> As one of our sages said: to what may the matter be compared? To a man who wished to see the King. So he went to the royal palace and stood outside and waited for the King to appear. After some hours, the King did come outside, and the man was thrilled. But soon the King went back inside the palace. The man returned the next day, and the next, and sometimes he did catch a glimpse of the King, but always only for a few seconds, and then his view would be blocked by someone, or the King would step behind a pillar or get into his carriage and ride off. What had at first been thrilling now became only frustrating.
>
> Eventually, the king's close advisor became aware of the presence of the man standing day after day outside the palace, and he approached him and said: "I know what you want, but you are going about it the wrong way. Go up to the palace door and ask to work inside—it doesn't matter what: janitor, guard, woodcutter or water-drawer! Then you will enter the palace by right and see the King as a matter of course; indeed, He will recognize

> you and perhaps even call you by name." And so the man did, and it was just as the King's advisor had said: he saw the King up close every day, and the King called to him by name.
>
> This is the whole idea of Judaism. If you want to come close to God, the only way is to become His employee. Understanding that avodat Hashem is the true foundation of our halakhah may not de-fang modern biblical scholarship; a lot of what it says will always be disturbing to Jews. But I think that modern scholarship does not, because it cannot, undermine the essence of Judaism or what Jews actually do in their lives; it cannot … cause the system to collapse.

Jewish educators who are successful in teaching their students to aspire to serve God as enthusiastic and passionate Jews can help produce adults whose faith can remain firm even in the face of serious questions.

NOTES

1. The particular discussion that was begun with my recollection of my own teaching career and a reference to an article from the *Journal of Jewish Education* can be accessed at http://lookstein.org/lookjed/ read.php?1, 19050,19050. Dr. Tanchel's article, entitled "A Judaism That Does Not Hide: Teaching the Documentary Hypothesis in a Pluralistic Jewish High School" is available at http://www.lookstein.org/retrieve.php?ID=3360722. The conversation about Professor Kugel's *How to Read the Bible* appears at http://lookstein.org/lookjed/read.php?1,16514,16610.

Teaching Biblical Archaeology at Yeshiva University

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"I didn't know they teach biblical archaeology at YU" is one of the most frequent responses I receive upon informing people about my job and its whereabouts. I find this amusing because to me biblical archaeology is such a natural fit for the study of Tanakh that it seems self-evident that these two disciplines should be studied in tandem. I am not alone in this approach as the original mission statement for the creation of Yeshiva College in the 1920s makes clear:

> Yeshiva College will offer, with the standard college curricula combined with courses in Bible, Hebrew philology, Jewish history and literature, Jewish philosophy and ethics, the Talmud and Rabbinic literature, *Jewish archaeology*, Semitic philology and cognate subjects (emphasis mine).[1]

And yet, people are still surprised that biblical archaeology is taught at Yeshiva University—as if it were too radical a subject, or too dangerous, or perhaps not relevant.

This view is even more perplexing in light of the fact that the Land of Israel is among the most intensely excavated regions of the world (only

Greece comes close). While Christian Americans and Europeans dominated the field in the early part of the twentieth century, today Israeli archaeologists are at the forefront of research and research projects. With so much active research and much of it done by Israeli scholars, again why the hesitancy to fully embrace the discipline?

The answer is complex, and reveals both external and internal strains. Externally, the discipline of biblical archaeology itself has evolved from one that primarily saw its goal as illuminating the biblical narrative to a more scientific one that has at times relegated biblical narrative to the background. Religious teachers of Tanakh are often uncomfortable with this "secular" approach. On the other hand, while such teachers have been receptive to selecting individual archaeological finds that can shed light on particular biblical passages, they have often shied away from confronting the archaeological record when it seems to present a more nuanced or perhaps contradictory view of traditional readings of the text. The unwillingness to engage the data on its own terms has led to an approach that can be characterized as lacking in academic rigor and integrity.

My goal in this article, therefore, will be to demystify the discipline of biblical archaeology so that religious teachers of Tanakh feel comfortable embracing its discourse and to argue for inclusion of these findings into a richer and more sophisticated understanding of the biblical text. Finally, I will argue that those with a strong understanding and commitment to Tanakh have a perspective that can greatly enrich biblical archaeological studies. In fact, the absence of such a perspective threatens to deprive the discipline of its vitality, accuracy, and *raison d'être*.

Biblical archaeology as a discipline focuses on the places and time periods that are central to the biblical narrative. In general, this means that the core region is the Land of Israel, with a periphery reaching into parts of present-day Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. This region is customarily referred to as the southern Levant. The core time periods are the period of the Judges, United Monarchy, Divided Monarchy, Babylonian period, and Persian period. The time span is roughly from 1200 BCE–333 BCE. Archaeologists refer to these periods as Iron I (1200–1000 BCE), Iron II (1000 BCE–586 BCE), Babylonian (586–538 BCE), and Persian (538–333 BCE). Technically, then, for those operating within a traditional Jewish perspective, the biblical period closes with the final historical context of the biblical canon. The Christian perspective, of course, proffers a later end date, as the Christian Bible extends throughout the Second Temple Period.

Thus in the larger and even academic community, biblical archaeology as a discipline extends beyond the Persian period through Hellenistic, Roman, and even into Byzantine times.

The fact that the time frame of biblical archaeology moves beyond the end of the Hebrew Bible, while potentially confusing, does not pose any real complications. Those with a Jewish perspective simply choose to end their biblical period with the Restoration of the Second Temple and the Persian period. The subsequent Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods are often lumped under the rubric of the Classical period.

From its inception, biblical archaeology was closely tied to the Bible. The dominant American figure of twentieth-century biblical archaeology, William Foxwell Albright, trained generations of students in his approach that took a positivistic view toward biblical narrative and was oriented toward reconstructing the archaeological, historical, religious, and literary context of the biblical world. This approach was formed in part by his own excavations and expertise in material culture and by his facility with ancient languages, which allowed him to read and translate texts in Hebrew, Aramaic, Ugaritic, Egyptian, Akkadian, and Sumerian, among other languages.

While not a biblical literalist, Albright's interpretations and those of his students generally supported the biblical narrative. In the second half of the twentieth century, cracks began to emerge in this consensus. New archaeological finds seemed to contradict biblical narrative, while at the same time a younger generation of scholars, influenced by current trends in general archaeology, began to argue for a less "biblical" approach and a more "scientific" one. Broad issues of cultural change and the rise of social and political complexity came to the forefront, whereas specific questions of biblical historicity were ignored.

The field of biblical archaeology certainly benefited from more scientific rigor, especially in its methodology, but also in its interpretations. However, the disregard for biblical text emerged as an Achilles heel when a new generation of biblical scholars primarily from northern Europe began to inject a revisionist view into biblical studies and ultimately into biblical archaeology. The biblical archaeology community was slow to respond to these new interpretations, partly because they were seen as so far out that they did not need responding to. When the archaeologists finally did take note, they realized they were confronting a host of scholars who had re-interpreted the Bible and whose views were gaining promi-

nence in both the academic and non-academic community. Most problematic, was that these revisionists were deliberately obfuscating the archaeological record.

The acrimony of this debate between revisionists (minimalists) and the traditionalists (maximalists) has been damaging both to individual scholars and to the reputation of the discipline. Those outside the fray were made to feel powerless as these polarizing forces came to dominate the debate. And what were they debating, anyway? Whether or not King David was a real king? For the traditionalist, of course, this was a non-starter. But even trying to understand the debate has been difficult without concluding that the motives of the minimalist school to discredit the Hebrew Bible were infused with anti-Semitism. If this were the end of it, the situation would be quite discouraging, indeed.

However, mainstream biblical archaeologists were not ready to yield control of the debate to the minimalists and their supporters in the archaeological community (e.g., Israel Finkelstein). The lack of archaeological evidence for David's kingdom had to be addressed, and this has been precisely the focus of much of the archaeological research in the past two decades. Although 20 years ago, minimalists could mock traditionalists for clinging to a narrative with no archaeological support, that is certainly not the case today. While a full account of the finds pertaining to the United Monarchy under David and Solomon is beyond the scope of this paper, three significant examples will suffice.

The first significant find was a stele (inscribed stone) found at Tel Dan in 1993. Written in Aramaic, this royal, monumental inscription commissioned by a ninth-century BCE king (probably Hazael) boasts of Aramean military achievements over the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The text uses the phrase *bytdvd* ("House of David") to refer to the southern kingdom. This is the earliest extra-biblical mention of David and is consistent with ancient Near Eastern practice of referring to a kingdom by its eponymous founder. For traditionalists, this was the first step in reclaiming David as a historical personage. For minimalists, this posed a big problem, which they feebly tried to discredit by first reading *bytdvd* not as "House of David" but rather as "house of the uncle." Subsequently, they posited other interpretations—equally unconvincing—citing the absence of a word divider between *byt* and *dvd*.

Even when minimalists were willing to acknowledge the existence of David—and the Tel Dan stele made it hard not to—they still maintained

that David was not a true king but rather a simple tribal chieftain. This allowed them to argue that true statehood emerged in ancient Israel much later, and that the biblical narrative of a United Monarchy was a later fabrication. Again, 20 years ago, the minimalists could point to the fact that no monumental architecture had been found in Jerusalem associated with David or Solomon.

Why this is important is that one of the principal archaeological correlates for statehood is the presence of such architecture. The absence of monumental architecture confirmed for them that there was no state. However, one should always be careful of deriving arguments from negative evidence. Indeed, the minimalists' position suffered a severe blow when in 2005 archaeologist Eilat Mazar announced that she had found in Ir David (City of David) the foundations of a royal monumental building, which she named the "Large Stone Structure." Whether or not this building was part of Kind David's actual palace as Mazar posits, does not change the fact that monumental architecture from the time of David (dated by the pottery finds) has finally been found in Jerusalem. Kings, not tribal chieftains, build such structures. Minimalists responded in the only way they could to retain their ideological stance: they rejected outright Mazar's dating of the Large Stone Structure.

A final irrefutable blow emerged in the last five years, with the excavations of a small, fortified site in the Elah Valley called Khirbet Qeiyafa. This site yielded not only evidence of a central Israelite administration but also was unequivocally dated to the time of King David by radiocarbon analysis of olive pits found in secure archaeological contexts. That the site was Israelite and not Philistine or Canaanite is strongly attested by the style of wall construction (casemate), the pottery, the lack of pig bones and figurines, and an early Hebrew inscription. Only a centralized administration would be capable of organizing the construction *de novo* of a border fortress. It follows then that David was a true king who took an active role in securing his borders from external threats, particularly the Philistines to the west.

These recent finds have shifted the center of argument away from the minimalists and their ideologically motivated interpretations toward a more central position in which the layers of historicity in Tanakh are refracted against the archaeological record. This middle approach, while certainly "secular," need not pose a threat to a traditional Jewish consider-

ation. For the Jewish approach to Tanakh has never been a strictly literal one but rather an interpretive one. The so-called historical books of the Bible—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles—were not written as pure history in the modern sense, and they are certainly not unbiased. On the contrary, they deliberately and unabashedly impart a theological message. For example, the Book of Samuel focuses on the motif of why David is to be chosen over Saul.[2] The theme then dictates the narrative as only those stories that develop it need to be mentioned. Consequently, while the text makes clear that Saul is a gifted military leader waging a successful campaign against the Philistines, the textual emphasis is not on the minutiae of battle, attacks and counter-attacks, but rather on Saul's reaction to his success. Namely, Saul credits himself with victory rather than God, and this is what makes him unfit as a leader for the Jewish people.

Accepting the primacy of the theological message does not negate the important historical and cultural material that is embedded in Tanakh. Moreover, these nuggets are not gleaned in a vacuum. One of the great achievements of biblical studies over the past century has been the decipherment of ancient Near Eastern texts—cuneiform, hieroglyphic, alphabetic—from Mesopotamia and Persia in the east to Egypt in the south, and Anatolia in the north. Add to this a century of archaeological exploration throughout the region, and scholars have reached a point where specific historical events, intellectual currents, and general lifestyles can all be recreated to one degree another. Thus the biblical material finds itself in conversation with not only the archaeological record from the Land of Israel—which has yielded a small but important corpus of extra-biblical texts—but also with the vast corpus of ancient Near Eastern material.

Gaining access to this material may seem daunting at first, particularly because very few overviews exist and each geographic region is often treated as its own separate discipline. Encyclopedias and cultural atlases, such as *The Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia* by Michael Roaf, provide good starting points, but these usually include material from time periods that are not relevant to the biblical period. Textbooks are comprehensive by nature, their usefulness measured by their accessibility to non-specialists. One of the better introductory textbooks is Hershel Shanks' edited volume *Ancient Israel*. More concise presentations can be found among the titles published by Oxford University Press in their series titled "Very Short

Introductions." Two such examples are *Ancient Egypt* by Ian Shaw and *Biblical Archaeology* by Eric Cline. While newspaper articles will often feature recent discoveries, more lengthy and explanatory pieces can be found in periodicals, the most popular of which is *Biblical Archaeology Review*.

Meanwhile, the best resource for ancient texts related to the biblical world is *The Context of Scripture*, edited by William Hallo and K. Lawson Younger. This three-volume tome contains hundreds of translated texts spanning a range of compositions—canonical, archival, and monumental—that relate directly and indirectly to Tanakh and the biblical world. Although not every known ancient Near Eastern text has been included, the selection is overwhelmingly comprehensive and the translations nicely balance readability with literal accuracy.

There are, of course, limitations to this textual material. The writers of ancient texts generally reflect the views, goals, and ambitions of the (overwhelmingly male) ruling or upper class. Although literacy during the biblical period was not rare in Judah or Israel, it was by no means universal. Evidence such as notations on pottery and ivory suggests that artisans and craftsmen were literate, but it is doubtful that the farmers who comprised the majority of the population could read or write. Another problem with texts is that huge gaps both temporally and geographically exist in their distribution. What this means is that texts are found neither everywhere nor from all time periods. Rather, their presence is concentrated in urban areas and in caches that generally reflect a specific era of time. Thus texts present a window on the elite and male urban population from disparate time periods.

The archaeological record, in contrast, does not suffer from these limitations. It is equally frequent today to find researchers excavating elite zones of cities where temples, palaces, and public buildings congregate as well as outer areas where basic households cluster. When looking at top plans of archaeological sites, these different areas are indicated by different letters. Moreover, one of the stratigraphic goals of the expedition is to unite the separate areas into a single chronological scheme. In addition, many research projects today incorporate not only the entire urban area but also the surrounding countryside. Such projects bring new insight into the relationship between urban cores and their supporting hinterlands.

In terms of temporal continuity, archaeological remains are far superior to texts. Gaps in material reflect real gaps in occupation. Otherwise, the

detritus of daily life accumulates layer by layer without interruption. The basics of daily life—mud bricks for building homes and ceramic vessels for storage, food preparation and consumption—were used by all people, rich and poor, male and female. Whereas the textual evidence simply ignores the vast majority of the population, the archaeological record highlights the differences between groups. Thus, wealthy people lived in larger homes, closer to the center of town, possessing fine decorated wares and exotic items. Poorer people lived in smaller homes suited to their agricultural lifestyle, closer to their fields, with basic wares and few, if any, luxury items. Gendered items such as spindle whorls and grinding stones for women and arrowheads and axes for men provide insight into the structure of daily life.

This does not mean, however, that archaeology is without its biases. The archaeological record is partial toward items that preserve well. Thus the most perishable materials such as foodstuffs, textiles, papyrus, and wooden implements are found only in exceptional circumstances. Ceramics are the single most common find due to their widespread use, fragility as complete vessels (i.e., they break easily), and incredible durability as shards. Another bias lies with collection methods. Decades ago, it was not customary to collect animal bones. As a result little information about diet and husbandry emerged. However, archaeologists today are much more careful about trying to safeguard all of the remains and have the nonmaterial culture remains analyzed by specialists from other fields. For example, faunal and floral experts are routinely consulted, as are scientists who sample sediment deposits, extract DNA, or perform carbon 14 dating.

Just as texts can speak toward specific historic events, archaeology can as well. The construction of a new town or a new building can be attested. More impressive is when the texts speak of a city's demise and the archaeological record preserves a thick, clear layer of destruction filled with charred material, fallen bricks, whole vessels left behind, unfortunate people who did not escape, roof material from collapsed homes, and, in some cases, arrowheads and other ballista that attest to the intensity of the fighting. Lachish is such a site that preserves not one but two clearly identified destruction layers. The first (Stratum III) correlates with the Assyrian conquest in the late 8th century BCE under Sennacherib, whereas the second (Stratum II) is from the time of the Babylonian conquest under Nebuchadnezzar a century later.

Our understanding of the Assyrian siege at Lachish is further elucidated by a series of reliefs unearthed at Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh in present-day Iraq. These reliefs attest to the composition of Assyrian military personnel—slingers, archers, lancers, and so forth—the strategy of building ramps to elevate the battering rams, the great loss of life, the ultimate surrender of the people of Lachish, and the bringing of booty and humans back to Assyria. The archaeological record can also attest to things that were previously unknown from textual or pictorial evidence. For example, opposite the Assyrian siege ramp, the people of Lachish had hastily built a counter ramp and raised the height of the wall as a defensive technique. Moreover, while the Assyrian ramp was known from the reliefs, only excavations could reveal that this earthen ramp contained 25,000 tons of material composed of a stone base consolidated by mortar, covered by layers of beaten earth, with logs sprinkled in to support the siege engines and facilitate their transport up the slope.

If validating and expanding on specific biblical events were all that archaeology could achieve, then the discipline would indeed be only a dedicated handmaiden of biblical studies. However, the archaeological record has great potential beyond this primarily in the range of culture and cultural context. For example, when Abraham visits Gerar (Genesis 20), the Bible focuses on the incident of Abraham concealing the true identity of his Sarah ("She is my sister" [verse 2]) and the repercussions thereof. There was of course much more to the visit. What did Abraham and Sarah see when they were wandering the streets of Gerar? What did they eat or smell or hear?

From excavations, we know that if Abraham and Sarah wandered toward the southwestern quadrant of the city—not inconceivable since the city itself was not that big—they would have seen a large, symmetric, fortress-like, Canaanite temple. It is not likely that they would have gone inside for a variety of reasons, including the fact that only religious specialists, i.e., priests, would have been given access. However, the surrounding courtyards would have been easily visible, and in them they would have seen much activity: throngs of people, bringing with them food offerings in either miniature or regular sized vessels, animals being slaughtered, incense being burned, puppies with their necks broken as part of healing rituals, people eating sacred meals, and, on one day only (their timing would have to have been impeccable), the ritual sacrifice of a donkey as part of a non-aggression pact between two potentially warring

parties. The food offerings would attest to the produce of the land such as wine, oil, wheat, barley, legumes, and so forth, whereas the animal sacrifices reflected the pastoral component of the economy: sheep and goats mainly, some cattle, and even birds. The archaeological record thus illuminates the biblical world and its context.

Those with a strong background are poised to take particular advantage of all that archaeology has to offer as they have a context in which to absorb it. This is why teaching biblical archaeology at an institution such as Yeshiva University is particularly exciting—the students already possess the building blocks of biblical narrative and thus are able to synthesize the new archaeological material very quickly. They grasp nuances that are lost on novices, ask questions reflecting a vast knowledge, and provide interpretations that reveal deep understanding.

One such example arose during a discussion of the economy of the Land of Israel during the Assyrian period (7th century). There is strong evidence that the area around Ashkelon specialized in wine, that around Ekron in olive oil, and that around Jerusalem in cereals. However, there is also evidence for some wine production around Jerusalem. It has been generally accepted that the reason for this is that the real estate close to the city was expensive and thus a more profitable crop such as wine was grown to cover costs. Upon hearing this explanation, the students at Yeshiva University immediately suggested another explanation: perhaps the reason for producing wine in the Jerusalem area was due to concerns of kashrut, with Judah preferring to produce its own kosher wine rather than trading for the readily available Philistine wine from Ashkelon.

We do not know the answer yet, but because of their Torah perspective, the students at Yeshiva University are offering new insights that can potentially guide and certainly enrich the direction of future research in biblical archaeology.

NOTES

1. Bernard Revel, "The Yeshiva College" [1926], in Aaron Rothkoff, *Bernard Revel: Builder of American Orthodoxy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1972), pp. 256ff.
2. I am indebted to Rabbi Menachem Leibtag for pointing this out to me.

Part III:

Text Studies

The Tower of Babel: A Case Study in Combining Traditional and Academic Bible Methodologies

HAYYIM ANGEL

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The growing popularity of what Rabbi Shalom Carmy calls the "literary-theological" approach to Tanakh study has been transforming the way we approach our most sacred texts. This methodology demands a finely tuned text reading, along with a focus on the religious significance of the passage. The premises of this methodology include the following:

1) The words of our Sages and later classical commentators are central to the way we understand the revealed word of God; and

2) It is vital to study biblical passages in their literary and historical context.[1]

This article on the Tower of Babel offers a "textbook lesson" in combining traditional rabbinic commentary with contemporary academic Bible scholarship. These two approaches begin with different sets of assump-

tions, but each gives us access to greater meaning in the Torah. Taken together, we emerge with a fuller picture than with either one by itself.

Text Analysis

We will first explore the basic text issues, and we then will turn to layers of interpretation—both traditional and literary-historical.

> Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard."—Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar.—And they said, "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world." The Lord came down to look at the city and tower that man had built, and the Lord said, "If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach. Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech." Thus the Lord scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel, because there the Lord confounded the speech of the whole earth; and from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth. (Gen. 11:1–9)

Our narrative begins with a united humanity living together. Yehudah Kiel notes that Shinar is likely the Torah's way of saying Sumer. Kiel also argues that the story need not refer literally to *all* humanity; it may refer simply to the people living in that region.[2]

The protagonists in this text migrate eastward until they reach a *bikah*, translated by Ibn Ezra and Yehudah Kiel as a plain. The Babylonians depended on brick-making for their building projects, since they did not have an adequate stone supply. While historically accurate, we may ask why the Torah places such emphasis on this seemingly trivial detail.

Verse 4 contains the crux of the builders' intent: "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world." "A tower with its top in the sky" appears lexically similar to our term "skyscraper." Similar terminology appears in Deuteronomy in reference to the high walls surrounding Canaanite cities (Deut. 1:28; 9:1). The builders of the Tower wanted to be remembered for having built this monumental structure (Ibn Ezra, Radak). On the surface, there does not appear to be anything unusually

sinful about their intent. They were interested in holding their growing community together with the help of the Tower, and being remembered by later generations.

However, God thwarts them. God's "descent" does not reflect some primitive notion of God's being "up" and needing to come down to earth to figure out what is happening. To the contrary, God knows that the people are building the Tower. Rashi therefore explains that God is teaching the notion that judges must investigate cases thoroughly.

It is not evident why God should feel threatened, or what the builders of the Tower were doing wrong that God needed to intervene. It also is remarkable that the Torah states that Babylonia was named after linguistic confusion, given that the Babylonians themselves referred to their city as Babel. We turn now to rabbinic commentary to explore these questions.

Rabbinic Interpretation

One classical explanation of the Tower of Babel is found in the Talmud:

> R. Jeremiah b. Eleazar said: They split up into three parties. One said, 'Let us ascend and dwell there;' the second, 'Let us ascend and serve idols;' and the third said, 'Let us ascend and wage war [with God].' . . . It has been taught. R. Nathan said: They were all bent on idolatry. (*Sanhedrin* 109a)

These Sages explain that the Tower reflects idolatry and rebellion against God. Rashi adopts their analysis, as well. The advantage of this interpretation is that God's strong reaction makes sense. God felt threatened and therefore intervened to thwart their plans. This interpretation also gains credibility insofar as this narrative is the only one spanning from Noah to Abraham and his family. It is reasonable to surmise that this story must be significant beyond its teaching of how people speak many languages.

However, one may ask whether this reading fits the text. Where is there mention of a rebellion against God or idolatry in this passage? Ibn Ezra summarily dismisses this interpretation:

> The builders of the tower were not so foolish as to think that they could go to the heavens. . . . The text reveals their intent—to build a large city for their settlement, and the Tower would be a sign of their glory and also their location for shepherds who ventured away. They would also preserve their name all the days of the Tower. . . . The builders hoped that they would never scatter, but this was not God's plan, and they did not realize that. (Ibn Ezra on Gen. 11:3)

However, commentators seeking the plain sense of the text (*pashtanim*) also struggle to determine the meaning of this narrative. Ibn Ezra argues that the people did not do anything sinful. God opposed the project since He had blessed them to multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 1:28; 9:1). God scattered them to fulfill His blessing to humanity. In a similar vein, Ralbag maintains that the people did not sin, but God desires human diversity rather than conformity and therefore scattered them.

Several later commentators assume that the builders of the Tower must have done something sinful, as God appears threatened. They modify the views of Ibn Ezra or Ralbag and insist that the people deliberately wanted to thwart God's blessing to fill the earth (Radak, Joseph Bekhor Shor) or to create a conformist, totalitarian regime (Yitzhak Arama, Samson Raphael Hirsch, Netziv).

Abarbanel submits a surprising thesis. Brick-making symbolizes human creativity, and he argues that technology ultimately causes problems. Of course, God does not outright forbid technology, but it is not the ideal course for humanity. Unlike the other interpretations we have seen, Abarbanel addresses the textual element of brick-making.

Although the talmudic interpretation of idolatry appears to read a lot into the text, the interpretations of the later *pashtanim* also do not appear evident in the text. Other than Abarbanel's anti-technology reading, the other interpretations do not explain the Torah's emphasis on brick-making. Moreover, none of the above interpretations explains why the Babylonians would refer to their own city as "confusion." The cryptic nine verses of this narrative pose difficulties in arriving at a compelling reading.

Ancient Near Eastern Context

Over the past century, scholarship has progressed significantly with the archaeological discovery of many artifacts and written documents from the ancient Near East. Much of this section summarizes the groundbreaking work of Moshe David (Umberto) Cassuto, and the subsequent discussions of Nahum Sarna and Elhanan Samet.[3] They argue that the Tower of Babel narrative is a polemic against the worldview of the nations, in particular Babylonia. In every ancient Babylonian city, there were temples, always accompanied with a tower called a ziqqurat. This term derives from the Akkadian *zaqaru*, "to rise up high," or "step pyramid." In

Babylonia, the great ziqqurat was the Temple of Marduk—the patron deity of Babylonia. The Temple was called *E-sag-ila* ("the house with a raised head"), and its tower was called *etemen-an-ki* ("the house of the foundation of the heavens and earth"). It appears that this temple originally was built in Hammurabi's time (18th–17th centuries B.C.E.), approximately the same time as Abraham. The Babylonians took such great pride in their temple that they composed myths that attributed its building to the gods:

> Marduk, the king of the gods divided all the Anunnaki (=various gods) above and below. . . . The Anunnaki opened their mouths and said to Marduk, their lord: "Now, o lord, you who have caused our deliverance, what shall be our homage to you? Let us build a shrine"; . . . when Marduk heard this, brightly glowed his features, like the day: "Construct Babylon, whose building you have requested, let its brickwork be fashioned. . . ." the Anunnaki applied the implement; for one whole year they molded bricks. When the second year arrived, they raised high the head of Esagila equalling Apsu (=corresponded to the depths of the ocean. Apsu was one of the original two gods in world, according to this myth.) . . . (Akkadian Creation Epic, Tablet VI, lines 39–62)[4]

The ruins of the Temple of Marduk were found between 1889 and 1917 by German archaeologists. It was gigantic, about 300 feet high, rising from a square base of equal size. There is little question that the Torah is discussing this temple. Archaeologists have unearthed the biblical Tower of Babel and other documents that describe what the Babylonians thought of their prized temple.

A ziqqurat was built as a surrogate mountain, designed as a meeting place between the gods and people. Priests could ascend to the top on elaborate staircases in order to encounter the gods. Phrases such as "its top in the sky" and "to make a name for oneself" appear regularly on Akkadian building inscriptions.[5] *E-sag-ila,* the house with a raised head, now appears strikingly similar to the Torah's quoting the Tower's builders as wanting "a tower with its top in the sky" (Gen. 11:4).

Additionally, the Babylonian Creation Epic cited above marvels at the brick-making required for the Tower. In this myth, it took *the gods* one year to make enough bricks to build the Temple of Marduk! The Torah mocks this claim, noting that the Tower and its bricks were built by people. This detail in the Babylonian epic helps explain why the Torah focuses on the brick-making aspect of the project.

God's "descent" in the Torah narrative also speaks against the idea of a ziqqurat. The physical height of a mountain or structure does not bring anyone closer to God. God descended to thwart the Tower before it was completed.

In this reading of the Torah narrative, Babylonian society was guilty of the ultimate arrogance. They were excessively proud of the Temple of Marduk, and claimed that their gods built it. They also built the Tower to make for themselves a name, usurping a supposedly religious structure for self-aggrandizement.

We now can understand the Torah's explanation for the city name, *Bavel*, confusion. The Babylonians called their city Babel, from the Akkadian *bab-ilim*, "the gate of the god." They considered their city to be the religious center of the world. The Hebrew etymology, then, is a "midrash" of the Torah to mock the Babylonians. You think you are the gate of the god, but in fact you are completely confused!

To summarize, the sin of the Tower of Babel was supreme arrogance of a polytheistic, idolatrous society. This interpretation also is the view of the talmudic Sages (*Sanhedrin* 109a) quoted earlier. Living in Babylonia, the Sages well understood what the Torah was teaching. With our knowledge of the ancient setting, their interpretation is closely wedded to the text of the Torah, and is the most convincing of all the suggestions cited above.

The Significance of the Narrative

Following this interpretation, Yehezkel Kaufmann observed that until this point in the Book of Genesis, all people are assumed to be monotheists. The Tower of Babel represents the moment when idolatry entered human culture. As a result, Abraham was chosen to leave Babylonia and to teach humanity about its original vision of monotheism.[6]

As in the Tower of Babel, the Garden of Eden narrative also revolves around people overstepping their human boundaries and God appearing to feel threatened by human actions:

> And the Lord God said, "Now that the man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever!" (Gen. 3:22)

Both narratives also have God using the unusual plural "we" form when referring to Himself. Lyle Eslinger argues that this unusual form is used

specifically when establishing boundaries between the divine and human realms.[7] Ramban (on 11:2) notes further that Eden and Babel were similar sins, and therefore the protagonists were exiled each time.

The Talmud poignantly casts God and human arrogance as diametrically opposed, to the point where God's presence in this world is threatened by arrogance:

> If one walks with a stiff bearing [i.e., with arrogance] even for four cubits, it is as if he pushed against the heels of the Divine Presence, since it is written, The whole earth is full of His glory (Isa. 6:3). (*Berakhot* 43b)

Monotheism is not simply a matter of the number of deities one serves. Rather, it promotes humility. God's Presence is invited in through that humility, as exemplified by Moses who was the humblest of all people (Num. 12:3) and the greatest prophet (Num. 12:6–8). The Tower of Babel narrative teaches that idolatry is rooted in the ultimate human arrogance.

Yehudah Elitzur further observes that the term *sulam* (ladder) appears only in Jacob's dream with the angels ascending and descending. More significantly, the term *sha'ar ha-Shamayim*, the gateway to heaven, appears only here:

> Shaken, he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven (*sha'ar ha-Shamayim*)." (Gen. 28:17)

Elitzur argues that this narrative is the Torah's response to the Tower of Babel. The Babylonians called themselves *bab-ilim*, the gate of the god, similar to *sha'ar ha-Shamayim*. God descended to the Tower of Babel, mocking its builders for thinking that they had connected heaven and earth with their ziqqurat. In reality, they were arrogant and confused. In contrast, Jacob's ladder effectively connects the heavens and earth, as angels freely ascend and descend.[8]

Finally, Zephaniah prophesied that in the ideal future, arrogance shall be replaced by all humanity again being pure of speech, i.e., being God-fearing.

> For then I will make the peoples pure of speech, so that they all invoke the Lord by name and serve Him with one accord. From beyond the rivers of Cush, My suppliants shall bring offerings to Me in Fair Puzai…For then I will remove the proud and exultant within you, and you will be haughty no

> more on My sacred mount. But I will leave within you a poor, humble folk, and they shall find refuge in the name of the Lord. (Zeph. 3:9–12)

This prophecy is the antidote to the Tower of Babel, which represents the arrogance and idolatry that led to people speaking many languages. In those medieval communities where the triennial cycle was used for Torah readings, this passage in Zephaniah fittingly was selected as the Haftarah for the reading of the Tower of Babel.[9]

To summarize, the Tower of Babel is of central importance to the early Genesis narratives. The Babylonians arrogantly presumed to establish the place where the heavens meet earth and that they could bring the gods down to earth by building high temples. They were self-aggrandizing by building a temple to make a name for themselves, and in their mythology they ascribed this monumental building project to the gods.

This is the moment in the Torah where idolatry is introduced. God shifts from focusing on all humanity to Abraham and his descendants, who were entrusted to teach the world about ethical monotheism. Humility brings God's presence closer. Arrogance is linked to idolatry and threatens God's presence.

Conclusion

In this article, we briefly explored facets of how to analyze the Tower of Babel narrative. We began with the basic text, pinpointing the major issues that need to be addressed. We then surveyed talmudic and later rabbinic commentary. Although insightful and illuminating, none of these sources fully addressed the various details of the text. A consideration of the ancient Near Eastern setting, coupled with the talmudic reading in Tractate *Sanhedrin*, provided a more satisfactory reading of the details of the narrative in a vacuum and in its surrounding context. This reading highlights a vital detail in the spiritual history of the world as presented by the Torah.

To round out the analysis, we considered other biblical references that shed additional light on the theme that the Tower of Babel narrative teaches. The Garden of Eden narrative and the Tower of Babel both explore how people sometimes exceed their boundaries and this threatens their relationship with God, leading to exile. Jacob's humility and God's revelation are linked as the ideal connection between the heavens and the earth.

Zephaniah prophetically anticipates a future era when the damage of the Tower of Babel is undone and the world unites again in humility and in serving God.

By the conclusion of the analysis, we can see how the rabbinic interpretations and ancient Near Eastern scholarship complement each other, enabling us to unlock a brief but powerful narrative that lies at the heart of the Torah's values.

NOTES

1. See Shalom Carmy, "A Room with a View, but a Room of Our Own," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), pp. 1–38.
2. Yehudah Kiel, *Da'at Mikra: Bereshit* vol. 1 (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1997), pp. 279–280.
3. Moshe David (Umberto) Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987), pp. 154–169; Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), pp. 63–80; Elhanan Samet, *Iyyunim be-Parashot ha-Shavua* (first series) vol. 1 (Hebrew) ed. Ayal Fishler (Ma'aleh Adumim: Ma'aliyot Press, 2002), pp. 21–30. Modified English version at http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.60/02noach.htm.
4. Translation from James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 68–69.
5. Ada Feyerick, *Genesis: World of Myths and Patriarchs* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 53.
6. For further discussion of the subject of the Chosen People, see Hayyim Angel, "'The Chosen People': An Ethical Challenge," *Conversations* 8 (Fall 2010), pp. 52–60; reprinted in Angel, *Creating Space between Peshat and Derash: A Collection of Studies on Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2011), pp. 25-34. For a different approach, see Zvi Grumet, "The Revolution of Terah and Avraham," in this issue.
7. Lyle Eslinger, "The Enigmatic Plurals Like 'One of Us' (Genesis I 26, III 22, and XI 7) in Hyperchronic Perspective," *VT* 56 (2006), pp. 171–184.
8. Yehudah Elitzur, "The Tower of Babel and Jacob's Ladder" (Hebrew), in *Yisrael ve-ha-Mikra: Mehkarim Geografiyim Historiyim ve-Hagotiyim*, ed. Yoel Elitzur and Amos Frisch, (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1999), pp. 46–48.
9. See listing of the triennial Haftarot at the end of Yosef Ofer, "The Sections of the Prophets and Writings" (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 58 (1989), pp. 155–189.

Dis/Obedience to Military Orders: A Biblical, Talmudic, Midrashic, and Exegetical Analysis of an All-Too Contemporary Question

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Prologue

From time immemorial, soldiers on the front lines have borne the burden of carrying out orders that are issued by senior officers from the relative safety of the rear echelon. When those orders are illegal, or of an ambiguous moral nature (think Nuremberg and My Lai), who bears the responsibility for their consequences?

This article is adapted, unabashedly, from a thoughtful article by the late Professor Moshe Greenberg of the Hebrew University, a renowned

scholar of Tanakh, *Parshanut*, and the ancient Near East, entitled: "Rabbinic Reflections on Defying Illegal Orders," in Menachem M. Kellner (ed.) *Contemporary Jewish Ethics* (NY, 1978), 211–220. I have added sources here and there, and, of course, the pedagogical adaptation is entirely original. I alone bear the responsibility for the presentation of the sources and for the conclusions drawn from them.

A Word about Methodology

Our Sages describe the highly selective nature of biblical history as *nevu'ah she-hutzrekha le-dorot*: prophecy that is required for eternity (BT *Megillah* 14a). According to this principle, only those events that were to have everlasting meaning and application were recorded in Tanakh, whereas other, ostensibly more idiosyncratic, events were omitted. In other words, prophetic foresight enables us to draw not just inspiration, but practical advice from the deeds—and, yes, misdeeds!—of our ancestors.

Just as the talmudic sages and medieval exegetes judged the evidence of the biblical text and applied it to their own circumstances, so too must we evaluate the evidence of their interpretations and attempt to extract from them the guidance we seek. Sometimes our situations are sufficiently similar that we can adopt their suggestions wholesale. At other times, however, and despite the overall sameness in our underlying human conditions, we can take their suggestions only as foundations upon which we must then construct our own edifices. I trust that I have built prudently.

Synopsis[1]

As King David lies dying (1 Kings 2), he instructs his son, Solomon, to settle old scores with Joab ben Zeruiah (vs. 5) and Shimei ben Gera (vs. 8). When Joab hears that Adonijah, whose candidacy for king he supported (1 Kings 1:7), has failed to secure the throne, he realizes that his life is forfeit and he seeks sanctuary in the "Tent."[2] He is brought before King Solomon and charged with the murders of Abner ben Ner (2 Samuel 3:27) and Amasa ben Yeter (*op. cit.*, 20:10). According to the "*peshat*" of the Book of Kings, Joab is immediately and unceremoniously executed by Benayahu ben Yehoyada (vs. 34). Talmudic Aggadah, however, has Solomon bring Joab to trial where he successfully defends himself against both murder charges. Instead, he is eventually executed on a third

charge—namely, his collaboration in the unsuccessful coup staged by Adonijah.

The core of this essay is an examination of Joab's defense in which the element of obedience to the orders of a superior officer plays a pivotal role.

Exhibit One: Joab's Trial

Sanhedrin 49a:

> [Solomon] brought Joab to trial and said to him: Why did you kill Abner? He replied: I was avenging [my brother] Asael.[3] Wasn't Asael in pursuit of Abner?[4] Abner could have saved himself by wounding Asael in one of his limbs [he needn't have killed him]. Perhaps he was not able to do so? Since Abner was able to strike him at the fifth rib[5] . . . he could have just wounded him.
>
> [Solomon] said: Let us leave [the subject of] Abner. Why did you kill Amasa? [Joab] replied: Because Amasa committed treason against the king. "The king [David] ordered Amasa to summon all the men of Judah in three days' time. . . . Amasa went to summon them and tarried" (2 Samuel 20: 4 ff.). [Solomon] said: Amasa construed the "but's and only's."[6] He found them engaged in [religious] study and reasoned: [The Israelites promised Joshua] "Whoever contradicts you or disobeys you, whatever you command, shall die" (Joshua 1: 18). Does that include [disagreement on account of] Torah study? The verse states: "*Only* [*rak]* be firm and resolute" (op. cit., vs. 7).
>
> [So why was Joab executed?] He was a traitor, as it states: "The news reached Joab who had sided with Adonijah, although not with Absalom" (1 Kings 2:28).

Elaboration:

The right of a leader to expect obedience to his instructions is not granted expressly in the Torah;[7] it derives from a specific historical precedent. After the death of Moses, the Israelites swore their allegiance to Joshua and promised to punish any disobedience to his command. This pledge, however, was not a blank check. Through their reference to "Only be firm and resolute" (*rak hazak ve-ematz*; the "but's and only's" cited above), they reveal to us our first important insight into the halakhot of obedience: A leader is expressly prohibited from requiring obedience in violation of Torah law.

NOTE: The Talmud accepts Joab's claim vis-à-vis Abner, but rejects his claim against Amasa by justifying Amasa's delay. Nevertheless, it prosecutes Joab on the separate charge of treason. The conclusion appears to be that while he was morally guilty vis-à-vis Abner and Amasa, he was not legally culpable.

Exhibit Two: Abner, Amasa, and Disobedience

Abner and Amasa, ironically, play a critical role in the talmudic derivation of the halakhic principles of obedience to orders.

In 1 Samuel 22:17, Saul commands his servants to kill the *kohanim* of Nob because they had aided and abetted David in his escape. The soldiers refuse to shed the blood of "servants of the LORD," so Saul turns the task over to Doeg the Edomite who has no such compunctions and kills them.

The *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Sanhedrin* 29a) asks:

> Who were those servants [who refused the order]? Rabbi Samuel ben Isaac said: They were Abner and Amasa. They said to Saul: If we owe you anything besides these belts and coats [their uniforms and insignia?], take them back!

The *Talmud Bavli* (*Sanhedrin* 20a), however, has certain reservations about their conduct:

> Rabbi Judah said in Rav's name: Why did Abner meet an untimely death? Because he failed to take a stand against Saul. Rabbi Isaac said: He took a stand, but he was overruled.

Elaboration:

Abner's death at the hands of Joab is his just desserts for his failure to assume a more vigorous opposition to the murder of the *kohanim* of Nov. This provides us with our second important insight into the halakhot of obedience: It may not be sufficient to abstain from obeying an illegal order; you might have to offer more than your resignation.

Indeed, the Talmud (*Shabbat* 55a), in elaborating on Ezekiel 9:4 ("Go through the streets of Jerusalem and place a mark on the foreheads of all who sigh and groan over the abominations committed in her"), makes the point that it is not enough to refrain from committing evil when one can also take a determined stand against it.

Exhibit Three: Joab and Disobedience—A Contrast

Given the aggadic penchant for validating the aphorism, "According to the measure that one metes out so is it meted out to him," we should not be surprised to discover that the disobedience that goes around comes around. The same talmudic passage with which we began (*Sanhedrin* 49a), continues:

> God brought [Joab's] guilt down upon his own head for having struck down two more righteous and better men than he [i.e., Abner and Amasa]. Better, in that they construed the "but's and only's," while he did not. More righteous, in that they refused a command that came orally, while he obeyed a command that came in writing.

Elaboration:

Whereas Abner and Amasa defied a questionable command that, by virtue of its verbal nature, carried an inherent note of ambiguity (and, thereby, could have provided them with "cover" should they have chosen to obey it), Joab failed to defy a written order (which contains no such uncertainty and therefore offers no acceptable alternative to disobedience)—to place Uriah the Hittite in the line of fire.

Exhibit Four: Crime and Agency

The Talmud in *Kiddushin* (43a) stipulates:

> If one commissions an agent to commit murder and he complies, the agent is guilty and the principal is exempt. Shammai the Elder said in the name of the prophet Haggai, the principal is guilty, as it states [of David, regarding Uriah]: "You slew Uriah . . . by the sword . . . and killed him by the sword of the Ammonites" (2 Samuel 12:9).

Elaboration:

Given their negative assessment of Joab's morality (see Exhibit Three), why do the Sages not rebuke him openly for his complicity in Uriah's death by applying Shammai's principle[8] that every individual bears responsibility for his own deeds and cannot abrogate that responsibility by arguing that he was only "following orders"? The contemplation of this question leads us to our third and final observation on the halakhot of

obedience: The rule of delegated responsibility stops short of the throne.

Just above, we cited the verse: "You slew Uriah . . . by the sword . . . and killed him by the sword of the Ammonites" (2 Samuel 12:9). R. David Kimhi (Radak; Provence, 1160–1235), commenting on the ostensible redundancy ("slew . . . killed"), notes that soldiers—even commanders—in the heat of battle, are entitled to take for granted that their commander-in-chief, the king, has done the necessary values clarification and they may therefore assume, implicitly, that any order he gives is legal:

> You slew him: As though you had slain him [personally] by instructing Joab to place him in harm's way. You killed him: [Why the repetition?] You have compounded the felony by having him slain by the Ammonites, the enemies of Israel.
>
> Our Sages have said: Although the universal rule is, "there is no agency for the commission of a crime" and in every case the agent—and not the principal—is culpable, here the situation differs since the verse calls [David] a killer. Why is this? Since he was the king and his word was law, it is as though he did the killing himself. Similarly, when Saul ordered the killing of the *kohanim* of Nov, it was as though he killed them himself.
>
> Generally, a person should refrain from following the king's orders in such a case. We have explained, apropos of "Anyone who defies your word shall die" (Joshua 1:18), that this does not include the commission of a crime, as the verse states: "Only" [be firm and resolute; i.e., excluding instructions that violate Torah law].
>
> Not everyone, however, is capable of construing "but's" and "only's." The onus [punishment], therefore, is on the king.

Exhibit Five: What Goes Around . . .

The principle of royal responsibility articulated by Radak takes on additional significance when viewed in the context of David and Joab's later interaction in a comparable situation. According to 2 Samuel 24:1 ff. (and 1 Chronicles 21:1 ff.), David is induced to commission a census of Israel and instructs Joab to carry it out. The text of 2 Samuel 24: 1–4 reports:

> And again the anger of God was kindled against Israel, and He moved David against them, saying: 'Go, number Israel and Judah'. And the king said to Joab the captain of the host that was with him: 'Go now to and fro through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan even to Beersheba, and number the people, that I may know the sum of the people.'

> And Joab said unto the king: 'Now the Lord thy God add unto the people, how many they may be, a hundredfold, and may the eyes of my lord the king see it; but why doth my lord the king delight in this thing?' Notwithstanding, the king's word prevailed against Joab, and against the captains of the host. And Joab and the captains of the host went out from the presence of the king, to number the people of Israel.

Joab initially opposes the mission, saying, according to 2 Samuel: "What do you need it for?" (*lamah hafetz ba-davar ha-zeh*) and adding, according to 1 Chronicles: "Why cause Israel guilt? (*lamah yihyeh le-ashmah le-Yisrael*). This clearly implies that while Joab ultimately submitted to the order on account of the rule of royal responsibility (*va-yehezak devar ha-melekh el Yoav*), he, again, recognizes its essential illegality or, at least, impropriety.[9] While Abner and Amasa, in a similar situation (see Exhibit Two), tendered their resignations to Saul; Joab, as was his wont, abdicated his moral responsibility albeit remaining strictly within the limits of the letter of the law.

Epilogue

The sources we have presented indicate that the responsibility for ensuring that orders issued to frontline soldiers are legal and moral belongs, foremost, to the king in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief. Officers of lower grades—including the Chief of Staff!—may assume his orders to be proper, particularly if they are in the heat of battle and lack the necessary leisure to evaluate them on their own. However, if they definitively know a particular order to be illegal or immoral, they must refuse to carry it out and, if necessary, suffer the consequences of their disobedience to the point of surrendering their commissions. In some cases, given the patently egregious nature of the illegal order, they must also protest it publicly.

Operative/Normative Conclusions

In conclusion, we cite several "codifications" of the laws of military obedience.

1) Rambam *Hilkhot Melakhim* (3:9):

> Whoever defies a royal order on account of preoccupation with mitzvot, even of a minor variety, is not culpable. When the master and the servant

both speak, the master's words take precedence. It goes without saying [however] that if the king commanded that a mitzvah be annulled, he is not to be obeyed.

2) HaRav Shelomo Min-HaHar: *Dinei Tzava U-Milhamah* (Laws pertaining to the army and warfare, #28):

The regulations of the General Staff and the Military Rabbinate are available to assist soldiers in all cases. According to regulations, *orders that contravene halakha are invalid.*

3) U.S. Dept. Of the Army, Field Manual: *The Law of Land Warfare* 182:

[Military courts are admonished] to take into consideration the fact that obedience to lawful orders is the duty of every member of the armed forces; that the latter cannot be expected, in conditions of war discipline, to weigh scrupulously the legal merits of the orders received.

4) The American Law Institute: *Model Penal Code, Military Orders* (2.10):

It is an affirmative defense that the actor, in engaging in the conduct charged to constitute an offense, does no more than execute an order of his superior in the armed forces which he does not know to be unlawful.

Practical Pedagogy

Have students consider the following questions while preparing the sources:

Re: 1 Kings 2:28 ff.:
On what charge is Joab is condemned to death?
How did Joab think to evade his fate?
Why was he unsuccessful?

Re: Sanhedrin 49a:
How does Joab justify his killing of Abner?
Of Amasa?
What is Solomon's challenge to that justification?
What is the final disposition of Joab's case?

Re: 1 Samuel 22:17 + Yerushalmi Sanhedrin + Sanhedrin 20a + 49a:
What do Abner and Amasa have in common?
How does this reflect on Joab?
What do these sources teach us about protesting illegal orders?

Re: Shabbat 55a:
What does Ezekiel chapter 9 teach us about protest?
How does it apply to the case of Joab?

Re: Kiddushin 43a + Radak 1 Samuel 12:9:
What is the limitation placed here on the law of "agency" (*shelihut*)?
What bearing does it have on the case of David and Uriah? On Joab?
Whose is the ultimate responsibility for morality in warfare?

Re: Rambam Hilkhot Melakhim 3:9:
Which of our sources is Rambam's, too?
Does he agree or disagree with Radak?
Would he have convicted Joab as charged?

Re: 2 Samuel 24:1 ff., and 1 Chronicles 21:1 ff.:
What does 1 Chronicles 21:3 add to 2 Samuel 24:3?
Why did David's census invite "guilt"? (Cf. Exodus 30:12 and commentaries)

What conclusion(s) may we come to regarding obedience to doubtful orders?

NOTES

1. We have excluded from consideration here the otherwise enlightening precedent of the midwives who disobeyed Pharaoh's orders to commit genocide. First of all, it does not necessarily involve Jews who would be bound by halakha and, in any event, because it falls outside of the scope of military discipline. I do treat the subject in, "The Obligation to Intervene in Halakhah and Tradition," *PRISM: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Educators*, vol. 1 issue 2 (Spring, 2010), p. 59.
2. While we will not pursue the element of sanctuary, per se, any further, it bears investigation. See Exodus 21:14, with commentaries, and BT *Makkot* 12a.
3. Blood vengeance is an acceptable form of retribution according to Torah law. Cf. Numbers 35:19.

4. Asael thereby becomes a *rodef*, pursuer, and may be stymied even at the cost of his life—providing there is no alternative. Cf. BT *Sanhedrin* 49a.
5. *El ha-homesh* (2 Samuel 2:23). Significantly, Joab's killing of Amasa is described in the identical terms (*op. cit.*, 20:10).
6. *Akhim ve-rakim*.
7. See the prerogatives of royalty in Deuteronomy 17:14–20.
8. Expressed as both: *ein shali'ah li-devar aveirah*; there is no agency for a crime, and: *divrei ha-rav, ve-divrei ha-talmid; divrei mi shom`im*?; if instructed by a master (God) and a disciple (David), to whom does one listen? [Obviously, to the master.]
9. See Exodus 30:12 and the commentaries there and in 2 Samuel.

Ramban's Integrative Approach to the Reading of Biblical Narrative

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Introduction

The commentary of Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (Ramban), a foremost thirteenth-century Spanish exegete, is a rich, incisive medieval resource for the study of the stories of the Torah. The student of Ramban's interpretation is drawn into the world of these stories—their plots, characters, themes, and didactic messages. How does Ramban succeed in vivifying the narratives and their personae, engrossing his readers and motivating them to want to study more about the biblical stories and their meanings? What is the unique appeal of Ramban's commentary, such that nowadays his analyses are increasingly studied? I believe that one of the answers lies in discerning his distinctive mode of reading biblical narrative.

A hallmark feature of Ramban's exegetical method is his integrative approach to the study of the biblical text and context. Ramban reads glob-

ally, associating the different components of a biblical story into a holistic narrative. Building on his predecessors' insightful analyses, Ramban develops a more extensive interpretative program that reveals the cohesiveness of biblical narrative, which provides the reader with a comprehensive, broad view of the stories. When Ramban reads a biblical story, he reads progressively, but also with an eye to linking what came before with what comes after. Through this amalgamated manner of reading, Ramban delineates the linear sequence of the story line. To facilitate his analysis, Ramban searches for linguistic clues such as key words that are pivotal for interpreting the narrative's dynamic or repeated words that summon the reader to follow their path in order to decode the wider sense of the narrative. Ramban takes note of changes in time and place as the story unfolds, markers that signal transformations in character experiences. Through his expansive reading, Ramban reconstructs broad portraitures of the biblical personalities by scrutinizing how the narrative describes their thoughts, emotions, speeches, and actions. Extending his integrative approach, Ramban interrelates diverse stories, within the same biblical book or between different biblical books, seeking the linking threads between them that elicit the catalyst for ensuing events, create related character portraitures, and establish the thematic continuum imparted by these narratives.

The ensuing discussion will illustrate selectively Ramban's analytical method, which will hopefully inspire further study of his engaging biblical commentary.

Plot Sequence and Timing

The following examples will demonstrate how Ramban's integrative approach discerns the sequence, structure, and progression of plot events in biblical narrative.

In his analysis of Exodus 2:10–25, Ramban applies this method of reading in order to clarify the plot sequence from a transitional situation to a complicating event to the final situation that prevails at the conclusion of the narrative. Ramban observes that this text marks a new situation when it references the event of Moshe, the youth, "growing up" in verse 10 (*va-yigdal ha-yeled*). Ramban interprets this to refer to Moshe's physical maturation, prompting his mother to bring him to the palace to be raised by Pharaoh's daughter as a son "who would stand before kings."

This reading intimates how Moshe's early experiences prepare him for his role as redeemer who will plead Israel's case before Pharaoh. The second reference to Moshe "growing up" (2:11) specifies the instigating event that initiates the narrative's turning point. Labeling Moshe as "a man of understanding (*ish da'at*)," Ramban (on 2:11, 23) clarifies that Moshe reaches intellectual maturation, and he now becomes aware of his Hebrew origins, causing him to seek out his brethren and assess their oppressive condition. These observations impel him to act immediately and kill the Egyptian taskmaster (2:12), a transformative act that marks the climax of the narrative, as is evident from his confrontation with two wrestling Hebrews on the second day (2:13–14). As Ramban (on 2:14, 23) paraphrases the Hebrew's retort to Moshe, "Who appointed you as an officer and judge over us? Is it because you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian that you are chastising me?"

Their slander forces Moshe to escape to exile, settling in Midian (2:15), which precipitates God's charge that he return to Egypt to redeem his people (Exodus 3–4). Noting, however, the significance of the temporal marker in verse 23, "*It happened during those many days* (*va-yehi ba-yamim ha-rabbim ha-hem)* that the king of Egypt died and Israel groaned from the work and cried out and their cries went up to God . . .," Ramban (on 2:23) observes how the narrative provides the reader with a sense of the passage of time between these main action sequences. Assuming that the marked time frame refers to the length of Moshe's exile,[1] Ramban proposes that Moshe escapes from Egypt when he is less than 20 years old,[2] and, as noted in Exodus 7:7, Moshe appears before Pharaoh at the age of 80. Since he receives the communication from God with only his eldest son, Gershom, having been born, Ramban posits that Moshe wanders for many years, settling in Midian and marrying Tzipporah toward the end of his years in exile (7:21–22).[3] Nevertheless, the narrative condenses its discussion of the wandering sequence as it is a transitional experience. At the end of this time period, while Moshe is in Midian, the Egyptian king dies, prompting God to charge him with his mission.

Ramban's linear insight into the narrative's progression enables the reader to discern a clear sequence and structure that leads to a better understanding of the story's underlying themes: exile, survival, and salvation.

Ramban (on Exod. 4:19–23) also outlines plot progression by tracing the paths of recurrent words within a narrative scene. Through this integrative mode of reading, Ramban makes sense of the episode in Exodus

4:18–21, which is marked by the repeated words, "go (*lekh*)" and "return (*shuv*)," that follow the biblical figures' movements. After Moshe's experience at the burning bush, the text relates,

> 18. Moshe went and returned to Jether his father-in-law and said to him, "Let me go now and I will return to my brethren who are in Egypt so that I may see if they are still alive." Jethro said to Moshe, "Go in peace." 19. God said to Moshe in Midian, "Go, return to Egypt for all the men who were seeking your life have died." 20. Moshe took his wife and his sons and mounted them on the donkey, and he returned to the land of Egypt, and Moshe took God's staff in his hand. 21. God said to Moshe, "When you go to return to Egypt, see all the wonders I have put into your hand and perform them before Pharaoh. But I will harden his heart and he will not release the people. . . ".

Ramban maintains that the primary focus of this scene involves the transformation of the family relationship, which is precipitated by Moshe's mission as Israel's savior. Moshe returns from Mt. Horeb to ask permission from his father-in-law to return to Egypt. The focus on *Moshe*'s movements, however, intimates that he planned to return "alone, in stealth," intending only to remain in Egypt temporarily. Apparently, Moshe still feared for his life, seeing a need to conceal his identity. God therefore reassures him, commanding Moshe, according to Ramban's reading, to return to Egypt and reside there until he liberates his brethren. Accordingly, Moshe takes his family and sets out to return to Egypt. God subsequently reiterates to Moshe that he must diligently perform the wonders with which he has been charged, even though Pharaoh will not listen.[4]

However, since the text anomalously records that only "*he* returned" to Egypt (4:20), Ramban integrates the later scene in which Zipporah circumcises her son (4:24–26) in order to resolve the question of Moshe's family's whereabouts while he confronts Pharaoh in Egypt. Presuming that only Gershom, the firstborn, is alive at the time (despite the plural, "sons," in verse 20, which is attributed to the norm of scriptural style), Ramban suggests that Moshe returns to Egypt with his family, "for this was a sensible idea," as it would prove "that his heart was firm, trusting" that redemption was imminent. Therefore, Ramban surmises that the second son, Eliezer, was conceived on the way to Egypt or in Egypt, and Gershom is circumcised by Zipporah. Although only Moshe's return is specified, Ramban assumes that his family accompanies him.

Alternatively, Ramban examines the family movements from a different perspective. In this reading, Zipporah had already been pregnant with her second child before Moshe receives the divine revelation at Mt. Horeb. When he returns to seek Jethro's permission to go to Egypt, she gives birth. In his alacrity to fulfill God's will, Moshe does not circumcise him; when Moshe is confronted by the angel, the newborn is circumcised by Zipporah on the way to Egypt. As Exodus 18:2 suggests that Zipporah was sent away (*ahar shiluheha*), Ramban speculates that Zipporah and her children turn back to Midian at Moshe's insistence; not wanting to delay his mission, Moshe leaves his family at the inn where they had stopped (4:24), instructing them to return to Jethro's home when the newly circumcised child is sufficiently strong.[5] Ramban also suggests that perhaps they all went to Egypt, but, longing for her father, Zipporah is sent home with her children.

Sensitive to the gaps and ambiguities in this narrative, Ramban integrates its different facets by focusing on the repeated, guiding words that punctuate its context. His interpretations motivate the reader to ponder the relationship between husband and wife and parents and children in association with the broader frame of this narrative, the divine mission to redeem Israel from Egypt.

Ramban is adept at integrating related narratives within a biblical book, divulging how one pivotal incident serves as the catalyst for subsequent events, influencing their outcome. An illustrative example is how Ramban centralizes Joseph's dreams (Gen. 37:5–11) as the crux of later episodes in Genesis. From Ramban's perspective, Joseph does not view his dreams as youthful imaginings, but he sees in them divinely providential import and feels it is his obligation to ensure that they are brought to fruition. Relating Joseph's reaction to his brothers' arrival in Egypt to trade for food, Scripture reports, "Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him, and *Joseph remembered the dreams* he had dreamed about them, and he said to them, 'You are spies. To see the nakedness of the land you have come'" (Gen. 42:8–9). According to Ramban (on Gen. 42:9), when Joseph sees his brothers, he realizes the time has arrived to implement his dreams, and he orchestrates subsequent events to ensure their fulfillment in the order he had dreamed them. "He carried out everything well at its appropriate time in order to realize the dreams, for he knew that they would certainly be realized."

In his first dream, Joseph had envisioned 11 sheaves bowing down to his sheaf, signifying his brothers' obeisance to his sovereignty (Ramban on Gen. 37:7). Since only 10 brothers first arrive in Egypt, Joseph conceals his identity and devises a scenario that will compel the brothers to bring Benjamin down to Egypt so that the first dream will be fulfilled in its entirety and proper sequence (Ramban on Gen. 42:9).

Ramban (on Gen. 37:10) uniquely interprets that Joseph decodes the symbolic meaning of the second dream (Gen. 37:9) as an indication that Jacob (represented by the sun), Jacob's entire lineage who were born to his four wives (signified by the moon), including the 11 brothers (that is, the stars), would bow down to Joseph. In order to fulfill this dream, therefore, Joseph must ensure that his entire family is uprooted to Egypt, where they will bow down to him when they "see his great success there."[6]

Ramban's focus on the dreams also explains why Joseph never communicates with his father while in Egypt, even though Egypt is close to Canaan. Joseph deliberately keeps his father ignorant of his whereabouts because revealing himself would jeopardize the realization of his dreams in succession (Ramban on Gen. 42:9). For Ramban, Joseph's dreams are the proverbial glue that binds the narrative scenes involving Joseph and his family.

Characterization

Ramban's clear sense of the overall portraiture of the biblical figures emerges from his integrative reading of the narratives in which they appear. This analytical method may be illustrated through his polar characterizations of Noah and Lot. Based on his holistic analysis of the Flood story (Gen. 6–8), Ramban develops a one-sided portrait of Noah, but his global analysis of the episodes in which Lot plays a role leads him to reconstruct a complex portrait of his persona.

Ramban frames his perception of Noah around a key biblical phrase that, in his view, defines this biblical figure's character. Genesis 6:9 relates, "*Noah ish tzaddik tamim hayah be-dorotav*." According to Ramban, the moral epithet, *ish tzaddik*, specifies Noah's righteousness in the particular sense of having been judged innocent of any wrongdoing. Whereas the people of Noah's time are convicted of a host of crimes, which warrant

their destruction, God deems Noah to be completely guiltless. Noah therefore merits, without reservation, to be saved from the Flood catastrophe. The adjective, *tamim* (complete), accentuates his absolute vindication in judgment. The time frame, "in his generations (*be-dorotav*)," specifies that although Noah lived a long life, spanning multiple generations, he was never corrupted by his contemporaries' wicked ways, and, exceptionally, only he was worthy of being saved from the Flood. A midrashic view infers that this temporal qualifier delimits Noah's sterling character as being only relative to the wicked men of his generations and certainly not measuring up to extraordinarily righteous individuals like the patriarch Abraham. However, Ramban presumes that this proviso aggrandizes Noah's meritoriousness. As Ramban emphasizes further, only Noah "walked with God" (6:9), exhibiting a spiritual closeness to God that was sorely lacking among his contemporaries.[7]

Ramban supports his monolithic characterization of Noah by analyzing additional textual indicators. Prior to revealing Noah's defining quality, Scripture asserts how God is "saddened" that He must eradicate the very humans He created because of their evil ways (6:5–7). However, the text contrastingly observes, "*But* Noah found favor (*matza hen*) in God's eyes" (6:8). While noted predecessors maintain that Noah's "favorable" effect on God was an activation of His mercy, implying that Noah did not fully merit salvation,[8] Ramban (on Gen. 6:8) claims that this divine "favor" was bestowed upon Noah because "all of his deeds were befitting and pleasing before God."

Additionally, Ramban observes that Noah's praiseworthy character is endorsed by God Himself. In 7:1, God asserts, "Go into the ark, with all your household, for *you alone (otekha)* have I seen to be innocent (*tzaddik*) before Me in this generation." While this confirmation raises the question why Noah's family was saved, Ramban concludes that Noah's merit was sufficient to rescue his household as well. This is why his children are mentioned in conjunction with Scripture's assertion of Noah's defining feature as a "*tzaddik*." Genesis 6:9–10 relates, "This is Noah's lineage (*toledot Noah*)—Noah was a completely innocent man in his generations; Noah walked with God—Noah begat three sons . . .". In Ramban's view, these opening statements direct the reader to focus on the pivotal figure of Noah, whose merit saves his three sons from whom the world will be rebuilt (9:18–19).[9]

Ramban's consistent evaluation of Noah's persona is highlighted by his striking perspective on the inebriation scene in Genesis 9. While one might think this scene is cause for re-assessing Noah's positive characterization, Ramban (on Gen. 9:26) asserts that this episode is a commentary on the potency of wine and its ability to fell even the greatest of men; it does not detract from his worthiness to be saved from the Flood. "For the wholly innocent individual (*tzaddik tamim*), whose merit saved the entire world, even he was brought to sin by wine."

One might posit that Ramban's integrated study of the Flood story leads him to derive a constant portrait of Noah because this characterization answers a central question of this story: Why did Noah merit to be, in essence, the "Second Adam," whose lineage would be the ancestors of future humanity? By eliciting the narrative's clear conception of Noah's portraiture, Ramban leaves no doubt about this figure's role in the renewal of the world.

Conversely, Ramban (on Gen. 19:8) perceives that the Torah presents Lot as a multidimensional personality. Considering Lot's despicable offer of his two daughters to the vicious Sodomites (Gen. 19:7–8), an act that Ramban surmises could only arise from "a wicked heart," one might question how he deduces that Lot is a complex character. However, Ramban unearths subtle clues that direct him to contemplate Lot's persona more broadly. Ramban (on Gen. 19:3) credits Lot with a display of good will in his desire to host the (angelic) guests (Gen. 19:1–3). The angels cultivate this merit, which plays a part in helping to save him from destruction, by initially refusing to accept his invitation, which prompts Lot to beseech the angels further. Furthermore, Ramban (on Gen. 18:26) maintains that when Abraham begs God to save the cities of the plain for the sake of the righteous, innocent men who dwelled in them (*tzaddikim be-tokh ha-'ir*) (18:24, 26), he effectively seeks salvation for Lot, whom he deems to be sufficiently innocent of the Sodomites' crimes. Ramban (on Gen. 19:12) observes that Lot's merit suffices to save his family, and his request averts destruction of the nearby city, Zoar, where he will find refuge (19:18–22).

At the same time, Ramban (on Gen. 13:13) finds other textual indications that cast a shadow on Lot's persona. Scripture follows its description of Lot's choice to live in Sodom with an evaluation of its inhabitants as being exceedingly wicked men (13:12–13) in order to castigate Lot's new

residence. Ramban (on Gen. 19:16) also suggests that the text implies Lot was ultimately saved out of mercy, not merit; as Genesis 19:16 indicates, Lot was hastened out of Sodom by the angels, "while God's mercy was upon him."

Nevertheless, Ramban reveals Lot's positive qualities in his analysis of Genesis 19:29: "When God demolished the cities of the plain, *God remembered Abraham and He sent Lot out* from the upheaval . . . ". In Ramban's view, this text underscores Lot's loyalty to Abraham, which earns him the merit to be rescued:

> . . . Lot had displayed kindness toward the righteous one [Abraham] by going with him, wandering throughout the land wherever he went . . . And therefore he had the merit to save him because of Abraham's merit. For it was because of him [Abraham] that he [Lot] resided in Sodom. Were it not for Abraham, he would have still been in Haran with his family. And it is implausible that harm should occur to him [Lot] because of Abraham, who had departed by the command of His Creator.

By integrating the various narrative scenes in which Lot appears, Ramban directs the reader to appreciate how close reading can reveal the many sides of a biblical personality.

Furthermore, Ramban's integrative method develops comparative portraits between related biblical figures who have active roles in different biblical books.

Representative of this approach is Ramban's perception of the parallel experiences between Joshua and Moshe, revealing continuity between teacher and student in their leadership roles. Explaining what laws were established after the incident at Marah, where the bitter waters were sweetened (*sham sam lo hok u-mishpat*, Exod. 15:25), Ramban posits that Moshe institutes daily guidelines for Israel's interpersonal relationships and between humans and God to ensure stability within the community during their sojourn in the wilderness. Comparatively, Ramban (on Exod. 15:25) observes that the verse in Joshua 24:25, *va-yasem lo hok u-mishpat bi-Shekhem,* indicates through the same language how Moshe's successor establishes similar societal standards and practices before his death, after much of the conquest has been accomplished, in order to guarantee success for the newly settled Israelites.

Correlating these biblical figures' actions, Ramban applies the later episode of the capture of Ai (Josh. 7–8) in order to explain Moshe's con-

duct in the war against the Amalekites (Exod. 17). Although Moshe indicates that he will stand on top of the hill with his staff in his hand during the battle (17:9), the ensuing narrative relates only that Moshe raises his hands to ensure the Israelites' victory (17:11–12). To clarify the staff's function, Ramban observes that prior to the assault of Ai, God commands Joshua to perform a symbolic gesture signifying the enemy's defeat: "Stretch out the javelin in your hand toward Ai, for I will give it into your hand" (Josh. 8:18). With his hand and spear outstretched, the ambush rushes out, captures the city, and sets it on fire (8:19, 26). Correspondingly, Ramban (on Exod. 17:9) suggests that when Moshe reaches the top of the hill, he first extends his staff over the Amalekites below to preordain their defeat. However, to reinforce this signification, he prays to God with raised hands, having put the staff away beforehand.

In an analogous example, Ramban associates the two leaders' spy expeditions. Noting the disparate accounts in Numbers 13 and Deuteronomy 1 concerning who initiated the spy venture, Ramban posits, in one approach, that although the people introduce the idea of sending spies (Deut. 1:22), Moshe approves their initiative (Deut. 1:23), and God grants His permission (Num. 13:1–2), since the mission's intent is to plan a military strategy to invade Canaan. To bolster his reading, Ramban notes similar reconnaissance missions, expedited by Moshe (prior to attacking the Amorite lands; Num. 21:32), and by Joshua before attacking Jericho (Josh. 2:1). Referencing the attack on Ai (Josh. 8), Ramban reiterates that it was customary to arm the attackers with knowledge of their enemy to assure victory against them. Ramban (on Num. 13:2) observes further that while the Israelites intended to send only two spies, as was the case before the battle of Jericho, God commands that each tribe send its chieftain as spies to maximize the chances of success.

Thematic and Didactic Features

Ramban's integrative approach divulges the interrelated subjects of the biblical books, illustrating their progressive thematic relationship. A notable example is his introduction to the Book of Exodus, in which he encapsulates the contents of the first two books of the Torah, disclosing their thematic continuum. According to Ramban, in the Book of Genesis, the *creation* of the world and its creatures narrows to focus on the creation

of Israel through "the experiences of the patriarchs, which are a type of *creation* for their descendants," as their biographies symbolically preordain Israel's historical destiny. Ramban's associative reading suggests how the world cannot exist without a divinely chosen nation that fulfills the purpose for which the world was created. Furthermore, Ramban notes that the promises and decrees foretold in the Book of Genesis come to fruition in the Book of Exodus. The Covenant between the Pieces in Genesis 15 preordains the exile in Egypt and Israel's redemption, the main events of the Book of Exodus.[10]

Noting, however, that the Book of Exodus concludes with Tabernacle's construction, Ramban also applies an integrative reading that circles back to the beginning in order to connect the narratives of both biblical books.

> For the exile did not end until the day that [Israel] returned to their place, and returned to the high stature of their Patriarchs . . . When they came to Mt. Sinai and built the Mishkan, and God returned and rested His presence among them, then they returned to the heights of their Patriarchs, where the counsel of God dwelled on their tents. . . Then they were considered redeemed.[11]

For Ramban, the crowning distinction of the creation of Israel is its return to the elevated spirituality of its patriarchal ancestors, who felt God's open presence among them continually. Through the medium of the Tabernacle, Israel will realize the purpose for which God created the world and selected the patriarchs to establish the foundation of the nation of Israel.

Ramban also elicits the integral didactic features present within a particular narrative. In his introduction to the Jacob-Esau confrontation (Genesis 32–33), Ramban underscores its three primary messages: 1) "God saved His servant and redeemed him from the hand of one more powerful than he. He sent an angel and saved him"; 2) "Jacob did not rely on his righteousness, but he exerted all of his effort for his salvation"; and 3) "All that transpired between our patriarch [Jacob] with his brother Esau will continually happen to us with Esau's descendants."

Ramban (on Gen. 32:22, 23, 25) delineates how each of these edifying elements is present in the scene of Jacob's struggle with the angel. Illustrating the second message, Ramban observes that Jacob acts as "a man of war," sleeping outside "in the camp" (32:22), among his servants and shepherds, to guard against his brother's possible attack. During the night, he checks the water level, transfers his wife and children, and the

possessions by means of servants, ultimately being left behind on the wrong side of the river, where the struggle occurs (32:25–26).

Ramban (on Gen. 18:1; 35:10) analyzes this struggle in the broader context of the confrontation between Jacob and Esau, identifying the "man" as the angelic "prince of Esau." Accordingly, he intimates that the first didactic feature is expressed in this very event of the struggle, for salvation by an angel does not appear elsewhere in this biblical story. Ramban (on Gen. 32:26) presumes that Jacob needs to endure a struggle with the angel of Esau in order to attain a victory by divine mediation that prevents the angel from mortally harming him, so that Jacob's triumph over his enemy will be assured.[12]

Applying midrashic analysis, Ramban exposes the narrative's third instructive component, its futuristic implications. Jacob's victory over the angel signifies that while his righteous descendants will suffer an injurious blow at the hands of the Romans—Esau's descendants, Israel will ultimately prevail. In conjunction with this thematic underpinning, Ramban presumes that this narrative concludes with Jacob's return to the place of *Shalem* (33:18), alluding to his arrival whole and unscathed.[13]

Additionally, Ramban elicits this didactic perspective in his interpolation of the angel's reaction to Jacob's demand to know his name (32:30). "*Why do you ask for my name*: There is no benefit for you to know my name, for the power and capability belongs to God alone. If you call me, I will not answer you; and I will not be able to redeem you from your travails." Ramban (on Gen. 32:30) suggests that the angel teaches Jacob a lesson for generations: Israel needs to face its enemy by prayer that is directed to God Himself.

Conclusion

Ramban's biblical commentary provides an important interpretative method for the serious study of the stories of the Torah. His integrative approach discerns interlocking connections between the scenes of a biblical narrative or between different narratives, expanding the reader's scope of analysis. By assimilating the components of biblical narrative into a cohesive whole, Ramban delineates plot sequence and structure, primary themes and messages, and a broad perception of the biblical personalities. Ramban's interpretations reveal the essence of the biblical stories, which are the backbone of our national history.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

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NOTES

1. Ramban, Exod. 2:23, however, initially identifies this time frame as the length of Israel's oppression.
2. Ramban follows the midrashic view cited in *Shemot Rabbah* 1: 27; 5:2.
3. Ramban, Exod. 2:23, observes that verse 15 states, "He *settled* in Midian" (not "He *went* to Midian"), intimating that Moshe wandered a long time before settling down.
4. Yitzhak Gottlieb also addresses this plot sequence in *Yesh Seder la-Mikra: Hazal u-Farshanei Yemei ha-Benayyim al Mukdam u-Me'uhar ba-Torah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2009), p. 357.
5. This reading is influenced by Ibn Ezra, Exod. 4:20.

6. Ramban, Gen. 42:9. Ramban, Gen. 37:10, observes that the eleven brothers bow to Joseph in Gen. 43:26 (28). Although he does not specify, it appears (as R. Behaye maintains) that Jacob bows to him on his bed (49:31). Furthermore, even though the text does not record that all of Jacob's household shows obeisance to Joseph, Ramban seems to maintain that this event happened.
7. For this extensive analysis, see Ramban, Gen. 6:9. For the qualifying view of "in his generations," see Rashi's midrashic citation on 6:9.
8. Cf. Ibn Ezra, Gen. 6:8.
9. Ramban, Gen. 6:9. Ramban considers that the sons were as righteous as their father, but ultimately prefers the approach that sets Noah apart from all of his contemporaries, including his family. See Ramban, Gen. 7:1, 8:1, 9:8.
10. Ramban, Introduction to Exodus, observes that the exile to Egypt, which begins at the end of Genesis with Jacob's household leaving Canaan, is repeated at the beginning of Exodus to demonstrate the continuity between the narratives of these biblical books.
11. Ramban, Introduction to Exodus.
12. Compare Pinchas Yehudah Lieberman, *Perush ha-Ramban al ha-Torah: Tuv Yerushalayim, Penei Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem, 1985), I:404, notes on Ramban's introduction to Genesis 32.
13. Ramban, Gen. 32:26, based on *Bereshit Rabbah* 77:3; *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 2:7.

The Revolution of Terah and Avraham

Zvi Grumet

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The opening of *Lekh Lekha* raises numerous questions. Why did God choose Avraham? Why was it necessary to choose anyone? Why does the focus of *Sefer Bereshit* suddenly shift from a broad universal focus to a narrow, particularistic one?

Toledot

Let us begin with an observation about the structure of *Sefer Bereshit*. More than any other book in Tanakh, *Bereshit* can be identified as a book of *toledot*, of listing generations. There are only 13 times in all of Tanakh that a passage is introduced by the words *elleh toledot* or *zeh sefer toledot* ("These are the generations of . . ." or "This is the book of generations of")—and 11 of those are in *Bereshit*. This expression is so dominant that one could argue that it is the defining literary element of the book. That is, *Bereshit* is essentially comprised of 11 books of *toledot*, with Chapter 1 as an introductory chapter—and each unit of *toledot* ends just before the next one begins.

One interesting literary element defining each book of *toledot* is that it begins by repeating some information that we already know. Thus, *toledot Adam* begins with the birth of Shet, even though the end of the previous section concluded with that information; *toledot Noah* begins by telling us about his three sons, even though we were told that just a few *pesukim* earlier; *toledot Yitzhak* begins by telling us that Avraham had fathered Yitzhak.

This insight leads us to a somewhat puzzling observation—there is a *toledot Terah*, but no *toledot Avram* or *toledot Avraham*. How are we to understand this?

We would need to begin by defining what we believe *toledot* refers to. A survey of the 11 records of *toledot* reveals that "*toledot*" means neither children nor generations, as many would like to think. One need look no further than the first time it is used—*toledot shamayim ve-ha-aretz*, the "*toledot*" of the heavens and the earth (*Bereshit* 2:4). The heavens and the earth have neither children nor generations. It would appear that the term refers to an outcome or result, as in *Mishlei* 27:1—*lo teda mah yeled yom*—who knows what this day will give birth to, or, what will be the final outcome of what this day brings? What was the result of the creation of *shamayim va-aretz*? In the end, what came from Noah? The word *toledot* can almost be understood as meaning legacy. What was the legacy of Yitzhak? What was the legacy of Yishmael, or Esav?

Sefer Bereshit, then, would be the unfolding of the legacy of God's creation, followed by the legacy of human involvement in that creation, followed by successive legacies. What was the final legacy of Yishmael? That the promise given by the angel to his mother came true—Yishmael would be a great nation and dwell as a nomad. What was the legacy of Esav? That his father's blessing came true, as he finds a place to settle, establishes (or takes over) a kingdom, and plants his permanent roots outside the Promised Land.

Applying this observation to our earlier question yields a most bizarre conclusion. Since there is a *toledot Terah* but no *toledot Avraham*, Terah leaves a legacy under which Avraham's entire life's work is subsumed. How are we to understand this?

Terah's Legacy

Hazal understand Terah as nothing more than an idolater. His idolatry is unquestionable, and is mentioned explicitly in a *pasuk* in *Yehoshua* (24:2).

Yet an investigation of his introduction to us in *Bereshit* reveals another aspect to Terah, one that is truly revolutionary.

Terah is introduced to us at the end of *Parashat Noah*. Right from the start it is clear that he represents the end of one era and the beginning of a new one—each previous generation is introduced as having borne a single son (there were others, but they were unimportant to the Torah's story), Terah has three named sons. Terah fits into a pattern in *Bereshit*, in which significant figures have three sons. Adam has three named sons; Lemekh has three named sons; Noah has three named sons; and now it is Terah. Interestingly, there appears to be a pattern within those three sons. One son is clearly outside of the main line of the story (Kayin, Ham, Haran), one is the central figure from whom the story will continue (Shet, Shem, Avram) and one son plays a "supporting role" (Hevel, Yefet, Nahor).

Beyond that, however, there is an anomaly in the description of Terah and his family—his family. The Torah's description of Terah's family members is excessive in its mention of their relationship to him. Take one example. After introducing his three children, the death of Haran and the marriages of Avram and Nahor, the Torah describes a journey Terah initiates (11:31): "Terah took Avram, his son, Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, Sarai, his daughter-in-law, the wife of his son Avram . . .". Every relationship mentioned in this *pasuk* is unnecessary—we were just told that Avram is his son, that Lot is his grandson (from Haran), and that Sarai is Avram's wife. The text could have easily been written as: "Terah took Avram, Lot, and Sarai . . . ," yet it chose to accentuate the familial bonds. What the Torah seems to be emphasizing is that the value of family, and the responsibility for family, was a paramount value for Terah.

This is further accentuated by the verb *va-yikkah*—he took. The very fact that Terah took his orphaned grandson suggests a sense of responsibility for grandchildren (contrast that to Noah who curses his grandson). But the verb *va-yikkah* is used in the same passage to describe acts by Avram and Nahor, who took wives. This "taking" was apparently also an act of taking responsibility for orphans, as Milkah and Sarai (possibly another name for Yiskah) were their orphaned nieces. Orphaned nephews are adopted, orphaned nieces are married. That is how they are cared for. (This may be why Hazal suggest that Mordekhai was married to his orphaned cousin, Esther.)

The value of family, and the responsibility for family, is Terah's legacy. It is not surprising that the end of *toledot Terah* indicate this as well. As we

suggested earlier, each book of *toledot* ends just before the next one begins. *Toledot Terah* ends with death of Avraham and his burial. It is the first time in the Torah that we have explicit reference to a man being buried by his children—the sense of family responsibility has been extended to children's responsibility for parents. Even more, it is both Yitzhak and Yishmael who bury Avraham. Even the family torn by strife is unified by the sense of responsibility for parents.

It is also not surprising to find that Terah's son, Nahor, bears the same name as Terah's father. Terah honored his father by bestowing his name on his son.

Taking Wives

Let us examine more closely the marriages of Avram and Nahor. Reading the first 11 chapters of *Bereshit* we are struck by the description of 20 generations of man; not just mankind, but man. There are 20 generations of men begetting men. The only exceptions are the strange references to Lemekh's wives (4:22–24) and the anonymous references to the wives of Noah and his sons. To be sure, the absence of women in the narrative should not be surprising; the narrative reflects the culture and mores of the times. In this strictly patriarchal society, the primary role of women was to carry the man's seed for the next generation of men.

Enter Terah's children. Avram and Nahor are the first individuals in Shet's line to be described as having taken wives. Even more—it becomes clear early on that Sarai is barren. In a society for whom women's function was to serve as incubators for the man's seed, taking—and keeping—a wife who will not bear children was nothing short of revolutionary. If such a revolution were to take place, it would make sense for it to happen within the sphere of the man who effectively "invented" family values.

Avram Continues Terah's Legacy

Aside from the fact that Avram's entire life is subsumed under *toledot Terah*, and we now understand that it is Terah's legacy of family that Avram continues, there is additional textual evidence that Avram continues—or completes—what Terah set out to do. Let us look at two *pesukim*, written with only five *pesukim* separating them. One describes Terah's journey from Ur Kasdim, the other describes Avram's journey from Haran.

Terah's Journey (*Bereshit* 11:31)	Avram's Journey (*Bereshit* 12:5)
Terah took	*Avram took*
Avram his son	
Lot, the son of Haran, his grandson	*Lot, his nephew*
Sarai his daughter-in-law, the wife of Avram his son	*Sarai, his wife*
	And all their possessions and the souls they acquired in Haran
They left together from Ur Kasdim	*They left*
to go to the land of Canaan	*to go to the land of Canaan*
but they arrived in Haran and stayed there.	*and they arrived in the land of Canaan.*

The structure of the two *pesukim* is identical. Even the unnecessary descriptions of the family relationships (we already know that Sarai is Avram's wife and that Lot is his nephew) are copied in the description of Avram's journey. And just as Terah took responsibility for his orphaned grandson, Avram takes his orphaned nephew under his wing. The key difference between the two descriptions is that whereas Terah planned to go to Canaan he never arrived. By contrast, Avram finished the journey that Terah started.

Both literally—in terms of the arrival in Canaan, and figuratively—in terms of developing the notion of family, Avram completes Terah's journey. It does not surprise us that most of the challenges Avraham faces revolve around his family. The command to leave his father, Sarai with Pharaoh in Egypt and with Avimelekh in Gerar, Lot in Sedom, Hagar and Sarai, Yishmael and Akedat Yitzhak, all involve sacrifices related to family. The man of family must endure challenges to his core values.

Why Is Family So Important?

All of this begs the question—why is family so important? Our answer, to put it simply, is that the Torah understands the family as the core unit for

the transmission of values. This is actually explicit in the Torah. Prior to the destruction of Sedom, the Torah informs us of God's choice of Avraham and His decision to reveal His impending plan to him. "Avraham will become a great and mighty nation, and through him will come blessing to all other nations of the earth. Since I know that he will instruct his children and his household after him, that they will observe God's way in doing justice and righteousness—that is why Avraham will receive all of which has spoken about him" (*Bereshit* 18:18–19).

The opening words identifying Avraham as the one who will become a great and mighty nation and through whom will come blessing to all of the other nations, are a clear reference to the beginning of *Lekh Lekha*, where God initially chooses Avraham and promises him precisely those things (12:2–3). If so, then this passage is where the Torah explicitly identifies the reason for the choice of Avraham—because Avraham will use the vehicle of the family as the unit of transmission of the values of *tzedakah* and *mishpat*. Let us explore this innovation of Avraham from a number of angles.

Innovating Beyond His Predecessors

If the Torah highlights Terah's legacy as the one who founded the notion of family, to the extent that Avraham's entire life is subsumed under it, we must be curious as to why God did not choose Terah and instruct him with *lekh lekha*. The answer here is apparently clear—Terah was, as stated in *Yehoshua*, an idolater. Although Terah's innovation of family was significant, it was insufficient, since he was unprepared to leave his idolatry.

Perhaps even more interesting is the question of *tzedakah* and *mishpat*, which Avraham apparently championed. From where did Avraham learn these values, and why were his predecessors not chosen? One could easily argue that these were Avraham's innovations, yet it appears from the text that Avraham carried with him an earlier tradition. Hazal identify this earlier tradition as the "yeshiva of Shem and Ever," and this bears a closer examination.

Our introduction to Ever's legacy is introduced by an unusual comment. Back in *Parashat Noah*, when identifying the legacies of Noah's sons (*toledot benei Noah—Bereshit* 10:1), Shem is identified as the father of all of the "Ever-ites" (*benei Ever*—10:21). This is a strange appellation on two accounts. First, Ever has not been identified yet. He is first introduced

three *pesukim* later. Second, when Ever is introduced, he is only one of Shem's great-grandchildren. Apparently, the Torah is suggesting that there is some link between Shem and Ever. Even more, there is a link between Shem and all those identified with Ever. Although at the end of *Parashat Noah* that identification is still a mystery, that mystery is cleared up later as Avram is identified as an Ivri—a descendant of Ever (14:13). (This appellation is later given to Yosef, and then to Yosef's brothers. They are all the *benei Ever* referred to in *Parashat Noah*.) Thus the text is suggesting that there is some legacy which began with Shem, was passed to Ever, and then to all those who are identified with Ever. Shem's precise legacy is left unclear—it might have begun with the incident after the *Mabbul* in which he protects his father's dignity and receives his blessing, and it may have to do with Avraham's notions of *tzedakah* and *mishpat*.

All this returns us to our original question. If, indeed, Avraham carries a tradition from Ever, passed on through Shem (or, in Hazal's language, a tradition that Avraham learned in the yeshiva of Shem and Ever), why were Shem and Ever not chosen by God for the *lekh lekha* command and blessing?

The answer, I believe, is that while Shem and Ever may have been champions of particular values, they were unable to find an appropriate vehicle through which to transmit those values. Shem waited for three generations before he found someone worthy to teach; Ever waited even longer. Absent a reliable vehicle for transmitting values, they had to wait until a worthy recipient of their tradition could be found. Avraham, however, presented a new model. Avraham married the values of family he learned from his father with the values of *tzedakah* and *mishpat*, and understood that the family had the potential to serve as the vehicle for the transmission of other values.

Terah, as an idolater, lacked those other values; Shem and Ever lacked the reliable vehicle of transmission of their values. Hence God's testimony about Avraham's commitment to instruct his children and his household in upholding God's values of *tzedakah* and *mishpat* (*Bereshit* 18:17–19).

A Return to the Original Plan

The significance of the Terah-Avraham revolution in *Bereshit* cannot be overstated. The first *toledot* is *toledot shamayim ve-ha-aretz*, creation itself.

What was the result, or the legacy, of that process? It was a two-fold legacy. On the one hand, it was the legacy of a shattered family, of the first fratricide. On the other hand, it was the legacy of Enosh, who began to call in the name of God (4:26). Humans had the capacity to recognize God, but they would need some help in putting their families in order. The second *toledot*, that of Adam, yielded an even more troubling dichotomy. There were individuals, like Noah, who managed to find favor in God's eyes (6:8), but for the masses, their thoughts and actions were becoming increasingly bad (6:5). That left God with little choice but to start anew.

Following the *Mabbul*, *toledot benei Noah* leaves us with a world that is repopulated and diverse. Indeed, God has successfully brought about a fulfillment of His original intent of *peru u-revu u-milu et ha-aretz*, albeit not without considerable effort and intervention (the dispersion from Bavel helped considerably). The question that remained was whether humanity would once again call in God's name, as did Enosh.

With the choice of Avram that question was finally answered. Avram heeds God's instruction, journeys to Canaan, and when he reaches Bet El he builds an altar and calls in God's name (12:8). With the emergence of Avram, who transforms into Avraham, we are returned to a state that existed prior to the *Mabbul*. The return to this state, however, was not a step backward but a step forward. For whereas Enosh's calling in God's name comes in the backdrop of the first failed family, one that did not transmit its values, Avram's calling in God's name is accompanied by his championing of the value of family. With the vehicle for the transmission of values in place, the story can progress.

The Beginning of a Process

Yet as we know, although Terah and Avram innovated the notion of family, the families in *Bereshit* are hardly models worthy of emulation. Tensions between spouses and siblings abound. Those tensions lead to multiple breakups, planned vengeance, and even plots to kill. Indeed, it is my contention that all these family challenges are an essential part of what hindered the process of *Bereshit*. Strife in the families of the *Avot* prevented God from moving forward. After all, how could we continue if the central vehicle we need for the transmission of the values God wants to propagate is dysfunctional?

This, I believe, is the underlying tension in the story of Yosef. If Yosef disappears, if the brothers don't somehow figure out how to maintain their nuclear unit, then God's plan cannot continue. It is only at the very end of the story, after Yaakov's death and the fear expressed by the brothers and Yosef's response, that it becomes clear that there is a mutual commitment. It is only with the mending of the family that the story can continue.

That is why *Bereshit* ends with a story of a family that reunites following a generations-long conflict. That is why at the end of *Bereshit* we hear of Yosef raising his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren (50:23). That is why *Bereshit* can close with Yosef's understanding of his need for his brothers, and of the long-term destiny of his people. And that is why immediately following *Bereshit* we see the transformation of a family into the seed of a nation.

Searching for Holiness: *The Song of the Sea* in Tanakh and *Tefillah*

Rachel Friedman

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In the past several generations, a literary approach to Tanakh study has engaged both lay and academic Jewish learners; indeed, it is a significant subject in this volume. The thesis of this article is that a literary reading of biblical material found in the daily *liturgy* can similarly infuse our prayers with new levels of meaning and connect these specific prayers to the larger themes and messages of the Siddur.

In this article, I will focus on the prayer of *Az Yashir*, also known as *Shirat ha-Yam* (*The Song of the Sea*, or simply, the *Song*), to demonstrate this methodology.[1] It is hoped that a literary-theological analysis of the *Song* in its biblical and liturgical settings will inspire a personal connection between this ancient poem and its modern daily readers.

The Verses of Praise and the Daily Prayer Service

The *Song of the Sea* is part of the section of the liturgy known as *Pesukei de-Zimra*, or *verses of praise*. The Talmud teaches (*Berakhot* 32b) that "a

person should first recount the praise of God, and then pray." The Rabbis instituted *Pesukei de-Zimra* to prepare the individual for the recitation of the central elements of the daily prayer service—the *Shema* and the *Amidah*—by focusing one's thoughts on God and contemplation of His glory. Before we can ask God to grant our needs and requests, we enter the proper state of mind by thinking about Him and praising Him.

The broad theme of these selections is praise of God for creation of the splendid and orderly natural universe. *Pesukei de-Zimra* begins with the introductory blessing of *Barukh she-Amar*, which includes 10 praises of God, beginning with the word "*Barukh*"—blessed is He—and explains its goal:[2] "*U-ve-shirei David avdekha, nehallelekha Hashem Elokenu*"—we intend to praise God through the songs of David. Indeed, the core passages that follow are the six final chapters of *Sefer Tehillim* (Book of Psalms)—Psalm 145, commonly known as "*Ashrei*," (Praiseworthy are those . . .)[3] and Psalms 146–150, the "*Hallelukah*s"—corresponding to the six days of creation that we praise.[4] The majority of the remainder of *Pesukei de-Zimra* is also composed of passages from the Bible traditionally attributed to David, from *Tehillim* and elsewhere. *Pesukei de-Zimra* then concludes with the blessing of *Yishtabah* (May Your name be praised), which enumerates 15 words of praise and 15 expressions of glorification of God.

The *Song of the Sea* stands out from most other selections in *Pesukei de-Zimra* because it is not attributed to David.[5] It is a song found in the biblical book of *Shemot*, a song recited by the Israelites after they crossed the Red Sea and their Egyptian pursuers were defeated. Why is this song, which begins with the words "Then Moses and Israel sang," included in the category of the songs of David? What was the motivation for including this passage, and the verses that precede and follow it, in the *Pesukei de-Zimra*?

In order to answer these questions we must consider the significance of the *Song of the Sea* in its biblical context.

Biblical Significance of the Song

The chart below describes the structure and themes of the book of *Shemot* based on a plain-sense reading of the biblical account.

Book of Exodus	
Part I	
1–14	Oppression and Exodus
15:1–21	***Song of the Sea***
Part 2	
15:22–ch. 17	Journey begins
18–24	Revelation at Mt. Sinai
25–31	Commandment to build *Mishkan* (Tabernacle)
32–34	Sin of the Golden Calf
35–40	Construction of the *Mishkan*

On the simplest level, *Shirat ha-Yam* marks a turning point, the end of the period of the exodus. The time of oppression and miraculous salvation are over (chapters 1–15:21), and the journey through the wilderness toward the land of Canaan has begun (chapters 15:22–40). Thus, *Shirat ha-Yam* is the demarcation line between Part 1 and Part 2 of the book of Exodus. In this sense, it is similar to Song of Deborah (Judges 5), which marks the completion of the conquest of Canaan.

On a deeper level, however, *Shirat ha-Yam* is the key to understanding the entire structure of *Sefer Shemot*. Analysis of the *Song* helps clarify the very nature of this book.

A disagreement regarding the overall theme and purpose of *Sefer Shemot* dates back to the rabbinic period. Is *Shemot* a book that tells the story of a nation of slaves who are liberated, enter a covenant with God, and, in a culminating crescendo, build a Sanctuary in which to serve Him? Or is it the story of a nation liberated by God and blessed with divine revelation that then falters in idol worship, so that God must command the construction of a Sanctuary to fulfill their need for physical worship?

This divergence in opinion reflects two different views as to the actual chronology of events in the narrative. According to the sequence described in the book, and assumed inter alia by the thirteenth-century Spanish exegete Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban), God commanded Moshe regarding the construction of the *Mishkan* immediately following the revelation at Sinai. It had always been God's intention to have a Tabernacle at Sinai and to dwell among the people.[6] The people then sinned with the Golden Calf, and the Torah therefore reiterates that the command to build the *Mishkan* was nonetheless fulfilled.

The Midrash, however, as well as many of the classical commentators such as the sixteenth century Italian exegete R. Obadiah Sforno,[7] assumes that this is one example of the principle "*en mukdam u-me'uhar ba-Torah*" —the Torah is not necessarily written in chronological order. In fact, the Sages argued, the command to build the *Mishkan* followed the sin of the Golden Calf; it was only in response to the sin that the concept of the *Mishkan* was introduced at all.[8]

There is an indication in the text that the book of Exodus records events in their actual sequence—and we can appreciate this through careful study of *Shirat ha-Yam*. Immediately after the liberation from Egypt, after witnessing their salvation from the Egyptians at the Red Sea, Moses and the people pause to reflect on the new era of history unfolding before them. At this juncture, the Israelites express their heartfelt desire to embrace God in sacred space: "*zeh E-li ve-anvehu*." Targum Onkelos explains the word *ve-anvehu* as deriving from the word *naveh*, habitation: "This is my God, and I will build a Sanctuary for Him." The twelfth-century Spanish exegete Abraham Ibn Ezra elaborates: "This is my God, and I wish to make Him a habitation wherein He can dwell with me forever."[9]

At the conclusion of the *Song*, the nation lodges the same request: "You will bring them and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance, The place You made to dwell in, O Lord, The Sanctuary, my Sovereign, that Your hands established." When the Israelites are finally planted in the land of Israel,[10] they will build a permanent structure in His honor. *Shirat ha-Yam* thus begins and ends with the same theme: The children of Israel desire a physical location at which they can experience God's presence on earth. Scholars have noted that this theme is prominent in ancient Near Eastern texts as well, where songs often express a desire to build temples to the gods. For example, the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma Elish* culminates with the building of a temple for Marduk, and the Ugaritic Baal-Yam texts describe the construction of a palace for Baal following his victory over Yam. Thus, *Shirat ha-Yam*, which proclaims the sovereignty of the God of Israel, asks that a Temple be built to His name.

This desire to build a shrine for God is implicit elsewhere in the *Song* as well. Whereas the first 11 verses of the *Song* celebrate God's salvation of Israel at the Red Sea, verse 12 introduces the theme of God's holiness in addition to that of His power. "Who is like You among the heavenly powers, Lord! Who is like You, mighty in *holiness!* . . ." Similarly, in verse 13

God is not only the victorious warrior, but also the redeemer who guides Israel to His destination of holiness: "You have led with might to Your *holy abode*." Ibn Ezra asserts that the "holy abode" referred to here is Mount Sinai; the Israelites praise God for leading them to the site of Revelation. This explanation is in fact quite logical given the location of this praise in the Song—after the description of the events at the Sea and before the description of the Canaanite nations' fear of conquest.[11] If the nation's desire of *ve-anvehu* is their wish to enshrine God on earth, we might argue that the hope expressed in the *Song* is similarly to build the *Mishkan* at Mount Sinai.

Israel desired a Sanctuary, a sacred place, and God responded by commanding the building of the *Mishkan*—not as a concession to human frailty, but as a response to the Jewish people's desire for nearness to Him as expressed in *Shirat ha-Yam*. This indicates that the final 16 chapters of *Sefer Shemot*, the complex and detailed enterprise of building the *Mishkan*, were always part of the plan to create an abode for God's Presence in the wilderness. Perhaps the *Mishkan* was a response to the desire for a physical mode of worship, but that desire is not negative. On the contrary—it is the lofty desire to continue to glorify God in a sacred space long after we conclude singing the song glorifying His miracles.

The Liturgical Context of the Song of the Sea

With this background in mind, we can understand the function of *Shirat ha-Yam* as part of *Pesukei de-Zimra*, which are predominantly the songs of David. *Shirat ha-Yam*, the Torah paradigm for the praise of God as Savior, culminates with a request that He invest His glory on earth, that He create a sacred space in which we can worship Him. This is, in fact, the subtext of all of the *Pesukei de-Zimra*.

In the Ashkenazi liturgy,[12] we precede *Barukh she-Amar*, the beginning of *Pesukei de-Zimra*, with *Mizmor Shir Hanukkat ha-Bayit le-David* (Psalm 30); according to a prominent rabbinic tradition this Psalm was intended by David to be sung at the inauguration of the Temple.[13] In fact, although it was David's son Solomon who would actually build the Temple, one of our primary associations with David is his desire to build it. He pleaded with God for the opportunity to build a house for Him, and when he was turned down, he prepared blueprints and materials for the eventual construction.[14]

The *Pesukei de-Zimra* continue to praise God particularly in connection with His sanctuary on earth. *Hodu*, the first passage that follows *Barukh she-Amar*, is a song of thanksgiving composed by David when the ark was brought to Jerusalem, in preparation for the ultimate construction of a *Mikdash*.[15] *Mizmor le-Todah* (Psalm 100) was recited when one brought a thanksgiving offering in the Temple[16] upon salvation from a hazardous situation. Psalm 145 or *Tehillah le-David*, the most important passage in *Pesukei de-Zimra*, is introduced with the words, "*Ashrei yoshevei vetekha*"—"Happy are those who dwell in Your *House*,"[17] although these words are not part of the biblical psalm. The final "*Hallelukah*," the magnificent culminating song of *Tehillim*, Psalm 150, was recited by pilgrims bringing their first fruits to Jerusalem.[18] It begins, "Praise God in His *holy place*."

Following this psalm, we recite three verses from *Tehillim* that begin with the word "*barukh*"—"blessed,"[19] which would seem to bring closure to the praise begun in *Barukh she-Amar*, where that word is the central theme. We would expect *Pesukei de-Zimra* to end here, but instead, we move on to the passages of "*va-Yevarekh David*"—"David blessed the Lord," "*Attah hu Hashem levadekha*,"[20]—"You alone are the Lord," and *Shirat ha-Yam*. What are these sections doing here? I suggest that they continue the theme that we have begun through the excerpts from *shirei David*; they mark the historical moments when Israel asked God for sacred space on earth.

At the end of his life, David made Jerusalem the capital and brought the ark there. Denied the chance to build the Temple himself, he assembled the people and charged them with the task. In "*va-Yevarekh David*,"[21] he recites a prayer of thanksgiving after concluding his preparations for the Temple that would be built by his son Solomon.

The next section, "*Attah hu Hashem levadekha*,"[22]—"You alone are the Lord"—is an excerpt from a prayer recited by Ezra, Nehemiah, and their community after the Return to Zion. Ezra and Nehemiah summon the people to reaffirm their covenant with God and ask God to help them as they rebuild Jerusalem, with the intent of rebuilding the Temple. Indeed, this gathering culminates with the people's affirming their commitment to the Temple service (Nehemiah 10:40)—"We will not leave the house of our God."

We then continue with "*va-Yosha*" and *Shirat ha-Yam*, which describe, as we have said, the very first request for a Sanctuary. The *Song* glorifies

God as Israel's Savior and asks Him to invest his Presence in a sacred space on earth—a *Mishkan* or *Mikdash*.

The opening words of *Shirat ha-Yam* indicate that this composition was recited in immediate response to the miracles that Israel witnessed at the sea—"*Az yashir*," "**Then** they sang." The rabbis of the Midrash note that these words are actually written in future tense and, taken out of context, would be translated literally as, "*Then* they *will* sing."[23] According to this Midrash, this is the song that Moses and the Israelites will sing in messianic times. Similarly, Rashi writes, "This is a hint in the Torah to the Resurrection" (Rashi, Exodus 15:1).

Thus, to the rabbis, the significance of *The Song of the Sea* is not limited exclusively to the episode of the splitting of the sea. Similarly, to the compilers of *Pesukei de-Zimra* the recitation of *Shirat ha-Yam* did not simply recall a song of praise that was sung once upon a time or a request for God's presence that was lodged ages ago. *Shirat ha-Yam* anticipated messianic times and the Third Temple; it constitutes our own praise of God and our own request for *Mikkedash A-donai konenu yadekha*, The sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands established.

Because of these messianic implications, we conclude our recitation of the *Shirat ha-Yam* with other verses that refer to the ultimate redemption and God's universal sovereignty: For kingship is the Lord's and He rules over the nations" (*Tehillim* 22:29); "Saviors shall go up to Mount Zion to judge Mount Esau, and the kingship shall be the Lord's" (*Obadiah* 1:21); "Then the Lord shall be King over the whole earth; on that day, the Lord shall be one and His name will be one" (*Zechariah* 14:9).

According to our understanding of the thrust of *Shirat ha-Yam*, it serves as an appropriate capstone to *Pesukei de-Zimra*, for it declares the glory of God, crowns Him as our King, and asks Him to create sacred space for us on earth.

Praise and Presence: The Song of the Sea in Bible and Prayer

This article has sought to demonstrate that an appreciation of the significance of *Shirat ha-Yam* in its Torah context sheds light on its role in *Pesukei de-Zimra* as well. Indeed, we may go a step further; the narratives of *Sefer Shemot* complete the story of creation in *Sefer Bereshit*. The ultimate goal of all of creation is the creation of a space on earth in which God

can dwell and we can worship Him. In the Song of the Sea, the nation of Israel—for the first time in its history—sings a song of praise and thanksgiving to God and asks Him for a *naveh, a mishkan, a mikdash*.

Thus, *The Song of the Sea* is the biblical paradigm for the praise of God and provides a literary model for the organization of *Pesukei de-Zimra*. Like *Shirat ha-Yam*, *Pesukei de-Zimra* begins with an appreciation of God's greatness and concludes with the contemplation of His holiness. While *Barukh she-Amar* praises God as the creator and sustainer of the universe and all of humanity, *Yishtabah* praises not only God's greatness, but also His "holiness in heaven and earth."

It has been suggested that the 10 words of praise in *Barukh she-Amar* are meant by its composers to evoke the 10 times that God "spoke" ("*va-yomer*") in the course of Creation (*Avot* 5:1).[24] It has also been suggested that the 15 words of praise in *Yishtabah* correspond to the 15 steps leading to the entrance of the Temple, the steps on which the Levites stood as they sang their hymns—*Shirei ha-Ma'a lot* (Psalms 120–134).[25] *Pesukei de-Zimra* can thus be understood as beginning with the praise of God of Creation and concluding with the praise of God who answers our request for Him to dwell on earth.

In sum, *Shirat ha-Yam* and the passages that precede and follow it invoke our desire for a House of God—the *Mishkan* of the wilderness, the First and Second Temples, the Temple in messianic times—and are therefore a most fitting conclusion for the *Pesukei de-Zimra*. As we move from *Pesukei de-Zimra* to the *Shema* and *Amidah*, we move from individual to communal prayer. At this point, it is appropriate to invoke these historical moments—past and future—in which the nation of Israel prays as a community, seeking to create sacred space on earth. The nature of the sacred space may change, as in the transition from Temple to synagogue, but its significance for Jewish life endures as the culmination of our people's search for holiness.

NOTES

The author is grateful to Meira Mintz and Dr. David Shatz for their contributions to earlier drafts of this article.

1. The history of the liturgical recitation of *Shirat ha-Yam* is itself a fascinating topic but one that is outside the scope of this essay. *Shirat ha-Yam* was part of the liturgy in the Temple; it was sung by the Levites on Shabbat afternoons in conjunction with the offering of the *korban tamid*. After the destruction of the Second Temple, two different customs developed with respect to the inclusion of *Shirat ha-Yam* in the prayer service. In Babylonia, it was not included in the daily service, and even in Geonic times, it was sung only on Shabbat and holidays; only much later did it become a fixed part of the daily prayer service. In the land of Israel, however, many customs of the Temple were incorporated into the daily service after the destruction, and *Shirat ha-Yam* was thus included in the *Pesukei de-Zimra* from earliest times. See, e.g. Levi, Eliezer, *Torat ha-Tefillah* (Tel Aviv: Abraham Zioni Pub. House, 1967), pp. 123–125.
2. In the first sentence of the prayer, "*Barukh she-Amar, barukh hu*," the words "*barukh hu*" are a response to the previous phrase and are therefore not counted as a separate line of praise.
3. In the prayer service, Psalm 145 is introduced with two verses—*Tehillim* 84:5 and 144:15—both of which begin with the word "*Ashrei*." Therefore, this prayer is commonly referred to as "*Ashrei*."
4. See, e.g., comment of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in *The Koren Siddur with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary by Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009), pp. 62, 65.

   > The concept of God as creator is fused with that of God as sustainer; God created humanity and continues to care for it. Thus, these passages describe not only the wonders of nature, but the graciousness of God's nurture. Psalm 147, for example, describes God as the One who not only "counts the stars" and rules the cosmos, but also the One who "heals the broken hearted and binds their wounds."

5. The passages from Nehemiah 9:6–11 which immediately precede *Shirat ha-Yam* in *Pesukei de-Zimra* and the passages from Obadiah 1:21 and Zechariah 14:9 that immediately follow it are also not attributed to David. We will deal with these passages later in this article.
6. See especially Ramban's introduction to *Sefer Shemot*.
7. See especially Sforno's introduction to the Torah where he discusses the content and purpose of *Sefer Shemot*.
8. The *Midrash Tanhuma*, for example, explains that the golden vessels of the *Mishkan* serve as an atonement, *kapparah*, for the gold used to construct the Golden Calf. See *Tanhuma Terumah* 8. This is also the approach adopted by the eleventh-century French commentator Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi), who suggests that the bull brought by Aaron as a sin offering in the dedica-

tion of the *Mishkan* was intended to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf. See Rashi on Exodus 29:1.

9. See similarly the interpretation of Sforno on Exodus 15:2—"I will make a habitation so the He may dwell within us" or *Tanakh, The Traditional Hebrew Text and The New JPS Translation*, Second Edition (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), which translates: "I will enshrine Him." An alternative translation is "I will glorify." Rashi, after citing Onkelos' translation, brings this alternate explanation: "From the word *noi*—beauty. I will tell of His beauty and praise to all people." See also *The Koren Siddur*, p. 80, which translates "I will beautify."
10. This verse uses plant imagery—"*titta'emo*"—evoking the concept of rootedness in the land.
11. Nahum Sarna agrees that this is the most likely interpretation. See The *JPS Torah Commentary, Exodus*, by Nahum M. Sarna (Philadelphia, New York, Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 80. This explanation is substantiated by the description of the journey from Egypt in Psalms 78:53–54: "And He brought them to the border of His holiness; this *mountain* that His right hand acquired." It is also implicit in the language of God's promise at the burning bush (Exodus 3:12), "When you take the nation out of Egypt, you will worship God on this *mountain*."
12. The discussion in this section assumes the sequence of *Pesukei de-Zimra* in Nusah Ashkenaz.
13. See e.g. Rashi on *Tehillim* 30:1. See also the comment of the thirteenth-century exegete Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak) on this verse.
14. See II Samuel 7 and I Chronicles 17, 22:5–19.
15. I Chronicles 16: 8–34.
16. See e.g. Rashi on *Tehillim* 100:1.
17. See *Tehillim* 84:5.
18. See e.g. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Bikkurim* 4:17.
19. These three verses are the concluding verses of three of the books of *Tehillim*.
20. Nehemiah 9:6–11.
21. I Chronicles 29:10–13.
22. Nehemiah 9:6–11.
23. See e.g. *Mekhilta* on Exodus 15:1. According to the simple meaning of the biblical text, the future tense is used here as a reference to the past. Rashi (on Exodus 15:1) offers a third possibility when he explains, "Then—after witnessing the miracles—it occurred to Moshe that he should sing."
24. See comment of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in *The Koren Siddur*, p. 65.
25. See *Sefer Abudraham ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem: Even Israel Publishing, 1995), p. 74. See also discussion in Jacobson, B.S., *The Weekday Siddur* (Tel Aviv: Sinai Publishing, 1978), p. 119.

Part IV:

Alternative Models of Tanakh Study

Scripture Envisioned: The Bible through the Eyes of Rembrandt

Bryna Jocheved Levy

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In 1914 Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who would later become the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, visited the National Gallery in London. His aesthetic sensibilities were aroused by the artistic grandeur he encountered. He was particularly transfixed by Rembrandt's paintings:

> When I lived in London I used to visit the National Gallery and my favorite pictures were those of Rembrandt. I really think that Rembrandt was a *Tzadik* (a righteous person). Do you know that when I first saw Rembrandt's works, they reminded me of the legend about the creation of light? We are told that when God created light it was so strong and pellucid, that one could see from one end of the world to the other, but God was afraid that the wicked might abuse it. What did He do? He reserved that light for the righteous when the Messiah should come. But now and then there are great men who are blessed and privileged to see it. I think that Rembrandt was one of them, and the light in his pictures is the very light that was originally created by God Almighty. (*Jewish Chronicle*, London, September 13, 1935)

Rembrandt van Rijn, a master of *chiaroscuro* (light and shadow), infused his portraits with a transcendental vitality. While this is true of all of his portraits it is certainly the case with his paintings of biblical scenes. Rembrandt's penchant for the Bible is reflected in the number of biblical portraits, etchings, and drawings he created. In the field of portraiture in general Rembrandt left 400 paintings, 75 etchings, and only a few drawings. This may be contrasted with the 160 paintings, 80 etchings, and more than 600 drawings of biblical subjects that have come down to us.

Rembrandt's prodigious activity in this field reflects his love of and intimate knowledge of the Bible. Rembrandt's biblical scenes are not merely an exercise in historical painting; they contain his own passion and intensity as well as a remarkable degree of his innovative biblical interpretation.

A picture is worth a thousand words. And in the case of Rembrandt this adage can be multiplied exponentially. I would like to survey two of Rembrandt's biblical paintings in order to gain insight into the biblical text through his artistic and interpretative grandeur. It is often the case that something in his painting will stir our souls to consider aspects of the story we hadn't considered before. Other times we will note something glaringly absent from the canvas, which focuses our attention on a dimension of the biblical narrative that is of great importance. In either case these pictures serve as a catalyst for profound analysis and speculation on the Book of Books—the Bible.

"Scripture Envisioned: The Bible Through the Eyes of Rembrandt" (http://www.judaicaru.org/rembrandt_eng/) is a website that contains an impressive exhibit of Rembrandt's etchings and portraits of biblical stories. It also contains classical rabbinic, medieval, and modern exegesis, which complement, supplement, and enhance the illustrations on view.

Allow me to share with you the etiology of the site, which began with a class about the prophet Jeremiah, which I taught in the Kehilath Jeshurun Synagogue in Manhattan. In the audience sat George S. Blumenthal, the founder of COJS: The Center for On-Line Jewish Studies. At the end of the class he approached me and said, "Bryna, you brought the Bible to life. I want you to do that through Rembrandt's pictures of biblical scenes." Given that my first love is Bible, and that Rembrandt is my favorite artist, I was delighted. George procured permission from museums throughout the world to use the pictures and commissioned Ardon Bar Hama to digitize and design the website. He had the vision and magnanimity to have the site translated into Hebrew (www.judaicaru.org/rem-

brandt_heb/) translated by Sara Fuchs, and designed by Natan Bar; and into Russian (www.judaicaru.org/rembrandt_rus/) translated by Dr. Yona Shnaider, designed by Natan Bar.

All of this was done over ten years ago. George Blumenthal was the trailblazer, digitizing this site, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Aleppo Codex, and other great treasures as a gift to the world (www.cojs.org).

Let us begin with the painting in the London National Gallery, *Belshazzar's Feast*, which may have inspired Rabbi Kook to make his grandiloquent statement about the numinous light of creation that Rembrandt brought into the world.

Belshazzar's Feast and the Writing on the Wall

Chapter five of the Book of Daniel describes the royal banquet of King Belshazzar, the son of Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar was the Babylonian emperor who had conquered Jerusalem, exiled its people, destroyed the Temple, and carried off its sacred vessels in triumph. Interestingly, the Bible portrays him as eventually acknowledging his hubris and humbling himself, as he says, before the "Ever-Living One, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion and whose kingdom endures throughout the generations. All the inhabitants of the earth are of no account…" (Daniel 4:31–32).

Belshazzar, his son, was nowhere near as humble. In the midst of a gala banquet he ordered the sacred vessels to be brought to his palace. In addition to profaning them by using them as common drinking cups, he added sacrilege by toasting and praising his pagan gods. As punishment for glorifying lifeless gods, the live hand of God writes a cryptic message on the palace wall:

> But you Belshazzar his son, did not humble yourself although you knew all this. You exalted yourself against the Lord of Heaven and had the vessels of His temple brought to you. You and your nobles, your consorts and your concubines drank wine from them and praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear, or understand; but the God who controls your life breath and every move you make—Him you did not glorify! He therefore made the hand appear and caused the writing that is inscribed: *Mene Mene Tekel U-pharsin*. . . . (Daniel 5:22–25).

Mene Mene Tekel U-pharsin

Overcome by terror, Belshazzar called for his soothsayers. No one could interpret the inscription. The Queen suggested that they check with Daniel, one of the exiles from Jerusalem, who was summoned to solve the riddle. Daniel asserts that whereas his father Nebuchadnezzar humbled himself before the Lord, Belshazzar's impious desecration of the sacred vessels had called forth immediate punishment. The cryptograms, reduced to three, are to be deciphered as follows:

- *Mene*—numbered; God numbered your reign and ended it.
- *Tekel*—weighed; you have been weighed in the balance and have been found wanting.
- *Pharsin*—divided; your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

The story ends with Daniel being given the insignia of nobility and Belshazzar being killed that very night.

Rembrandt has captured the startled expression of the king and his guests. The artist has remained true to the biblical text insofar as only the king beholds the inscription, while the others drop their vessels and gaze at the king. It is noteworthy that he has painted the words of the cryptic message in Hebrew letters, but has written them up and down rather than

from right to left, offering an inventive explanation for why they could not be deciphered. This explanation is found in the Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 22a in the name of R. Samuel, and was probably known to Rembrandt by way of his Jewish friend R. Menashe b. Israel (see explanation of *David Defeats Goliath* on the website cited above).

Holy Vessels

The story itself and Rembrandt's dramatic depiction raise and highlight the basic question, what is the purpose of *kelei kodesh*, the holy vessels?

The notion of royal vessels belonging to the King of Kings seems somewhat primitive and anthropomorphic. Does the Master of the Universe need a set of tableware? The Rabbis grappled with this question:

> What was the purpose of . . . all of the holy vessels? The Jewish people said to the Holy One Blessed Be He: Master of the Universe, the kings of the nations have a palace, a table, a candelabrum, incense burners . . . these are appurtenances of kingship. Every king needs them, and You are our king, our savior, our redeemer; shouldn't You have these royal paraphernalia so that the entire world will know that You are king? He said to them, My sons, you are flesh and blood, and so you have need of all this, but I have not need since I do not eat or drink, I need no light as my servants attest, since the sun and the moon illuminate the world and I shine my light upon them. I shall watch over you well in the merit of your fathers. (*Midrash Aggadah*, Exodus 27, Buber ed.)

The conclusion is clear: the vessels serve human needs, not divine ones. But precisely because humans depend on material forms as symbols, their misuse of such symbols—as in the case of Belshazzar—brings on catastrophe.

Man's Creative Offerings

We still are left to ponder why in the context of the biblical story of Belshazzar's feast we find such a stern and inexorable condemnation. What was it about the use of the holy vessels that signaled the fall of the curtain on the Babylonian empire?

In the description of Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Jerusalem, the Bible makes mention of the following bit of information:

> King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon marched against him [Jehoiachin]; he bound him in fetters to convey him to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar also brought some vessels of the House of the Lord to Babylon, and set them in his palace. (2 Chronicles 36:7)

In reaction to this, Hananiah son of Azzur, a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah, proclaims:

> Thus said the Lord of Hosts the God of Israel: I hereby break the yoke of the king of Babylon. In two years I will restore to this place all the vessels of the House of the Lord which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took from this place and brought to Babylon. And I will bring back to this place King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the Judean exiles who went to Babylon—declares the Lord. Yes, I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon. (Jeremiah 28:1–4)

The order in his description is telling; first vessels, then the king, then the people. The captured vessels signify a perceived defeat of the God of Judah. The symbolic value of these vessels was immense. That would explain why Belshazzar's misuse of them was so provocative, and induced the wrath of God.

Biblical exegesis adds an additional observation about sacred vessels to explain why they played such a critical role in the story of Belshazzar. The Bible tells us that humans were created in the image of God. God's role as a creator is reflected in the creativity of humanity. In Genesis, six days of creation were followed by the creation of the day of rest, the Sabbath. In the Book of Exodus we learn of six other days that were followed by a special seventh day:

> The Presence of the Lord abode on Mount Sinai, and the cloud hid it for six days. On the seventh day, He called to Moses from the midst of the cloud. . . . "Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him. And these are the gifts that you shall accept from them: gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple. . . . And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them." (Exodus 24:15–16, 25:1–9)

On the seventh day, Moses was instructed regarding the construction of the Sanctuary and its vessels. The parallel is so striking that the Rabbis determined that the kinds of labor prohibited on the Sabbath were all those acts necessary for the construction and furnishing of the Sanctuary in the desert. The royal privilege to create, to pursue aesthetic perfection

and technical virtuosity, found expression in the crafting of the sacred vessels for use in God's sanctuaries. The vessels themselves were a form of offering. They were not merely receptacles for libations and sacrificial offering; they were inherently holy, having been consecrated to God by humans, as an expression of their divine spark—their *tzelem Elokim*—and as a form of thanksgiving.

Therefore, when Belshazzar defiled the sacred temple vessels through pagan use, he violated the relationship of the people of Israel with their ancestral God. It was this act that signaled an important turning point in Jewish history. When Belshazzar dislodged the spirit from the vessels where it was hiding, it openly revealed itself on the whitewashed wall from where it could never be erased, portending the end of the Babylonian Empire and the return of the vessels and the people to where they belonged.

Using Rembrandt's portrait as springboard for teaching the story serves as a *keli,* an educational tool, for learning about *kelim*. The power of the visual and this interpretative approach move us from the Book of Daniel to the Books of Chronicles and Jeremiah and provide the teacher the opportunity to introduce and integrate rabbinic exegesis.

Let's now take a look at Rembrandt's magnificent biblical portrait, *Jeremiah lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem,* which inspired the birth of the website.

As noted above, in the year 586 B.C.E., the Babylonian tyrant Nebuchadnezzar conquered the city of Jerusalem, destroyed its Temple, and carried off its people into exile. Among the handful of those who remained was the prophet Jeremiah of Anatoth. In this portrait, Jeremiah is mourning the destruction of Jerusalem, alone with a few remaining holy vessels from the Temple, as the people of the city have been taken into exile by their Babylonian conquerors. Behind him, the ruined Temple smolders. The prophet sits desolate and lost in thought, leaving the viewer wondering what he is contemplating.

Is he focused upon the catastrophe of a people bereft of their sacred Temple and banished from their land? Or is he crushed not by the effect of the destruction but rather by its cause—the fatal breach of trust and loyalty toward the Lord God of Israel? Jeremiah's sadness might be a result of the fact that as a prophet, he strove with all his might to prevent that breach—and tragically failed in his attempt.

Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem

Rembrandt depicts Jeremiah leaning on the Bible, on his immortal words of prophecy. Does this symbolize the obsolescence of his words, which have fallen on deaf ears? Does it perhaps suggest that the book is closed to others, and now serves to support the prophet alone? Note that the prophet is leaning on his left hand. His right hand is not visible, reminiscent of the biblical verse:

> If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither, let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour. (Psalms 137:5–6)

Lingering Agony

> It is difficult to conceive of any situation more painful than that of a great man, condemned to watch the lingering agony of an exhausted country, to tend it during the alternate fits of stupefaction and raving which preceded its dissolution and to see the symptoms of vitality disappear one by one, till nothing is left but coldness, darkness and corruption. (*Critical and Historical Essays: The Complete Writings of Lord Macaulay*: "Machiavelli" (1827), pp. 117–118)

These words of Lord Macaulay could be used aptly to sum up the life of the prophet Jeremiah. For 40 years the prophet Jeremiah labored long and hard to prevent the destruction of Jerusalem and the holy Temple. He railed incessantly against the evil deeds of the people of Judah. What was it about their conduct that warranted such a terrible fate?

Crime and Punishment

Jeremiah, the prophet of the destruction of the first Temple, preached against the sins of idolatry, sexual misconduct, and bloodshed, but in his reproach he went beyond mere diatribes. He exposed the essence of these sins, exhibiting his keen grasp of the psychological motivation behind them. One classic example of Jeremiah's searing insight into the psyche of the sinner is his famous Temple Sermon:

> Thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Mend your ways and your actions, and I will let you dwell in this place. Don't put your trust in illusions and say, "The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord are these buildings." No! If you really mend your ways and your actions; if you execute justice between one man and another; if you do not oppress the stranger, the orphan and the widow; if you do not shed the blood of the innocent in this place; if you do not follow other gods, to your own hurt then only will I let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers for all time. See, you are relying on illusions that are of no avail. Will you steal and murder and commit adultery and swear falsely, and sacrifice to Baal, and follow other gods whom you have not experienced,

> and then come and stand before Me in this House which bears My name and say, "We are safe?" to do all these abhorrent things! Do you consider this House, which bears My name, to be a den of thieves? (Jeremiah 7:1–15)

The Temple Fallacy

It was not unusual for a biblical prophet to preach against sins of inhumanity toward strangers, orphans, and widows; idolatry; theft; adultery; and murder. What is special about Jeremiah is his deep understanding of the psychology of sin, and how he exposed the fallacy into which the people had fallen. They had deluded themselves into thinking that perfunctory rituals would atone for their sins. They assured themselves that the Temple of the Lord would provide them with asylum and expiation. It is from this malady that they suffer. Professor Nehama Leibowitz explains:

> What is the psychological incentive for idol worship? What causes people in all periods of history to place their trust in something external which is not contingent upon their actions but is confined to a particular space or time rather than to depend upon the moral imperative which is required of them?...In every generation people ignore God's will and His everyday requirements, preferring to seek a cheap form of atonement which lies outside of their quotidian lives. This atonement absolves them of performing radical changes in their life style.

Jeremiah accuses his constituency of abusing the Temple and relying upon its cultic efficacy rather than their own religious rehabilitation. Holiness, he insists, is not even in the holiest of buildings; it too shall be razed. Divine presence will only dwell in the midst of the people if they are able to find the spark of the holiness within themselves, and use it to ignite warmth and concern for others.

These paintings, two shining examples of the hidden light in Rembrandt's inspired work, provide a glimpse of the site, "Scripture Envisioned: The Bible through the Eyes of Rembrandt." Rembrandt's masterpieces help unravel the mysteries of the Bible and the Bible, in turn, illuminates his magnificent art, the one in soul-stirring conversation (*sihat nefesh*) with the other.

Let us conclude with an intriguing insight of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, regarding the designer of the vessels of the Mishkan, Bezalel (liter-

ally, *be'zal-El*—"in the shadow of God"), which sheds new light on Rembrandt's technique of *chiaroscuro*.

> . . . The light of God, The Omnipresent, Blessed be He, is heavenly wisdom and absolute justice. However, the aesthetic sensibility of the pure soul [that is] blessed with divine knowledge, creativity, skill and design, (Exodus 35:32–35) is in effect what shadow is to light, when they are together, they complete vision and the perception of reality in its entirety. (*En Ayah* on *Berakhot* 55a, my translation)

Hasidic-Psychological Readings: Revelation and Korah

Yehoshua Engelman

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After years of learning in conventional yeshivot, I discovered several Hasidic writers. They opened my eyes to reading the Torah in a manner fundamentally different from anything I ever had learned before. Their penetrating spiritual and psychological wisdom inspired me to study their works ever since. Below are two unrelated analyses of the Revelation at Sinai and of Korah's rebellion. I hope that these two studies offer a taste for the nuance and depth these writers have to offer the contemporary reader.

Revelation—Shame and the Law

One of the moments in history that many Jews would love to experience is the Revelation at Sinai. What really happened there? So much has been written about what Sinai was, literally or metaphorically. The idiom of every Jew having been present at Sinai implies that there was, or could be, a Sinaitic certainty. I hope to elaborate on this, and suggest what, paradoxically, this certainty is.

What interests me is the aftermath, what was born there. One may broadly and loosely define Sinai, or Revelation, as some religious peak experience, and assume that the period afterward cannot but be anticlimactic. Religious experiences are sought after worldwide, in various forms and means. There often is a disparity between the intensity of the experience and how unimpressive the person who experienced them is. Sometimes they seem to be in converse proportions.

The Talmud teaches that the aftermath of Sinai is shame: "Anyone who is shameless—it is known that his parents did not stand on Sinai" (*Nedarim* 20b). However uncomfortable shame is, being shameless is rarely considered worthy. In English or Hebrew we speak of being ashamed of *ourselves*. Our self shames us. This phenomenon reflects a belief that there's a self inhering in us that is "better" than we are to whom we compare ourselves, and who criticizes us incessantly. If we absolutely cannot do better—then we feel no shame. Sinai was seeing, experiencing, knowing, a self. After Sinai, that remnant becomes and is the self. These laws, even though they be but a shadow of the core Revelation "I am the Lord your God," still shame us, for we know how much 'more' we can be: our potential always shames us.

Immediately after the Ten Commandments we read: "And the whole people saw the voices and the torches and the voice of the Shofar and the mountain smoking and the people saw, and moved and stood afar. And they said to Moses: speak to us and we will hear, and let not God speak to us lest we die. And Moses said to the people: Do not fear, for in order to test/raise you has God come, and in order that be His awe on your faces that you not sin. And the people stood far away, and Moses approached the mist, where God was" (Exodus 20:15–18).

Sinai was a terrifying experience. The Talmud tells us that the people "died" again and again when hearing God's voice, and needed angels to revive them (*Shabbat* 88a). These were moments when the world stood still, "not a bird chirped nor did a cow bellow," moments when "God hung the mountain over them like a barrel, saying to them: If you accept my Torah—good, if not—here will be your burial." The Israelites felt forced to accept God. The Maharal of Prague (16th century) explains that their experience of closeness and love of God was so exquisite, and their love for God so great, that there was no way that they could ever have declined. "Everything God has spoken we will do," they said even before hearing His commands (Exodus 19:5). This is a deep human desire to be choice-

less, for there to be no-two-ways, love-given clarity. We desire to be in love. This was Sinai, and whoever has been there can recognize others who have, and know who hasn't. That is the tone of the statement of the Talmud "Whoever is shameless—is not one of us." This is the way the Talmud expresses this:

> Said Rabbi Elazar: when Israel said "We will do" before saying "We will hear" (Exodus 19:8, 24:3,7), a heavenly voice emitted saying: "Who revealed this secret to my children, a secret used by angels… who first do God's word, then hear God's word" … It is like an apple tree which brings forth its fruit before its leaves, alike to this was Israel's saying "We will do" before saying "We will hear."
>
> There was once a Sadducee who saw Rava deeply immersed in learning, sitting upon his thumb which, from the pressure, squirted blood. He said to him: You hasty/careless nation who placed your mouths before your ears—you still are so careless/hasty! You should have first heard and seen if you are able (to keep it) then accept, and if not—not accept it. He replied: About us, who are very whole, it is written "The innocence of the upright will guide them," whereas about others, who are very crooked, it is written (the continuation of that verse in Proverbs) "and the distortion of traitors will rob them." (*Shabbat* 88b)

The Talmud is describing, amongst various nuances of love, the concept of *hineni*, here I am. For that is what love is, a "Here I am." Called by those we love, even in the middle of the night, our immediate gut response will be: Yes, I come. Other people, if they call us, will elicit a more reserved response. We respond to those we love not because we should or because it's right. We respond because we are unable not to, for as soon as we heard their voice we already answered Yes. The Talmud describes this as a moment of "My soul went out when He spoke" (Song of Songs 5:6). Thus the Sadducee's question as to first calculating if one is able is irrelevant. Being in love is knowing that one can, because one will stop at no less than doing one's all. It is "innocent" as Rava says, and that innocence is a sure guide and one knows it.

The Talmud is describing the feeling that one can't wait, like the apple tree, which cannot wait to bring forth its fruit, even though there are no shady leaves yet, even though sufficient preparations have not been made. Rather than seeing a perfect moment of Rava's love, the Sadducee saw haste and carelessness. Rava retorts that his calculating leaves infidels and traitors like him with nothing. The feeling of "I can't wait" is so beautiful

precisely because one knows that one can wait yet feels the not-wanting-to-wait as "can't," as inability. It is the most delicious inability, the inability to say no when one has no desire but to say Yes.

This clarity sometimes passes. One may be in love, but then starts doubting this God-given clarity and reduces it to terms easily provided by others and ourselves. Not a long time passed after the Revelation before Israel doubted their love and did not know if it was really true, so they felt shame. They now felt that they *could* wait; they felt that there was no hurry. This lack of desire—is shame.

Let us imagine a concert violinist for whom the audience who heard his playing are on their feet applauding. He may yet feel frustrated and ashamed of his oh-so-professional performance for *he* knows what it is like to play with passion, with inspiration, forgetting oneself and being nothing but an instrument for the music, and less than this, for he is nothing more than being an efficient machine. As the Magid of Mezeritch explained-rephrased the words of II Kings 3:15 "And when the player was like the instrument, then the hand-of-God was/is upon him." Playing, or doing anything, without passion is lifeless especially for those who have known the divine elevation of impassioned inspiration, and what is more shameful than death?

The extreme expression of this Sinai-born shameful split from oneself is the story, maybe a metaphor, of the Golden Calf, the embodiment of decay of desire. Thus the Torah starts with the words "Then the people saw that Moses delayed (*ki boshesh Moshe*) descending from the mountain" (Exodus 32:1). This word *boshesh*, akin to *bushah*, shame, is used also referring to Adam and Eve: "and they were naked, man and his wife, and waited not—*lo yitboshashu*." They were not ashamed, and did what was natural without any shame or shyness. The aftermath of their lacking desire is paradise lost. The Talmud narrates that at Sinai people returned to their Eden-like state and became whole. One Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni* 20:300) explains that at Sinai all were healed, there were no blind, deaf, lame, or foolish people. All were healed when hearing God's voice. Feeling passionate is healing.

Whereas *bushah* means shame, *boshesh* means to delay. This delay in satisfaction, in fulfilment of our desires, is the deep experience of shame. There is a difference between desire and desires. The being-kept-waiting by parents, then others, let alone their sighs of frustration at our infant

needs, although inevitable, all instill in us a sense of shame, that we should not be desirous of . . . anything, that we should be satiable (compare the last words of the guard in Kafka's parable "In the Cathedral"). Hasidut teaches that desiring ever more is expression of man's being created *be-tzelem Elokim*, in God's image, having infinite desire. The way we satiate those desires may, as you say, shame us, for more often than not we supplant the specific objects of our desires for these desires themselves. We all know the sense of shame in being kept waiting, or even thinking that we are being delayed. We all knew that sense of shame having to wait, being needy, of waiting for the gratification provided by parents. Our good taste shames us, and when feeling detached and uninspired and lacking desire – we may feel shame. Such is *bushah*—delay, the separation from a self, a soul, an ideal, a height, that was ours, that we believe still is ours in some way, still is attainable. If we don't expect ourselves to be able to do things that we could when younger we will feel no shame at inability to do so. But distanced from things we still dream of we feel shame.

Someone whose "parents' feet were on Sinai" is someone who, having known greatness, can recognize it and bow their heads to it, feel humbled and modest as Israel must have felt at Sinai. Having known grandeur one can recognize it, whereas someone who has never known anything better will lack this, will relate to everyone with casualness or familiarity simply because he is unable to recognize genius. One needs a certain education to be able to recognize inspiration. The closest we can come to knowing it, to wholeness and being, is our awareness of our lack. This desire *is* the fullness of our being.

Dreaming is the closest most of us get to prophecy and Revelation. Sinai, as an event in history and as a metaphor for our soul's core, is the most sublime dream we ever dreamt. It is not by chance that we speak of aspirations as dreams. Hazal said "A person never dies even half fulfilled" – our dreams and aspirations can never be fulfilled (unless they are very limited ones!). And so our dreams shame us, because they express our highest aspirations, and so when we are reminded of our dreams and aspirations we cannot but be filled with shame at our inadequacy. But the alternative, having very low aspirations or not dreaming at all, is even worse, for it evidences a loss of our being made *be-tzelem Elokim*, in the image of an infinite God, it evidences our having lost desire to grow infinitely. The residue of Sinai is remaining dreamers.

The Positive Dimensions of Korah

One of the qualities of good literature is complexity, and even in stories that seem to have clear "good guy—bad guy" delineations, the Bible sometimes hints that these lines are not intended to be clear-cut. The surface reading of Korah's rebellion seems to present Korah as the bad guy, jealous of Moses' power, wanting to usurp Moses' leadership and even prophecy, spotlighting what seems to be evident nepotism in Moses' choice of Aaron and his sons for priests.

The *Mei HaShiloah* (mid-19th century Hasidic commentary) argues that things are not necessarily what they may seem. He assumes that all biblical heroes demand understanding, even if they were mistaken or sinners. He relinquishes the need for a clear-cut and often trite moral. To this interpreter, the story of Korah presents two sides that battled, and one side losing does not imply its being entirely mistaken nor need its protagonist be entirely in the wrong.

Against a totalitarian regime, rebellion is inevitable, even if this rule is divinely ordained, and even when the law challenged is God's. The event was handled badly. Moses seems to have wanted a public confrontation. He initiates the contest by fire (Numbers 16:16–17), and suggests that the earth open its mouth to swallow the rebels and their families (16:29–30). The grand debacle is ineffective. Rather than being persuaded, the people afterward accuse Moses and Aaron saying, "You have killed the Lord's people" (17:6–8).

Moses' words to Korah's party, "You have enough sons of Levi" (16:7), are irrelevant to the issue. No rule, not even that of Moses, is above criticism merely by virtue of its being ordained by God. In the Talmud, Moses is censured for these words to Korah: "He [Moses] used the term 'You have enough'—and the same words were used by God when refusing him entry into the land 'You have enough' (Deuteronomy 3:26)" (*Sotah* 13b).

This rabbinic criticism of Moses is severe. It could be interpreted as saying: How can one say to someone seeking closeness to God "You have enough?" Notwithstanding his being hurt, Moses should have perceived that their yearning for closeness to God may have been authentic. Saying "You have enough" is not only saying that Korah is mistaken in his belief that all people can be greater and that they should aspire to more, but that there can be, in regard to closeness to God, "enough." Questioning oth-

ers' motives for desiring holiness is a travesty, whereas the seeking itself is holy.

The Talmud's suggestion that Moses' setting boundaries to Korah is what ultimately denies his own entry to the Promised Land is portraying how, tragically, the boundaries with we protect ourselves will always limit our own expansion and growth.

The Seer of Lublin (early 19th century Hasidic master) said, "Were I alive at the time—I would have supported Korah." Korah's words were not a rabble-rousing slogan nor were they empty words. If when meeting Moses people could not but be awestruck (Exodus 33:10), when meeting Korah people saw their own sanctity, realized how God inhered in them, too. Korah had that rare ability to reflect to people their own holiness.

The eleven Psalms that are attributed to "The Sons of Korah" demonstrate that "Korah's son" was not a shameful name, but rather was a name used with pride by Temple singers. This was a judgment of history that the rebellion against Moses was not a simple power struggle. Even their end implies a non-ending: "And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them . . . they and all they had descended to Sheol alive" (Numbers 16:32–33). In language of myth their descent to Sheol is a continuation of living, but in another place.

Many legends narrate how Korah and his children continued their existence in Sheol and were not totally annihilated, even as the Torah tells us later, "Then the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and Korah in the death of his community when the fire ate the 250 men, miraculously. *The sons of Korah did not die*" (Numbers 26:9–10).

A Midrash gives the Korah story an additional dimension that connects it to the preceding passage that commands wearing fringes with a blue thread on garments (Numbers 15:40). Korah brought his 250 men wearing entirely blue garments challenging Moses, "Do these need a blue thread?" and then ridiculed Moses' affirmative response. The Midrash may be portraying Korah not as someone ridiculing ritual *per se*, but only the idea that ritual is not equally relevant in all cases and not fitting all people equally.

Thus *Mei HaShiloah* explains: Mitzvot are reminders and, as such, are perhaps needed by the masses, but why should individuals who really are not in need of them observe them? Korah, he says, would say: "Awe of God, awareness of His presence, is perpetual for me. What do I need

reminders for?" Mitzvot are reminders of God's presence, and this can be bliss, or oppressive when awareness of God's omnipresence and omniscience is inescapable. Korah is saying, in pain, if only I *could* forget. *Mei HaShiloah* is portraying Korah not as one who wants to escape God but as one whose aspirations and awareness are so intense as to be unbearable. He imagines that fixed forms of worship, such as high priesthood, could create a limitation and contain his burning. Living forever is the most tragic of punishments, and Korah descends to the Sheol of his unquenchable passion for the divine.

Religions and laws act as equalizers, for better and for worse. Like the ashes of the Red Cow in the parashah that follows Korah, which "Purify the impure and defile the pure"—so rules and regulations refine those who otherwise would be degenerate, while lowering those whom they limit. Korah cannot accept this paradox of ritual. The Torah does seem to nod in Korah's direction after his demise when God says to Moses: "Say to Elazar son of Aaron to lift the pans from amongst the fire for they have become sanctified. The pans of these sinners in their souls—make them a covering for the altar, for they were brought close to God and have become sanctified, let them be a sign for the Children of Israel" (Numbers 17:1–3). Even though the 250 people had rebelled, their pans become a memento to serve as a reminder of the immortality of their bearers' claim, recognition that their aspirations were true. These pans would contain the Temple fire, and teach the need for containment of religious passion, too.

Rabbi Yitzhak Luria Ashkenazi, the Ar"i (16th century Safed) writes that, "In the future Korah will be shown to have been correct." That Korah who insisted in his opening words, "All the whole community is holy and God amongst them"—every person is unique and divine—will be vindicated.

Moses' handling of the conflict seems faulty, allowing things to get out of hand, fearing that God may not back him, and initiating violence. Perhaps no one is free of the misuse of speech when attacked, and when being reactive. Moses who so faithfully and repeatedly protects his people from God's wrath, and even does so again when God wants to destroy his people, has difficulty protecting them from his own wrath. Although no one can speak to God as Moses does, dialogue with the people is not Moses' forte. Growing up an outsider without family or society, he remained an outsider vis-à-vis the people themselves, remaining "heavy of

mouth and heavy of tongue" (Exodus 4:10) and his original fears of being unable to converse with them (Exodus 4:1) and that they would not believe him came true.

There is no one path for everyone. More than seeing Korah as one who wanted to rule, we can see him as suggesting alternatives. Rebels are often as rigidly insistent on having *the* truth as those against whom they fight, as if admitting many options would weaken rather than strengthen any claim. So often justice becomes a single thing, as if there were but one justice rather than many, we forget that justice can be challenged in name of various other values—wisdom, charity, compassion—to name but a few. Fighting in the name of justice we make the conflicts into zero-sum games. When the Ar"i writes that in the future we will be following Korah's way this does not read as a contrast and a victory over Moses. Rather, it suggests that the structure of dispute and there being various options, as the Torah passes down this story—is the promise of the future.

Bibliodrama: A Form of Interpretative Play

Yael Unterman

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The Educational Challenge in Torah Study[1]

The progress of my Torah study can be summed up as follows: *From no-brain to left-brain to whole-brain.*[2]

I learned a lot of useful information in my ultra-Orthodox high school, and my mind did develop there to some extent. However, when it came to Torah learning I was short-changed. We studied Torah with bits of Rashi and Ramban, accompanied by unsophisticated explanations that changed little from when I entered at age 12 to when I exited at age 18. Hence I feel somewhat justified in terming it, for my purposes, "no-brain."

The next stage of my religious education, my post-high-school Torah study, brought a marked improvement. I was finally able to have the satisfying left-brain experience that my 18-year-old self craved. In my intellectually oriented women's yeshiva, we studied Talmud and Rambam, commentary and philosophy; we absorbed information, grasped concepts, compared perspectives, and analyzed texts. Nonetheless, I always sensed that something was missing—but I could not quite put my finger on what. It is difficult to pinpoint the absence of something when you have never

experienced it or even seen anything remotely like it. One event from that period stands out—the occasion when Ilan Nov, a resident of Bat Ayin, visited our yeshiva and read to us a section from a book he was writing.[3] Although I could not fully grasp his meaning, I was intrigued and delighted: how refreshing to meet someone creating art from within his personal Jewish experience.

Moving on to undertake advanced Jewish studies at university and other institutions, I found myself increasingly dehydrating in various classes, many of them frontal lectures. Even those that involved discussion and debate did not satisfy me. I yearned inchoately for something different, but I still knew not what. In 1999, I abandoned a high-level Jewish studies program for women halfway through the year, having comprehended that high-level Talmud learning in the yeshiva/academic style was not what I needed for my growth. The wish for something else had grown urgent by now, but I still did not have a precise notion of what that should be. I had noticed a tremendous level of excitement and yearning arising within me after I stumbled across an article concerning a fringe Jewish spirituality movement, but was not ready to relocate to the desert and live in a yeshiva-ashram with people lacking all normative boundaries.[4] I began to despair of lectures and shiurim, none of which was engaging me with the Torah to the level I desired: that is to say, fully and passionately, as a whole person. Entering a crisis of Torah, I found even my own teaching lackluster; and even the study of Hasidut and Kabbalah, which I love, did not suffice to fill the vacuum.

With hindsight, I now understand that for all those years, an entire hemisphere of my brain was being overlooked. I now know that for me, creativity and emotional awareness line up firmly alongside my intellectual and analytical modes as the channels for my experience of the world. Small wonder my Torah learning felt half-baked. Although I was blessed to study with many brilliant teachers in Israel who introduced intellectual creativity, emotional insight, and depth to the study of Jewish sources, this still ultimately represented a concession to right-brain energy within left-brain territory. Moreover it always took place within the strongly left-brain format of lectures (and, on a good day, discussion). Creativity remained in the realm of the teacher, with very little on the part of the student. When the student did offer some creative idea, in the best case scenario this would be briefly acknowledged with a word of praise; at worst, it would be misunderstood or squashed.[5]

Bibliodrama: An Introduction

I was fortunate enough to have my prayers answered. In the early 2000s, I encountered the technique of Bibliodrama, and was finally able to integrate all that pent-up right-brain energy into my Torah study and teaching. Over a decade has passed and I have never looked back. I enjoy Bibliodrama tremendously and have, to date, run over 170 workshops on many different stories. Indeed, today I sometimes find it hard to sit through a regular Torah lesson, so powerfully do I feel the vitality and immediacy of the Bibliodramatic mode bubbling up in me.

The following is my own understanding of the method's potential, based on extensive experience with it. It is something I believe extremely important to share. All of us possess right-brains. True, not all of us feel an existential need to use them; some people are happy with purely intellectual stimulation. But to force that preference wholesale onto the people whose spirituality and education are in our charge; to deny the use of one hemisphere to an entire class of students, at least some of whom would thrive with their imaginations set free, is simply wrong.

Bibliodrama was invented by Dr. Peter Pitzele of the United States. Pitzele, a Jewish intellectual who has taught English literature at Harvard, is clinically trained in psychodrama, a type of group therapy utilizing dramatic tools for healing. Invited in 1984 to teach a class at the Jewish Theological Seminary, he decided to draw on his psychodramatic training by asking the students to take the part of Moses, answering his questions as if they were in Moses' shoes. Thus the technique of Bibliodrama was born. It continued with a success that astonished Pitzele. He has since run Bibliodrama sessions all over the world, trained others in the art of Bibliodrama, and written a book instructing toward its practice, *Scripture Windows*.

So what exactly is it? First let me explain what it is not. Despite its name, it is not theater. The group spends most of the time seated. There is no audience—the group serves as an audience for itself. The "script" is created spontaneously on an ongoing basis throughout the session and is not preserved for posterity. Another difference is that in theater, each part is played by one actor only, while in Bibliodrama, any given part is often played by the entire group, making for a much richer experience. Thus, Bibliodrama might best be described as a form of psychodynamic group role-play. It has been called by some "contemporary Midrash" or "sponta-

neous Midrash." While Midrash is more complex and far-ranging, to anyone experiencing the technique the comparison becomes quite obvious. Pitzele was not intentionally aiming at the midrashic form, but he explains that through his work he discovered

> . . . an immensely long tradition of commentary, storytelling, and imaginative interpretation of the Bible . . . that sought to fill in the gaps in the narrative. . . . Without knowing it I had stumbled into a conversation with the Bible that had been going on for thousands of years. . . .[6]

The texts are most often stories from Tanakh, but the technique is applicable to any story, and also to historical events and even non-narratives (I once did a Bibliodrama on the Hanukkah candles with adults).

The Practice of Bibliodrama

What occurs in practice? A series of questions are put to the participants as characters in the biblical story, questions that often lack any obvious or unequivocal answer and that arise from gaps in the text. For example, "Eve, why did you immediately give the fruit to Adam?" or "Adam, we understand that Eve was enticed by the serpent—but what brought *you* to eat from the forbidden fruit?"

Participants must respond in first-person language, speaking as major characters, minor characters (named, implied or invisible), or even as objects (for example, the Tree of Knowledge). The simple transition from third- to first-person language makes all the difference; it removes the distance we naturally place between ourselves and a story that is not about us, and compels us to get straight into the heart of the story. In the absence of clear answers, the students must draw upon their emotions, experiences and textual intuitions, often astonishing themselves with the powerful insights arising from their reading of the narrative. Indeed, I have frequently presented Bibliodrama as the encounter, unique to this very moment, between the divine in the text and the divine in ourselves. As the Hasidic rebbe Menachem Nachum Twerski of Chernobyl writes in his book *Me'or Enayim* (weekly portion of *Vayeshev*):

> It is known that the Torah is eternal and preceded time, but has been encased (lit: clothed itself) in time-bound narratives . . . the Torah must be (relevant) for every person and at every time.

By opening up the text to a myriad possible directions, Bibliodrama achieves the goal of propelling us beyond the obscure "clothing"/barrier of ancient language and context directly into the profound core of the story's mystery.

Even those with very weak backgrounds in Tanakh are found to contribute many excellent ideas, for all that is necessary is a basic understanding of the text and a heart and mind willing to lend themselves to a new context and new thoughts. In fact, the people least skilled at Bibliodrama, aside from those with an academic personality, are those who arrive already full to the brim with commentaries and the "correct" way to read the Tanakh, and without the flexibility to put that aside in order to read the text with a fresh pair of eyes. Clinging to what is already known obstructs the possibility of the Bibliodramatic flow, which is what makes the experience truly enjoyable—the sudden insight, the startling *hiddush*, the ability to listen to the others in the room and build from what they say. I emphasize that it is not the prior education that is the obstruction so much as the inflexibility. I have run Bibliodramas with Jewish educators extremely familiar with the story under the lens, having taught it numerous times themselves. This population nonetheless, through approaching the text playfully and with curiosity while bringing their personal and emotional lives to the text, have managed to arrive at tremendous new insights for themselves and others.

Per the Chernobler rebbe's call for the Torah to be relevant not only for every person but also at every time, no two Bibliodramas are the same, for no two groups are the same. A participant repeating a Bibliodrama will inevitably play it slightly differently, for people do not stand still and new thoughts arise. This ever-changing nature of Bibliodrama also makes it highly enjoyable for the facilitator, who will hear new interpretations each time and learn from the participants. The group experience is also vital to the Bibliodramatic process and to its dynamic character. It is the group that reflects upon and plays the story as a collective, and it is very susceptible to patterns that emerge. One individual comment (for example, Esther noting that she is an adopted child and never knew her parents) can cause the group to strongly move in a particular direction for the rest of the session. Bibliodrama could be done, theoretically, with just one or two people; but it is marvellous to hear the variety of responses to one question. A group Bibliodrama is truly an experience of *shivim panim*, the

70 facets of the Torah. It can also serve to make a group more cohesive, especially when done over time.[7]

I have seen Bibliodrama transform ignorant students into sensitive Bible commentators, assiduously searching the text for clues to solve puzzles and difficulties, after their curiosity has been aroused by questions such as "Joseph, why do you insist on telling your dreams even after you see that it enrages your brothers?" or "Esther, what was it like growing up in Mordecai's house?" As the participants get comfortable with the technique and each other, they speak out powerful emotions that bring the text vividly to life and fill in the gaps. For many the previously impenetrable text becomes something to identify with: truly a tree of life. The experience changes the participants' relationship to the text. One 18-year old, a product of the religious Jewish education system, announced, "Before today I never thought of Abraham as someone I could actually identify with!" Another told me: "When we started, I could not even remember what was in chapter 1 of Ruth, even though I studied it just last week. Now there is no chance I would forget."

Students who do not shine in the regular left-brain classroom atmosphere, deprived of the opportunity to display their creative imaginations, suddenly come into their own in Bibliodrama. Teachers witnessing a classroom Bibliodrama have been astonished by the sudden vocal participation of a pupil who ordinarily remains silent. The method works well with both children and adults, both populations bringing different strengths and weaknesses to the technique. While teenagers sometimes do not connect as well, due to their increased self-consciousness, most children and adults enjoy the group experience of building up the inner life of a story. They relish the opportunity to be playful and also to express deep personal feelings through the safe mask of the biblical characters. Bibliodrama verges on the therapeutic, and participants may be encouraged to share any personal revelations, depending on how comfortable the facilitator is with such activity. Pitzele, a trained psychotherapist, is competent to take the session in very personal directions, whereas I feel less comfortable doing so—though I do place a high value on the sharing at the end and the personal take-away.

Lying between improvisational theater, psychodrama, and text-study, Bibliodrama may perhaps most accurately be entitled an *improvisational performance of a studied text*. It is highly flexible and quite unique. It is a

"performance" that is never repeated, that requires no rehearsals, is based upon text study, and can take place anywhere a circle of people may sit—from synagogue to salon to classroom. It does not conform to our usual picture of "religious activity," and yet participants often emerge profoundly moved and uplifted. It is unusual in that it deals with sacred text, yet contains playful elements not usually associated with the sacred. As a form of "serious play," it bears all the characteristics and paradoxes of play, whereby on one level what occurs feels very real, on another it is clear that we are all conspiring to pretend. Indeed, some adults take a short while to get into the method for fear of sounding ridiculous, but luckily there are generally a few brave souls willing to take the leap and create the suspension of disbelief necessary to start; after which the others follow. Even people who do not speak throughout the entire workshop have reported having a meaningful experience. They are grateful for the permission I give at the start that "if you are feeling shy, you do not need to speak at all." Most intriguing though is the common phenomenon of individuals who enter the room convinced they are not going to say a word, and then find themselves talking non-stop. This, if nothing else, is a great testimony to the power of Bibliodrama.

Example

The following is an example of a Bibliodramatic "thread" (question by facilitator followed by various answers.)

> The facilitator asks the group: *So Cain, why did you decide to bring an offering to God? As far as we know neither your mother nor your father ever brought offerings. Where did this idea come from?*
>
> After a moment of thought, one participant answers: *I had heard my parents talking about God. I wanted to speak to God too. This was my way of communicating.*
>
> Another participant says: *I wanted to give a gift to someone to say thank you for all the abundance I've received.*
>
> A third person suggests: *I want to see if I can get us back into the Garden of Eden—it sounds like it was such an amazing place and I am really sad that I missed being there. Maybe I can change God's mind with a bribe.*

A fourth adds: *My parents wrongfully took fruit, so I am repenting by giving back the fruit!*

Pitzele suggests that the facilitator echo (or "double") what participants say, repeating it in other words—thus both validating and also amplifying its content. He also recommends echoing in first person language. Thus, for example, after the second participant's comment, the facilitator might echo: "In my work as a farmer, I've received so much good, and the need to give thanks arises from deep within me. Who can I thank if not this God that my parents have spoken about, who seems to run the world?" The facilitator glances at the participant to make sure that this was what was meant. On rare occasions, the participant will reply: "No, what I mean is . . .".

The facilitator can also encourage deepening of ideas; for example, after a remark such as that by the fourth participant above there is room to prompt:

"*And in doing so I feel . . .*"

"*I see—do you think it's going to be accepted?*"

"*Very interesting—so you've not only invented the notion of offerings but also of repentance! You're very creative, Cain.*"

The key in Bibliodrama is the questions—asking questions that stem from a curiosity about the text, and that will lead participants quickly to the most compelling textual puzzles and emotional textures.

It is also important to choose a story containing some interesting tension, conflict, dilemma, and personal growth. Fortunately the Tanakh is full of these. Do not begin the Bibliodrama at the height of the drama (for example, the murder of Abel); it is crucial to build up to the climactic moment so that the characters and their motivations are sufficiently fleshed out beforehand.

Embodied Knowledge

In Bibliodrama, a transition is effected from studying the texts from the outside (analytical/academic activity) to studying them from the inside and getting under their skin (creative/imaginative activity). The expression of emotions in character affects one's actual emotional state; that is to say, they reach beyond a purely intellectual knowledge into the realm of

the viscera. Participants bring to bear, for dramatic support to their words, inflections and volume of voice, the use of hands when speaking, and emphatic movements of the entire body which are not just "acting" but real manifestations of emotion. These physical motions in turn further deepen and embody their experience.

Other activities borrowing from forms of family therapy inspired by the plastic arts can be used at times, to "sculpt" the biblical scene. Here, the facilitator transforms into a director, and participants are asked to pose in ways that indicate the dynamics between the characters in the story—who stands next to whom? How do their bodies indicate their relationships? Pitzele notes:

> Once group members are on their feet, as opposed to voicing their roles from their seats, your task as director begins in earnest, for when people stand and move they begin to create a space for play, and you have in effect a stage. . . . The whole body becomes an expressive element; any movement may take on meaning. . . . All such sculptings are interpretative because in fact every arrangement of bodies in space . . . becomes a way of seeing the story."[8]

In the Classroom and Alongside Commentaries

Two more points are pertinent to educators. Firstly, Bibliodrama may be conveniently and easily integrated into a regular class. Although a full Bibliodrama is ideally carried out in a circle, and can last for an hour or even two, a teacher may also, in the course of a class, suddenly switch into Bibliodrama mode for a brief moment, casually saying, "Now, everyone, I want to imagine that you are Moses standing in front of the burning bush. What are you thinking?" Five or 15 or 50 minutes later, after gathering first person reflections, the teacher returns to usual classroom mode, the story having been enriched and enlivened by having the students import it into their own experience.

The challenge for classroom educators—and to an extent for all who wish to run a Bibliodrama—is that as a technique it opens up boundaries in a manner that might feel threatening or frightening compared with regular teaching. The invitation to answer freely might lead to irreverence or subversive interpretations. This will be particularly challenging to Orthodox educators, though not solely to them.

My answer to this issue is that firstly, it *is* an issue, and each teacher will have to decide where he or she is comfortable setting the boundaries.[9]

In my introduction to Bibliodrama I ask the participants to stay with the *peshat*, with what is written in the text itself, and not to offer interpretations that overturn the text's meaning. I invite them to avoid answering flippantly and randomly but rather to answer intuitively and with respect, in a manner aligned with the text and aimed at "what might have been going on."

If an interpretation is nonetheless offered that contradicts the text or wider context, I would simply point that out to the group. For example, when a participant speaks as Abel, defending his profession as a shepherd with the words "We need the sheep for their meat," I note that humans were not yet eating meat at that point. Then there are the answers which are needlessly irreverent or silly. While occasional jokes are great for making Bibliodrama fun, in such a case I would apply Pavlovian conditioning, paying less attention to this answer while continuing to maintain my serious tone in asking questions and giving attention to the answers that are more interesting and profound. I do not like to "squash" answers or make a face. I believe—I hope, not naively—that children and adult participants alike value the permission to speak freely and even push boundaries without the facilitator becoming unduly upset; it gives them space to truly explore and own the text. If the main thrust of the group activity is a serious and respectful unpacking of the multiple layers of the text, maverick participants will often step into line, or at least not serve to ruin the experience for others while playing the text in their own unique way. For this to work, it is important for the teacher-facilitator to feel confident, open and relaxed; in short, to trust the process.

The second point pertinent to educators refers to one of the great benefits of Bibliodrama for Tanakh teachers, namely that after playing out textual and narrative difficulties Bibliodramatically, students possess far greater clarity regarding the matters with which the commentators deal. Thus for example, a Bibliodrama on Genesis chapter 4 involves the difficult question of why God rejects Cain's sacrifice and prefers Abel's. The question is posed to God, as a "character" in the story, which provides a platform also for students to air their theology and thoughts as to how God works within the world, itself a potentially significant discussion. After struggling with this question and hearing several answers, the student understands better why the Midrash decides to read "*from* the fruit of the ground" as referring to the inferior fruit, while other commentators do

not choose to read it this way. In fact, God's "motivation" is unclear from the *peshat*. True, this point might emerge from an ordinary reading of the story, but might well remain in the realm of a theoretical theological-moral discussion. But when students are forced to answer as God, or experience how Cain feels after the rejection, it becomes existential and immediate, plugging them into their own questions regarding theodicy, and so forth.

A famous textual difficulty that arises from the same chapter lies in verse 8, where Cain speaks to his brother in the field, but what he actually said is missing. A gap like this one is a classic for Bibliodrama, as the question can be easily posed to Cain: "What did you say to Abel?" and to Abel "How did you feel when Cain said that?" Or, in another example from the same story, Rashi's comment on Genesis 4:1 suggesting Cain had already been born back in the Garden of Eden, and not, as the simple sequence of the text seems to imply, after the exile from there, will take on extra significance after playing out the story. Participants will be asked "How does this change the story, compared to how we played it?" For example, the third participant quoted above might respond: "Well now I *really* want to get back—this was my birthplace and it's my birthright to be there!"

In brief, any study of commentaries after a Bibliodrama will certainly be more easily grasped than before it. As all teachers of commentary know, sometimes it is not at all clear where the commentator is coming from or what is troubling him. Indeed, teachers skilled in understanding commentators and the textual difficulties to which they are responding can in fact build their Bibliodramas from the outset based on the commentators.

Thus for example, in Genesis 24, where Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for his son, verse 2 says: *And Abraham said to the oldest servant of his household, who ruled over all that he had.* On the words *the oldest servant of his household*, Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (*HaAmek Davar*) writes: "This is a sign of wisdom," and on the words "*who ruled over all that he had*" adds "He oversaw everything that Abraham owned, and was given a free hand to command. . . . He controlled his evil inclination . . .". Another commentator, Hezekiah ben Manoah (Hizkuni), writes "Abraham would not have cause to suspect him of sexual impropriety."

When training teachers, I challenge them to locate the difficulty, and the consequent Bibliodramatic question, nestling in these commentators' remarks. I am searching for a Bibliodramatic question addressed to a spe-

cific character. The teachers do not always guess immediately, sometimes suggesting that the question should be posed to the servant, but eventually someone realizes that the most obvious question is to Abraham: "Abraham—you need someone to go on a long arduous trip across the desert. Why then do you send your *oldest* servant, who will probably die on the way of a heart attack, rather than some robust young man?"

Asked such a question, any group speaking as Abraham will in all likelihood come up with responses relating to issues of wisdom and trust, and perhaps also of decreased libido. The attentive teacher studying the commentators before building the Bibliodrama will notice this point, introduce it in the course of the session as a question, and then at the end cite *HaAmek Davar* and Hizkuni. The students will see that they thought of the same answers, and will feel close to the *HaAmek Davar* and Hizkuni, as if they too were sitting in the room during the Bibliodrama.[10]

In introducing analysis, debate, and study of secondary sources following a Bibliodrama, we are re-introducing left-brain activity, thus achieving the "whole-brain" experience to which I referred in my opening line. Other right-brain techniques can also be appended to Bibliodrama, for example putting on a play from within what was said during the session, or doing creative writing, art, or dance following the Bibliodrama.

Conclusion

I would love for Bibliodrama to become part of Jewish school curricula, both in Israel and in the Diaspora, alongside standard types of learning. It could do much to increase students' love for Tanakh. Teachers in several continents have responded enthusiastically to being trained in Bibliodrama, and have sometimes gone on to implement it immediately. I am aware that this method is unusual and might take many of us out of our comfort zone at first; but I believe that it meets some important needs of the twenty-first-century student. Hence I have no doubt that progress will be made, slowly but surely, like drops of water eroding a rock.

NOTES

1. Here I pick up where I left off at the end of my last article for *Conversations*, "The Limits of the Orthodox Classroom" (Vol. 4, Spring 2009), pp. 86–93. See also my article, "If You Seek Him with All Your Heart: Nurturing Total Individual Growth in Yeshivah," in *Wisdom from All My Teachers: Challenges and Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education*, ed. Prof. Susan Handelman and Rabbi Jeffrey Saks (Jerusalem: Urim, 2003), pp. 159–178.
2. The terms left-brain and right-brain are used here in their popular sense, as referring to the logical-analytical mode versus the creative-imaginative mode. The actual differences between the hemispheres are more subtle and complex, but the point I am making does not require accurate neuroscience.
3. Subsequently published as "*Shivrei Ofek: Keta me-ha-Seret ha-Gadol*" ("Fragments of Horizon: Section from the Great Movie").
4. The article was by Ohad Ezrahi, who was at the time launching *Hamakom*, his radical group for new-age Jewish spirituality.
5. In my article in *Conversations* 4, I indicated that Professor Nehama Leibowitz, though highly creative herself, emphasized in her classroom and in her expectations from her students the use of rigorous analytical tools and the desire for correct answers. Though valuable as a structured method of reading Tanakh texts, this approach was liable to cause more free-spirited students looking for innovation or personal meaning to feel cramped.
6. Peter Pitzele, *Scripture Windows: Towards a Practice of Bibliodrama* (San Francisco: Alef Design Group, 1998), p. 15. In addition to that book, see Pitzele's book, *Our Fathers' Wells—Personal Encounters with the Myths of Genesis* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995).
7. I am currently involved in a two-year EU-funded project examining the use of Bibliodrama in multi-cultural and interfaith settings. It appears that it is indeed an excellent method for such groups.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.
9. Here again the reader is referred to my *Conversations* 4 article, cited above, which discusses in greater detail the subject of boundary-setting in the classroom.
10. In this, the work of Nehama Leibowitz, in helping the student feel as if he or she is sitting "around the table" with rabbis and sages of centuries past is continued (see Yael Unterman, *Nehama Leibowitz: Teacher and Bible Scholar* [Jerusalem: Urim, 2009], p. 369). Leibowitz's approach differed from Bibliodrama, but there were times when she approached it in her flair for the dramatic and the relevant (see *ibid.*, pp. 570–572).