

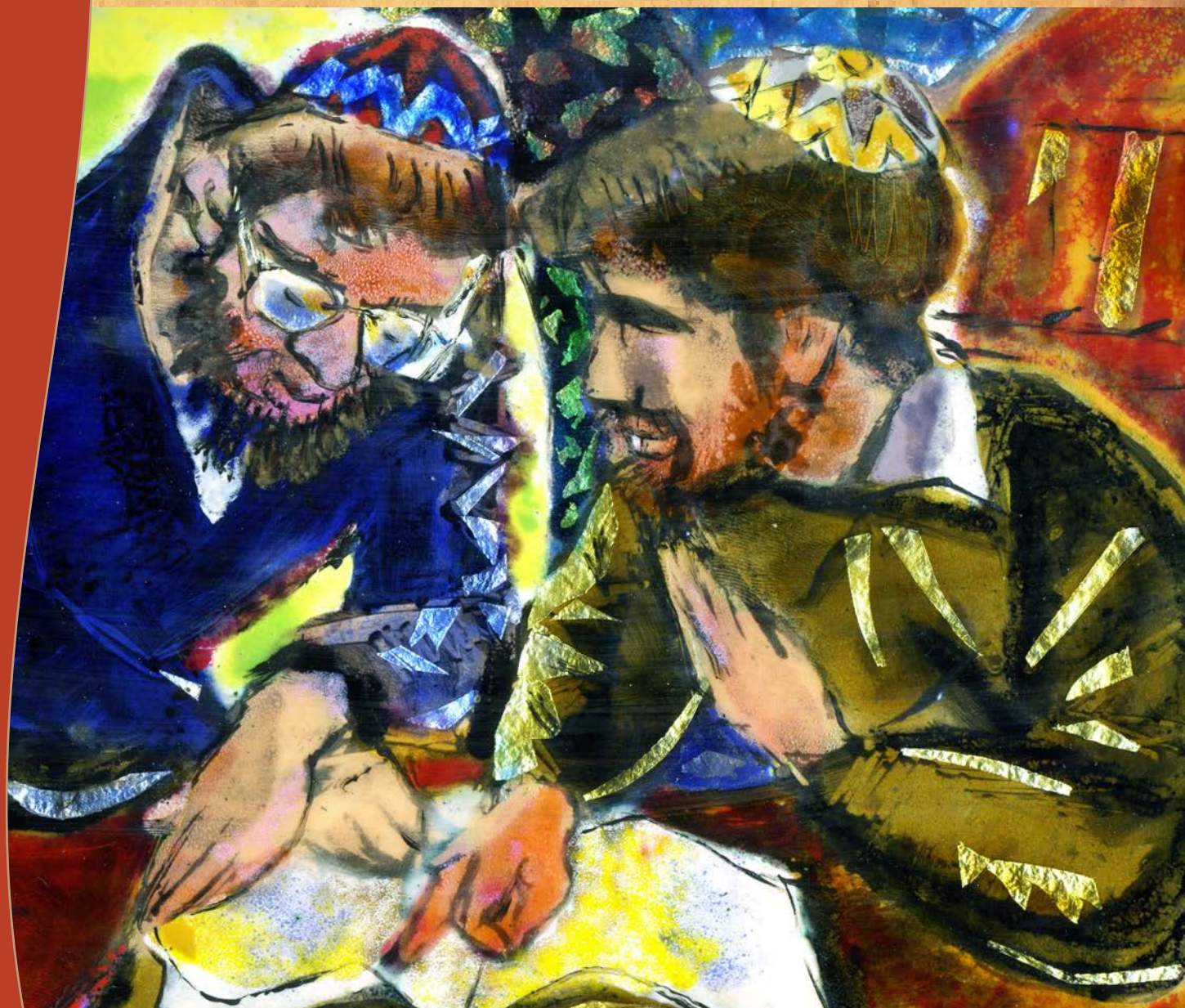


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# KOL HAMEVASER

THE JEWISH THOUGHT MAGAZINE OF THE YESHIVA UNIVERSITY STUDENT BODY

## TANAKH IN THE 21ST CENTURY: LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD



**Editor's Thoughts:  
Reflections of an  
Unrepentant Tanakh  
Enthusiast**

*Dovi Nadel*  
page 3

**Rabbeinu Tam Won't  
Sign Off On Your Dusty  
Tanakh**

*Nathan Hyman*  
page 4

**God's Three Keys and  
the Dialogue between  
Talmud and Tanakh**

*Miriam Pearl Khlar*  
page 10

**Of Angels and Men:  
Peshat As A Universal  
Tool**

*Avraham Wein*  
page 12

**Tower of Babel:  
Lessons for Humanity**  
*Michal Schechter*

page 28

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**KOL HAMEVASER**  
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## TANAKH IN THE 21ST CENTURY: LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

### Editor's Thoughts: Reflections of an Unrepentant Tanakh Enthusiast

Editors reflections on his favorite Biblical games, Biblical verses, and the need for reinvigorating Tanakh study within the walls of the Beit Midrash

**Dovi Nadel**

### Rabbeinu Tam Won't Sign Off On Your Dusty Tanakh

Taking another look at an oft (mis)quoted position of the Rabenu Tam on the study of Tanakh

**Nathan Hyman**

### Cross-Pollination As a Method of Biblical Study: A Case Study

An explanation of a peculiar biblical metaphor through tradional mefarshim, intertextual analysis, and comparisons to the Ancient Near East

**Alex Maged**

### God's Three Keys and the Dialogue between Talmud and Tanakh

A fresh look at a well-known Aggada and its deliberate and innovative usage of biblical verses

**Miriam Pearl Klahr**

### Of Angels and Men: Peshat As A Universal Tool

A thorough survey and analysis of new and emerging schools of thought and trends in the study of Tanakh

**Avraham Wein**

### Sefirat HaOmer: Why are We Counting?

Understanding the counting of Sefirat HaOmer through the eyes of Rishonim and their interpretation of the verses in Tanakh

**Josh Schilowitz**

### When Torah Comes to Life: Abarbanel and the Concept of Peshat

An innovative look at the evolving nature of peshat as a reflection of contemporary reality through studying the thoughts and commentary of the Abarbanel

**Cobi Nadel**

### Toward Understanding Biblical Gapping: Genesis 38 as a Case Study

On using new literary methods to understand Tanakh, understanding the bible's usage of "gapping" through the Yehudah and Tamar narrative

**Yaakov Ellenbogen**

### Tower of Babel: Lessons for Humanity

A fresh look at the story of the Tower of Bavel and the lessons its holds for contemporary times

**Michal Schecter**

### R. Zvi Dov Kanotopsky and the Kosher Switch

A continuation of a yearlong series on "Thinkers of YU's Past," this article includes reflections on biblical interpretation, the "spirit of Shabbat," and the "kosher switch" as well.

**Aryeh Sklar**

#### ABOUT KOL HAMEVASER

Kol Hamevaser, the Jewish Thought magazine of the Yeshiva University student body, is dedicated to sparking discussion of Jewish issues on the Yeshiva University campus and beyond. The magazine hopes to facilitate the religious and intellectual growth of its readership and serves as a forum for students to express their views on a variety of issues that face the Jewish community. It also provides opportunities for young thinkers to engage Judaism intellectually and creatively, and to mature into confident leaders.

Kol Hamevaser is published monthly and its primary contributors are undergraduates, although it includes input from RIETS Roshei Yeshivah, YU professors, and outside figures. In addition to its print magazine, Kol Hamevaser also sponsors special events, speakers, discussion groups, conferences, and shabbatonim.

We encourage anyone interested in writing about or discussing Jewish issues to get involved in our community, and to participate in the magazine, the conversation, and our club's events. Find us online at kolhamevaser.com, or on Facebook or Twitter.

## Editor's Thoughts: Reflections of an Unrepentant Tanakh Enthusiast<sup>1</sup>

BY DOVI NADEL

*R. Simeon b. Eleazar testified on the authority of R. Simeon b. Hanina: He who reads a verse at its proper time brings good to the world, as it is written, "And a word spoken in its proper time, how good is it."*<sup>2</sup>

These days, children's games have fallen quite far from their heyday in former generations. In a brief conversation I once shared with Rav Adin Steinsaltz, he reminisced about an old game he used to play in his childhood. The game's rules were simple. One friend would recite an arbitrary verse from Tanakh. The next friend would then have to respond with a new verse from Tanakh whose first letter corresponded to the last letter of the verse previously recited. Upon hearing about Rav Steinsaltz's adventurous youthful diversions, I remember feeling both relieved and impressed. I was quite relieved that Rav Steinsaltz did not ask me to participate in a reenactment of his childhood games. All the while, I was extremely impressed by the knowledge of Tanakh that seems to have been pervasive during Rav Steinsaltz's youth.

Rav Steinsaltz's game, I later learned, potentially had its Talmudic antecedents. There are a number of instances in the Talmud where an older person turns to an anonymous child, often as the

child is leaving school, and makes the following request: "*Psok Li Psukekh.*"<sup>3</sup> The translation of the request is simple and profound, "recite for me your verse." In each instance of this phrase's appearance, the child immediately responds with a verse relevant to the situation at hand. The verse recited by

the young child is then interpreted by the questioner as some minor form of prophecy. For modern ears, what is perhaps most

unique about these exchanges is, however, not the prophetic element. Rather, as the stories seem to indicate, in the times of the Talmud, even the children had (obscure) Tanakh verses sitting on the tips of their tongues.<sup>4</sup> Now that is impressive.<sup>5</sup>

Sadly, it seems to be the case that, these days, Tanakh study has not only fallen out of style in children's playgrounds, but in the Beit Midrash as well. A passage written in the Pri Megadim perhaps best captures the attitude toward Tanakh study in many a Beit Midrash in modern times. He writes, "there are

<sup>1</sup> This article's title is based off of the title of Rabbi Norman Lamm's essay, "Notes of an Unrepentant Darshan" found at <http://brussels.mc.yu.edu/gsdll/collect/lammserm/index/asoc/HASH5876.dir/doc.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> I believe that many of the sociological and societal observations made in Rabbi Lamm's reflections can be applied to the study of Tanakh as well.

<sup>3</sup> Sanhedrin 101a; verse quoted is

the *bahurim*- young students - who say that it is an embarrassment for them to learn *humash* with *Rashi* and a bit of *Neviim* and *Ketuvim* [in the Beit Midrash]."<sup>6</sup>

For many reasons,<sup>7</sup> mastering the breadth of Tanakh has taken a backseat in the contemporary yeshiva curriculum. How many denizens of the Beit Midrash can say that they have, at the very least, cursorily read through Tanakh (or at least aspire to do so)? What has happened to the famous words of *Rashi* who wrote

that just as a "bride adorns herself with twenty four types of jewelry, so too must a *talmid hakham* be proficient in the twenty four books [of Tanakh]?"<sup>8</sup> Granted we are no longer young children emerging from a schoolhouse. In fact, we are already college students, emerging from our classrooms, labs, and *Batei Midrash*. Yet, if we were asked to "recite our verse," would we have a response?

Even learning the weekly *parsha* with *Rashi* is not sufficient to properly equip us with the necessary verses for a response suitable to any given situation. To know Tanakh and to know how to apply it to any given situation, one must study it seriously and deeply. The games of youth do not ensure that one gains the aptitude and knowledge

from *Mishlei* 15:23

<sup>3</sup> The four instances of this expression's usage are *Gittin* 56a, *Gittin* 68a, *Hullin* 95b, *Esther Rabbah Parsha* 7

to avoid the fitting complaint of the Torah to God that "thy children have made me as a harp upon which they frivolously play."<sup>9</sup> "*Psok Li Psukech*" requires both a breadth and *depth* of knowledge for a proper response.

These days, there are so many tools at our disposal to arrive at the necessary deep understanding of Tanakh. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, investment in serious Tanakh study requires looking back as well as looking ahead. Students of Tanakh must look back to *midrashim* and *mefarshim*<sup>10</sup>, delving into their methodologies, motivations, and historical contexts. All the while, students must look ahead to incorporate the best in archeology, history, and literary technique into deepening their understanding of Tanakh. We must use *all* of the tools provided to us by both the past and present to enhance our appreciation of God's written word to man.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, it has come time for this editor to leave the school house one last time. In many ways, my studies at YU have brought me one step closer to being prepared to "recite my verse" at a moment's notice. It is my hope that this issue of Kol Hamevaser does the same for you. For, indeed, "how good is it" when one truly knows how to "read a verse at its proper time."<sup>12</sup>

*Dovi Nadel is the outgoing Editor-in-Chief of Kol Hamevaser on the Wilf campus. He majored in Torah Ve-Hokhmah and will be continuing with Semikha and graduate studies in Bible next year. Some of his favorite Tanakh verses are listed below.*<sup>13</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A speech by the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Commonwealth in 1882 offers a fascinating interpretation of this phrase. He notes the significance of the fact that the children had recently left their schoolhouse. His

interpretation: a child always repeats what his teacher has last taught him. If one wants to know what “the people” are saying, ask the schoolchild. Link to the full speech can be found here: <http://englishhebraica.blogspot.com/2007/07/rationalist-19th-century-british.html>.

5 Indeed, a glance at any page of the Talmud appears to demonstrate that that many of the Tanaaim and Amoraim were incredibly proficient in Tanakh. As Saul Lieberman once wrote, “The entire Talmudic literature is testimony to the fact that the sages clearly knew Tanakh by heart.” Quoted in article by Rav Yeshoshua Reiss, “Shavim El Ha-Tanakh” in *Ve-Hi Si-*

*hati*, (Maggid Press 2014) Page 35

6 Found in the Igrot of Pri Megadim on *Or HaHayyim*, Igeret Hey. Also found in Rav Yeshoshua Reiss’s article quoted above on page 49. The Igeret is written as advice to a teacher. He continues on to say “if they were wise, they would understand that they should be learning that [Tanakh] first before anything else...”

7 For an understanding of the historical trends leading Jews toward and away from Tanakh study see the following two important articles. Rav Yeshoshua Reiss’s article “Shavim el HaTanakh” (Pages 30-68) as well as Rav Yoel Bin Nun’s article “Al Lim-

*mud Ha’Tanakh Ba’Yeshivot”* (Pages 157-180) in a recent publication by Mikhlelet Herzog and Magid Press, *Vehi Sichati*.

8 Rashi to Shemot 31:18.

9 Sanhedrin 101a

10 For a fascinating look at contemporary methods of teaching Tanakh through the use of classical mefarshim see Rabbi Yaakov Blau “Medieval Commentary in the Modern Era: The Enduring Value of Classical Parshanut.” I thank Rabbi Yosef and Dr. Rivkah Blau for pointing me to this work.

11 For some fascinating reading on

the usage of critical literary methods in learning Tanakh see Rav Aharon Lichtenstein “Criticism and Kitvei ha-Kodesh” in Rav Shalom Banayikh, Eds *Hayyim Angel and Yitzchak Blau* (Ktav Publishig House, Inc. Jersey City, NY) 14-32.

12 Sanhedrin 101a

13 Mishlei 29:18; Devarim 29:3; Eikha 3:27; Tehillim 19:3; Bamidbar 32:6; Tehillim 87:6; Shemot 12:10 ; Ezra 10:4; Devarim 4:6; Devarim 29:14; Mishlei 3:6; Divrei Ha-Yamim 1 29:18.

## Rabbeinu Tam Won’t Sign Off On Your Dusty Tanakh

BY NATHAN HYMAN

I.

At this point, it is somewhat of a truism to observe that a renaissance in Tanakh study is underway. One can hardly ignore the growth of interest in Tanakh-related *Yemei Iyun*, the resurgence of insightful and groundbreaking books on *sifrei Tanakh* by Orthodox teachers and scholars, and the efforts of passionate, articulate teachers to bring the joy of Tanakh study to broader audiences. For aspiring students of Tanakh, the natural response is excitement at new opportunities to delve into *devar Hashem* and commune with those who share similar passions. At the same time, one must be bitterly aware that in the background of this excitement lies an unfortunate truth. That is the fact that serious, reverent, and innovative study of Tanakh is something novel and unusual in the broader Torah com-

munity, large portions of which do not (yet!) share this enthusiasm.

Neglect of Tanakh study is not a new phenomenon, nor one whose scope is limited to complaints about day school curricula or anecdotes about the average *yeshivah* student’s abysmal level of Tanakh knowledge. It has a long pedigree, one that some scholars have traced back to the times of the *Rishonim*.<sup>1</sup> Over the generations, various sources and arguments have been invoked to justify the absolute primacy for study of Talmud and Halakhah, and the concurrent neglect of Tanakh.

Some of the arguments are strong and deserve both reflection and reasoned consideration. Other arguments are flawed and rest on a misreading of the relevant sources.

One argument that falls in

the latter category is the position oft attributed to Rabbeinu Tam that one effectively fulfills his obligation of Tanakh study through study of the Talmud Bavli. I hope to demonstrate that this notion is based on an egregious misunderstanding of Rabbeinu Tam. While I cannot claim that no authorities can be marshaled to support the interpretation that I reject, the interpretation of Rabbeinu Tam that is so often bandied

about as irreconcilable with the source texts, unsupported by simple logical thinking, and rejected by the consensus of *halakhic* authorities. I acknowledge that principled objection to Tanakh study is a legitimate position and that Rabbeinu Tam is only one of many sources that it rests upon. Nonetheless, when sources are invoked to justify or even idealize the neglect of Tanakh study, those sources should be

presented in a way that is accurate, as well as faithful to the interpretative tradition of the *mesorah*. The topic of Rabbeinu Tam’s position on Tanakh learning was briefly taken up several years ago by Gilad Barach,<sup>2</sup> and shortly thereafter by Shlomo Zuckier.<sup>3</sup> However, both authors dedicated the majority of their discussion to disputing whether Rabbeinu Tam was “resigned” and “uncomfortable” with his position,

which he intended only as a *limud zekhut*, or whether he was a “proud supporter of Tanakh non-scholarship.”<sup>4</sup> A close reading of Rabbeinu Tam, together with the *Rishonim* and *Poskim* who clarify his position, will hopefully render this disagreement irrelevant, inasmuch as it takes a misinterpretation of Rabbeinu Tam as its starting premise.



*However, if we look closely at Tosafot, it seems that neither Tosafot nor Rabbeinu Tam understood the requirement of shilush as requiring one to cover (and eventually master) a corpus of Torah knowledge.*

II.

In *Kiddushin* 30a, R. Yehoshua ben Chananya derives from a *pasuk* that one should divide his days of Torah study into thirds – one third Mikra, one third Mishnah, and one third Gemara.<sup>5</sup> Rashi understands that one divides up the week by spending two days on Mikra, two days on Mish-

nah, and two days on Gemara.<sup>6</sup> (Going forward, I will refer to this halakhah as “*shilush*,” for the sake of brevity.) For reasons beyond the scope of this article, Rabbeinu Tam rejects Rashi’s interpretation and concludes that the time *within* each day is what should be divided into thirds. Tosafot, perhaps bothered that common practice is inconsistent with this imperative,<sup>7</sup> quotes from Rabbeinu Tam that “We rely on what it says in Sanhedrin 24b that [the Talmud of] Bavel is an admixture of Mikra, Mishnah, and Gemara inasmuch as the name Bavel is a play on *balul*.”<sup>8</sup>

A superficial reading of Rabbeinu Tam suggests that he understands the Gemara’s imperative as requiring a balanced schedule of learning, of which Mikra is an important component. Rabbeinu Tam further asserts that one can fulfill this imperative simply by studying Talmud, which, because it contains all elements of a Torah curriculum, can adequately confer mastery of Mikra that would otherwise require separate study. In one fell swoop, Rabbeinu Tam has justified the common practice not to divide each day’s learning into thirds, and also set the stage for nearly a millennia of principled neglect of Tanakh study. This is the familiar understanding of Rabbeinu Tam, and it has the imprimatur<sup>9</sup> of no less than the Rama<sup>10</sup> and the Shakh,<sup>11</sup> the latter of whom explicitly invokes it for the purpose of justifying neglect of Tanakh study.<sup>12</sup>

However, if we look closely at

Tosafot, it seems that neither Tosafot nor Rabbeinu Tam understood the requirement of *shilush* as requiring one to cover (and eventually master) a corpus of Torah knowledge. Immediately before he cites Rabbeinu Tam, and immediately after rejecting Rashi’s in-

terpretation that *shilush* requires one to divide up the days of the week, Tosafot write that the requirement of *shilush* was the impetus for Rav Amram Gaon to establish “before each day’s *pesukei de-zimrah* [reading of] Mikra, Mishnah, and Gemara.” This is a reference to the *pesukim* and *Mishnayot* that describe the sacrificial service, along with *Beraita de-Rebbe Yishmael*, which nowadays are printed in every *siddur*.<sup>13</sup> Evidently, Rav Amram Gaon understands *shilush* as a formal requirement that is fulfilled by minimal, daily involvement in each genre of Torah study. Only given such a premise is the notion of fulfilling *shilush* through a standardized text—one that takes only moments to read through—comprehensible. Rav Amram Gaon clearly does *not* understand *shilush* as requiring any sort of mastery, or even familiarity, with the corpus of Mikra, Mishnah, or Gemara as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

It is only after Tosafot quote Rav Amram Gaon and his conception of *shilush* that they proceed to quote Rabbeinu Tam. Whereas Rav Amram Gaon promulgated a standardized text as the means of fulfilling the daily imperative of *shilush*, Rabbeinu Tam simply suggests that daily Talmud study serves equally well,<sup>15</sup> inasmuch as Gemara learning generally entails contact with Mikra and Mishnah as well. Talmud Bavli is *balul mi-kol* not because it *subsumes* Tanakh as a whole, but rather in the more modest sense that there are generally *pesukim* printed on each page.<sup>16</sup>

This reading of Rabbeinu Tam is not my own. It is how Rab-

beinu Tam is quoted by R. Tzemach Duran (“Tashbetz”),<sup>17</sup> who adds that Rav Amram Gaon rejected Talmud as

the means of fulfilling *shilush* because many people are incapable of regular Talmud study. It also seems to be the position of Rabbeinu Peretz,<sup>18</sup> whose formulation of

Rabbeinu Tam’s position is that, “This [obligation of *shilush*] only applied before the Talmud was written down. But [now] learning Talmud is sufficient, because it is *balul mi-kol*.” Now, if *shilush* is a means of mastering a corpus of knowledge, it should be irrelevant whether the Talmud is written down or not. But if it is a formal requirement, having a standardized text is critical, because it means that one can consistently expect to encounter Mikra and Mishnah in the course of their Gemara study. There is not a single Rishon who quotes Rabbeinu Tam in a way that definitively supports the notion that Talmud study is a substitute for learning Tanakh. As for later sources, both *Shulchan Aruch haRav*<sup>19</sup> and Shelah<sup>20</sup> forcefully and definitively reject Shakh and Rama’s understanding of Rabbeinu Tam.<sup>21 22</sup> The consensus of *Rishonim* and *Ahronim* thus reaches the same conclusion as a close reading of Tosafot—it is a misunderstanding to describe Rabbeinu Tam as a “proud supporter of Tanakh non-scholarship.”

Thus far, I have hopefully demonstrated this misunderstanding of Rabbeinu Tam has the support of neither text nor unchallenged tradition.<sup>23</sup> Some brief reflection should show that it is not supported by common sense either. Recall that the misunderstanding has two premises—that *shilush* demands substantive mastery of

Tanakh, and that serious Talmud study subsumes within it mastery of Tanakh as a whole. But can the latter honest-

ly be sustained? I’ll lower the bar as far as possible—can even *mastery* of Talmud *subsume* within it mere *familiarity* with T a n a k h

as a whole? Of the thousands of *pesukim* in Tanakh, only a small fraction are quoted in the Talmud. Whatever knowledge of Mikrah one acquires from studying Talmud is fragmentary at best. And one should not overlook the fact that the Talmud generally quotes *pesukim* out of context, and/or explains them on the level of *derash*.<sup>24</sup> If *shilush* demands substantive knowledge of Tanakh, how could Rabbeinu Tam possibly suggest that the fragmentary, incomplete knowledge of Tanakh gleaned from Talmud study meets that demand? Even as a *limud zekhut*, such an argument does not seem plausible.

While substantive knowledge of Tanakh is a worthy goal, it has nothing to do with *shilush*. Thus, although Rabbeinu Tam’s broader views about the importance of Tanakh study are still an open question,<sup>25</sup> his interpretation of *shilush* should be stricken from the canon of sources marshaled to support the neglect of Tanakh study. Hopefully then, the discourse about the relative importance of Tanakh study can focus on the sources and issues of policy that are genuinely relevant.

*Nathan Hyman is a 2011 graduate of Yeshiva College, and a third year law-student at NYU Law School.*

1 See the discussion in E. Kanarfogel, *Jewish Education and Society in the High Middle Ages* (Detroit, 1992), and E. Kanarfogel, “On the Role of Bible Study in Medieval Ashkenaz”, in *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume, Vol. I*, ed. by Barry Walfish (Haifa, 1993), who identifies the thirteenth century as the beginning of this trend.

2 *Nakh: The Neglected Nineteen*, Kol Hamevaser November 2011

3 *Defending the Opponents of Nakh: A Reluctant Devil’s Advocate*, Kol Hamevaser February 2012

4 This is Shlomo Zuckier’s characterization of Rabbeinu Tam in *Defending the Opponents of Nakh: A Reluctant Devil’s Advocate*, Kol Hamevaser February 2012.

5 It is unclear from the Gemara whether this is a derashah gemurah, or simply an asmakhta. However, Zohar Chadash (Tikkunim Vol. 2, 78:2) and Levush (Orach Chaim 50:1) write that the requirement of shilush is rabbinic in nature.

6 Presumably, one spends the seventh day reviewing one’s learning from the previous week.

7 Other Rishonim have different interpretations of shilush which also reconcile this problem. According to Rambam (Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:11), shilush is not indefinite. After one reaches a certain mastery of Mikra and Mishnah, they dedicate the balance of their time to Talmud. According to Ran (Commentary on Rif, Avodah Zarah 5b), the whole concept of ‘thirds’ is lav davka, and R. Yehoshua ben Chananya simply means that one should dedicate appropriate time to each.

8 Rabbeinu Tam’s position is also quoted by Tosafot on Avodah Zarah (19b) and Sanhedrin (24a), with minor

stylistic variations.

9 Tur (Yoreh Deah 246) also seems to hold this way, but he can be read as adopting the alternate interpretation I suggest below. At best, his position is ambiguous.

10 Yoreh Deah 246:4

11 Yoreh Deah 245:5

12 Nonetheless, it does not follow that this interpretation of Rabbeinu Tam is reflected in practice. See R. Moshe Tzurriel (Otzrot haMussar Vol. 2, pg. 779), who notes that Rabbeinu Tam is not quoted by either Shulchan Aruch haRav, Chayei Adam, Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, Mishnah Berurah, or Chofetz Chayim in his Kuntres Likutei Amarim in their discussions of the practical requirements of talmud Torah. I have opted for the more ambitious argument that Rabbeinu Tam himself never held the position that Rama and Shakh attribute to him.

13 See Tur (Orach Chayim 50). As for why R. Amram Gaon fixed these particular selections as opposed to any other combination of Mikra, Mishnah, and Gemara, see Beit Yosef, *ibid*.

14 However, this conception of shilush is clearly adopted by Rambam (Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:11), who understands that complete mastery of Mikra, Mishnah and Gemara is required. Rashi’s position on the matter is not explicit, but a compelling argument can be made that he rejects a formal conception of shilush fulfilled by a minimal, standardized text. See R. Mordechai Ashkenazi’s commentary to Hilchot Talmud Torah (Perek 2, pg. 69).

15 Presumably, he didn’t suffice with Rav Amram Gaon’s standardized text because it had not yet earned universal acceptance.

16 Ahronim struggle to reconcile the requirement of shilush with the curriculum in Pirkei Avot (5:25) of ben hamesh le-mikra... ben tet-vav la-Gemara, a simple of reading of which suggests that one concludes Mikra study at 15 and thereafter dedicates to Talmud. Maharsha (Chiddushei Agadot, Sanhedrin 24a) writes that for Rabbeinu Tam, the answer is simple. Because shilush requires only a minimal, formal involvement in Mikra and Mishnah, it is entirely consistent with dedicating the majority of one’s time to Gemara after age 15.

17 Yavin Shmuah (Commentary to Eizehu Mekoman, 1:1)

18 Hagahot ha-Smak, Mitzvah 105

19 Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:1, Kuntres Achron

20 Masekhet Shavuot, Perek Ner Mitsvah

21 R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (Nineteen Letters, Letter 18, Feldheim ed. pg. 267) also writes that neglect of Tanakh study is based on a mistaken interpretation of the Gemara’s statement that Talmud Bavli is balul mi-kol. (Which is meant disparagingly, not as a complement.) R. Hirsch might be working with the Rama and Shakh’s understanding of Rabbeinu Tam, in which case he is arguing that Rabbeinu Tam misunderstood the Gemara (an ambitious argument), but it seems more likely that he is arguing that Rabbeinu Tam was misunderstood by others. This is how R. Joseph Elias (pg. 293 *ibid*.) understands R. Hirsch.

22 R. Ya’akov me-Lisa (Ethical Will, quoted by R. Moshe Tzurriel *ibid*.) and R. Yishmael haKohen (Responsa Zera Emet, Yoreh Deah 107) reach effectively the same conclusion

even according to the interpretation of Rabbeinu Tam that I claim should be rejected. They argue that Rabbeinu Tam only justified an exclusive focus on Talmud for those who have already attained mastery of Mikra.

23 I do not mean that the interpretation which I reject has no adherents of stature, only that there is a very strong consensus against it.

24 See R. Moshe Tzurriel (Otzrot haMussar Vol. 2, pg. 780).

25 As far as I am aware, there are no other places where Rabbeinu Tam directly addresses the role of Tanakh study in a Torah curriculum, nor any scholarly literature that attempts to reconstruct his position. We know that he wrote a commentary on Sefer Iyov, but that one can hardly extrapolate a broader conception of Tanakh learning from that fact alone.

## Cross-Pollination as a Method of Biblical Interpretation: A Case Study

BY ALEX MAGED

When we pick up a work of military theory or a history of war, we expect it to be written clearly, factually, and to-the-point. Metaphors, symbolism, and allegory belong to Du Fu, not to Sun Tzu; to Sophocles, not to Thucydides; to von Goethe, not to von Clausewitz. In most cases, our Torah presents no exception to this rule; though the battles which it recounts certainly involve supernatural phenomena, the style of the text’s narrative voice as it describes those battles is markedly prosaic. Yet at the beginning of *Sefer Devarim*, as he reminisces upon an attack against the Israelites that took place nearly four decades prior, Moshe uncharacteristically waxes poetic:

[After the sin of the spies] you said to me, “We have sinned against the Lord; we will go up and fight, according to all that the Lord, our God, has commanded us.” So every one of you girded his weapons, and you prepared yourselves to go up to the mountain [and into the land of Canaan, which you had previously rejected]. And the Lord said to me, “Say to them, ‘Neither go up nor fight, for I am not among you, lest you be struck down before your enemies.’” So I spoke to you, but you did not listen, and you rebelled against the command of the Lord, and you acted wickedly and went up to the mountain. And the Amorites, dwelling in that mountain, came out towards you and pursued you like bees, and beat you down in Seir, as far as Hormah.<sup>1</sup>

The incident that Moshe refers to in this passage is first recorded in the fourteenth chapter of Bamidbar. After the sin of the spies, Hashem decrees that the Israelites must wander in the wilderness for forty years. But

the people, who by this point have changed their minds about living in Canaan, have other ideas—they decide to conquer the land, even though they have been warned not to, and are easily defeated as a result. It is a fairly straightforward story. What is Moshe adding to it by likening Israel’s enemies to “bees”?

As modern students of Tanakh, there are a number of angles from which we could

approach this question. Let us, in this essay, sample a few of those approaches together. First we will examine what the traditional *mefarshim* have said in regard to our verse, with an emphasis on how their comments remain pertinent nearly a millennium after they were written. Then we will read our verse “intertextually”—a literary method for interpreting Tanakh that has recently gained in popularity—to see how it fits within the Israelite experience in the wilderness, more generally. Finally, we will draw on insights from Ancient Near Eastern mythology (and, to a lesser degree, from linguistics), as a way of situating our verse in its broader cultural context.

### Rabbinic Approaches

Probably the best-known interpretation of Moshe’s bee imagery is Rashi’s. According to this French commentator, the Amorites are likened to bees because “just as a bee dies instantly upon stinging a person, so too your enemies, upon touching you, died immediately.”<sup>2</sup> To attack Israel, Rashi implies, is suicidal. His gloss is eerily prescient; until today, those who seek to harm the Jewish people are willing even to take their own lives in the

process, if that is what it is required.

Rashi’s grandson, the Rashbam, offers a more favorable understanding of the bee simile. In his view, Israel’s enemies are analogous to bees in the sense that they are united: “when one goes out [to attack], all the others follow suit.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, notes Hizkuni,<sup>4</sup> the Amalekites were not alone when they confronted the Israelites—they were aided by the Canaanites.<sup>5</sup> Hizkuni’s

observation is especially interesting when we consider that the Canaanites did not even dwell in the mountains, where the war took place; according to the report of the scouts sent by Moses, they inhabited “the coastal region.”<sup>6</sup> Like Rashi, then, Rashbam elucidates our verse in a way that is contemporarily relevant—whether in the War of Independence, the Six Day War, or the Yom Kippur War, Israel’s neighbors have often been joined in their military campaigns by nations who have no geographical stake in the conflict.

Ibn Ezra, by contrast, appears more sympathetic to Israel’s enemies. He suggests that the Amorites are likened to bees because “anybody who nears the home of a bee is immediately chased and bitten.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Rabbenu Behaye states: “It is the nature of bees

to pursue anybody who touches their home, and a person endangers himself by doing so.”<sup>8</sup> What these Spanish exegetes seem to be telling us is that the Israelites should have known better than to lay claims to territories that were not theirs. To establish your home in the land of your forefathers and foremothers is a beautiful *mitsvah*; to launch a reckless attack against a people to whom you have not offered peace, and whom God has explicitly commanded you to leave alone, is most certainly not.

While the rabbinic commentators vary widely in their analysis of our verse in Devarim, each of them strives to connect its meaning to the details of the battle described in the book of Bamidbar. Yet perhaps we must return to the moments immediately preceding that battle if we wish to uncover the import of Moshe’s curious reference to “bees.”

*Perhaps this analogy is intended to provide comfort. Do not be surprised that you met resistance when trying to enter into the Promised Land, Moshe intimates. Anything valuable always comes with challenges. Where there is sweetness, there are stings;*



[The spies said]: “We are unable to go up against the people [of Canaan], for they are stronger than we.” They spread a rumor about the land which

they had scouted, telling the children of Israel, “The land we passed through to explore is a land that consumes its inhabitants, and all the people we saw in it are men of stature. There we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, descended from the giants. In our eyes, we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes.”<sup>9</sup>

Only twice in the Torah are humans likened to insects: in our verse, and in

the final verse cited above. It would appear that these verses are closely connected. In Bamidbar, a frightened people abandons its plans to conquer the Promised Land when it is told that its members “seem like grasshoppers” in the eyes of the locals. The Israelites ultimately change their minds, but they are routed by the Canaanites all the same. Then, in Devarim, Moshe alludes to the debacle by portraying Israel’s enemies as “bees.” The bee does not prey on other insects,<sup>10</sup> and its cousin, the wasp, generally prefers plant material as well.<sup>11</sup> Yet wasps have been known to eat other insects—including, occasionally, grasshoppers—on one condition: if the grasshopper is already dead, or it has been paralyzed.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps this is the meaning behind Moshe’s “bee imagery.” “There was no reason for us to lose that battle,” he implies. “Only because we became paralyzed by our own fears were we vanquished.”

On the other hand, it is possible that Moshe’s bee imagery includes a more positive undertone as well. Twice in the course of the narrative of the sin of the spies is the land of Canaan referred to as a “land of milk and honey.”<sup>13</sup> This is a refrain that repeats itself throughout Tanakh, and though “honey” in this context is generally understood to refer to fruit syrup, there is no reason to rule out a literal reading. It is striking, at any rate, that of the many enemies who confronted



the Israelites in the wilderness, the only ones whom Moshe characterizes as “bees” are those who forcibly prevented their entrance into the land of Canaan. Perhaps this analogy is intended to provide comfort. Do not be surprised that you met resistance when trying to enter into the Promised Land, Moshe intimates. Anything valuable always comes with challenges. Where there is sweetness, there are stings; where there is honey, there are bees.

#### Linguistic-Cultural Approach

Until now, we have grounded our explanations of Deuteronomy 1:44 squarely within the Tanakh itself, or within the commentary of the traditional Biblical exegetes. An altogether different approach becomes available when we expand our focus and include in our study material outside of the Jewish canon. To that end, we turn now to a rather unlikely source: Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat’s *A History of Food*. Here are the surprising remarks that we find at the beginning of the author’s discussion on honey:

The Hebrew for bee is *dbure* from the root *dbr*, meaning ‘word,’ whence the pretty first name Deborah, indicating the bee’s mission to reveal the Truth. Honey, miraculously made by bees, signifies truth because it needs no treatment to transform it after it has been collected. It does not deteriorate, and until the discovery of sugar there was no substitute.<sup>14</sup> Though not a work of Biblical scholarship, *A History of Food* raises an intriguing question: What, indeed, is the etymology of the Hebrew

word for “bee?” At first glance, it would seem that *הרובד* is related to *רובד*, as in “pestilence.” Nevertheless, the *Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language*, in its entry for *הרובד*, cites only the Arabic and Aramaic cognates of the word—it does not list a definitive origin.<sup>15</sup> This leaves the door open for us to think more carefully about Toussaint-Samat’s theory.

In her book, Toussaint-Samat spends several pages tracing the mythic symbolism of bees and of honey in the Graeco-Latin tradition. Yet it turns out that bees play a prominent role in at least two Ancient Near Eastern cultures as well. Holly Bishop teaches us about the significance bees held for the ancient Egyptians in her own book, *Robbing the Bees*:

[The Egyptians] believed that bees were the messengers and incarnations of the gods, who had bestowed honey from on high. A translation of one papyrus reads, “When Ra [the sun-god] weeps again the water which flows from his eye becomes a bee...” Throughout the ancient kingdoms of Egypt, hieroglyphs of bees were used to signify omniscience, power, and deity.<sup>16</sup>

In ancient Egypt, bees were regarded as “incarnations of the gods.” This is consistent with Toussaint-Samat’s claim. Even more noteworthy for our purposes, however, is the importance attributed to bees in Hittite culture. Along with the Amalekites—whom the Torah explicitly identifies as one of the nations that attacked the Israelites in the original account of the battle that we have been studying—the Hittites were one of the indigenous peoples of Canaan’s mountain range.<sup>17</sup> It is telling that bees serve as divine messengers in their mythology as well. Annelise Talbot summarizes the Hittite Myth of the Missing God in her article “The

*“Seventy faces has the Torah,” our sages inform us—there are numerous many ways to unpack the teachings of our tradition. This is especially true in the twenty-first century, as discoveries in fields ranging from archaeology to zoology provide us with an ever-expanding data set against which to interpret our timeless Torah.*

Withdrawal of the Fertility God:”

The myth describes how all life on earth was paralyzed, when the god of fertility disappeared.... All we learn is that the god goes away in great anger... His action has a terrible effect on the world. Fire will not burn; corn will not grow; no young ones are born to the cattle or humans; trees wither, springs dry up, and everybody starves. At a feast the Sun-God gives for the ‘thousand gods’ nobody is satisfied by the food and drink, and the Weather-God suggests the reason must be that his son has gone away in an angry mood and has taken all good things with him.... Now the Weather-God asks the goddess Hannahanna for advice, and she suggests he goes himself. All he achieves, however, is to break the shaft of his hammer, when he knocks at the closed gate of Telipinu’s house, and this makes him give up his quest. In the end Hannahanna sends the bee out to search for the missing god, against the advice of the Weather-God who thinks the bee is too small to be of any use. The bee is ordered to sting Telipinu in his hands and feet to wake

him up, then to smear his wounds with wax and bring him back home. The bee finds Telipinu sleeping in a meadow and carries out the order to sting him. Telipinu is furious at being stung; when he is sleeping and nursing a temper, he does not want to be forced to make conversation! He refuses to return and starts to destroy mankind as well as oxen and sheep.<sup>18</sup>

In this Hittite legend, the bee is an emissary of the gods—but it fails in its mission, bringing about destruction instead of peace. Against this backdrop, three verses from our Tanakh take on entirely new meaning:

(1) And I will send hornets [הערצ] before you, and it will drive out the Hivvites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you.<sup>19</sup>

(2) And also the hornets [הערצ] the Lord, your God, will incite against [your enemies], until the survivors and those who hide from you perish.<sup>20</sup>

(3) And I sent the hornet [הערצ] before you, and it drove them out from before you, even the two kings of the Amorites; not with your sword, nor with your bow.<sup>21</sup>

Both the Egyptians and the Hittites treated bees as representatives of the gods. Yet the Egyptian bee is born through a sort of divine accident, and the Hittite bee undermines the aims of those who send it. The upshot is that neither the Egyptian nor the Hittite pantheon is truly omnipotent; its members don’t even exert complete power over a little bee. Perhaps it is in order to dispel these pagan theologies that the Hebrew Bible presents the “bees” as God’s agents—lest anybody mistake who is in control of whom, Hashem adopts the conventions of Israel’s neighbors and turns it on its head.

What all of this means in terms of the verse in our Torah portion, meanwhile, is open for debate. Maybe Moshe compares the Amorites to bees in order to stress that even when the Israelites lose a battle, God is still in charge; our enemies are *also* His “messengers,” as it were. This is a theme that recurs throughout Tanakh,<sup>22</sup> and particularly throughout the book of Devarim;<sup>23</sup> that it should express itself in our verse would not surprise us. However, explanations that do not invoke this theme are certainly possible, and perhaps worth examining another time.

#### Other Approaches?

Together we have considered several different approaches to understanding the meaning of Moshe’s bee imagery. These interpretations are by no means mutually exclusive; each grants us access into another dimension of our verse, and each compliments all of the others. “Seventy faces has the Torah,” our sages inform us—there are numerous many ways to unpack the teachings of our tradition. This is especially true in the twenty-first century, as discoveries in fields ranging from archaeology to zoology provide us with an ever-expanding data set against which to interpret our timeless Torah.

The search for multiple layers of meaning within our texts is, in no small part, what renders its study so enjoyable and personally rewarding for those who engage in it. So too is the development of a novel insight that results from a cross-pollination of multiple sources: Biblical and rabbinic, Jewish and secular, ancient and modern—as the case may be. In the words of King Davd, the toil of Torah is *matok mi-dvash ve-nofet tsufim*: “sweeter than honey and the drippings of its combs.”<sup>24</sup>

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## (Endnotes)

- 1 Deuteronomy 1: 41-44.  
 2 Rashi to Deuteronomy 1:44 s.v. ka'asher ta'asenah ha-dvorim  
 3 Rashbam to Deuteronomy 1:44 s.v. ka'asher ta'asenah ha-dvorim  
 4 Hizkuni to Deuteronomy 1:44 s.v. ka'asher ta'asenah ha-dvorim  
 5 Numbers 14:45  
 6 Numbers 13:29  
 7 Ibn Ezra to Deuteronomy 1:44 s.v. ka'asher ta'asenah ha-dvorim  
 8 Rabbenu Behaye to Deuteronomy 1:44 s.v. ka'asher ta'asenah ha-dvorim  
 9 Numbers 13:31-3  
 10 "Bee (insect)," available at: [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)  
 11 "Wasp (insect)," available at: [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)  
 12 *ibid.*

- 13 Numbers 13:27, 14:8  
 14 Toussaint-Samat, Maguelonne. *A History of Food*, p. 18. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.  
 15 Klein, Ernest. *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language*. New York, NY: Macmillan, 1987.  
 16 Bishop, Holley. *Robbing the Bees: A Biography of Honey*, p. 44-5. London, UK: Simon & Schuster, 2006.  
 17 Numbers 13:29  
 18 Talbot, Annelise. "The Withdrawal of the Fertility God." *Folklore* 93.1 (1982): 31-46.  
 19 Exodus 23:28  
 20 Deuteronomy 7:20  
 21 Joshua 24:12  
 22 See, for example, Judges 2:11-15 and Jeremiah 25:8-14.  
 23 See, for example, Deuteronomy 28:49-69 and 32:19-30.  
 24 Psalms 19:11

Mazal Tov to our staff writer (and incoming associate editor)  
 Alex Maged upon his recent engagement to Blima Zefinger!



## God's Three Keys and the Dialogue between Talmud and Tanakh

BY MIRIAM PEARL KLAHR

"Talmudic text that comments on some verses of Scripture calls in its turn for interpretation. Its intentions are not immediately apparent; its exposition can surprise a novice, and allows for several levels and dimensions of meaning,"<sup>1</sup> wrote the twentieth century French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas. Verses or *pesukim* from Tanakh appear often within the pages of the Talmud. Sometimes the Talmud comes to expound halakha, ethical norms, and righteous behavior from the *pesukim*. Often the *pesukim* serve as proof texts that support the different positions and views of the *tannaim* and *amoraim*. In such instances, it is rare that *pesukim* are cited in their entirety. Rather short phrases, consisting of precise language which strengthens particular argu-

ments, are commonly used. Though at times one does not need to understand the context of a quoted *pasuk* to follow the logical flow of Talmudic arguments, understanding the background of *pesukim* is a powerful tool when engaging in the interpretation Levinas calls for. It both enhances and deepens one's understanding of the Talmudic conversation<sup>2</sup>. This article will explore the *pesukim* that Rabbi Yohanan cites regarding God's "three keys" and how their context enriches one's understanding of his teaching.

"Rabbi Yohanan said: Three keys the Holy One has retained in His own hands and not entrusted to the hand of any messenger, namely, the Key of Rain, the Key of Childbirth, and the Key of the Revival of the Dead. The Key of Rain, for it is written,

"The Lord will **open** unto thee His good treasure, the heaven to give the rain of thy land in its season." The Key of Childbirth, for it is written, "And God remembered Rachel, and God hearkened to her, and **opened** her womb." The Key of the Revival of the Dead, for it is written, And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have **opened** your graves."<sup>3</sup>

Rabbi Yohanan's statement teaches that rain, childbirth, and the revival of the dead are exclusively in God's control. The structure of his words builds from the least to the most dramatic of God's actions, and demonstrates that God and only God



holds in His hands the keys to all life. Angels and emissaries play no role in the transformation of desolate grounds into lush grass through rain, the creation of new life from the human body, or the revival of the dead. These acts of creation are too miraculous to be attributed to anyone but God.

But Tosfot and Rashi are trou-

bled with the statement of Rabbi Yohanan: how can Rabbi Yohanan say that God does not entrust a messenger with any of these keys when the Tanakh relates how both Eliyahu<sup>4</sup> and Elisha<sup>5</sup> brought the dead back to life? Furthermore, in *Mesechet Sanhedrin* the Talmud tells that both the key of rain and the key of the re-

val of the dead were given to Eliyahu. Rashi resolves this question by explaining that when Rabbi Yohanan says "three keys the Holy One blessed be He has retained in His own hands and not entrusted to the hand of any messenger," he means to say that all three keys were never entrusted to a messenger together, at the same time.<sup>6</sup> However, this statement does not preclude the handing of only one or two of the keys to an emissary as was done with Eliyahu. Tosfot, resolves this question differently, explaining that Rabbi Yohanan's words imply that these three keys can never permanently be in the hands of an agent. They can however be temporarily given to messengers, allowing Eliyahu and Elisha to momentarily possess the power of bringing the dead to life. A third approach to this question may lie in examining the *pesukim* which Rabbi Yohanan cites.

While Rabbi Yohanan's unequivocally states that God alone controls rain, childbirth, and the revival of the dead, the *pesukim* he brings convey an almost subversive counter-voice to his statement. The verses teach that though God may hold the keys to creation, man has power over how and when God is able to use these keys<sup>7</sup>. The first *pasuk*, brought in relation to the key of rain, is from the book of *Devarim*. The *pasuk* reads "The Lord will

open for you his bounteous store, the heavens, to provide rain for your land in season and to bless all your undertakings."<sup>8</sup> This *pasuk* affirms Rabbi



Yohanan's point: that only God controls the heavens—the ultimate storehouse—and that only He provides rain for the world. But it is also important to note the context of this *pasuk*. The *perek* opens with the words "Now if you obey the Lord your God to observe faithfully all His commandments which I enjoin upon you this day,"<sup>9</sup> and then lists the many blessings that will come upon the Jewish people if they heed the words of God. Thus, though only God holds the key of rain, it is man who determines when the key is used. Man's choice to follow the *mitsvot* is what prompts God to unlock the heavens and bring rain to this world.

This idea of man actualizing God's powers is further strengthened by Rabbi Yohanan's next *pasuk*: "And God remembered Rachel, God listened to her and opened her womb."<sup>10</sup> Again, this *pasuk* demonstrates how God controls childbirth and opens wombs. But the broader context, and even the *pasuk* itself, also testifies to man's role in the process—God only opens Rachel's womb after listening to her. The language of "opening" is also used regarding Leah's womb<sup>11</sup>, but there the *pasuk* does not say that God listened to Leah. Rabbi Yohanan specifically chooses a verse where God not only opens the womb of a barren woman, but where this opening also comes as a response to human action. However, surprisingly, when one examines the *pesukim*, one does not find any prayer that Rachel offers to God. Instead, one

hears of Rachel's distress when she turns to Yaakov and says "Give me children or I shall die"<sup>12</sup> and senses her desperation when she tells Yaakov to have children on her behalf with her maid, Bilhah.<sup>13</sup> Unlike the example from *Devarim*, here what actualizes God's use of the key is not the fulfillment of His *mitsvot*, nor even a request directed towards Him. Rather, it is Rachel's intense pain and suffering that causes God to act, and open her womb. God does not only respond to the fulfillment of his commandments and action; He also responds to internal human emotion

Finally, the context of the last *pasuk* Rabbi Yohanan quotes is most astonishing. God says to Yechezkel, "And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves and lifted you out of your graves,"<sup>14</sup> reinforcing the idea that only God can revive the dead. This statement appears after God shows Yechezkel a valley of dry bones, and miraculously brings them to life in front of Yechezkel's eyes. But Yechezkel does not stand idle as the miracle occurs. Instead he plays a role in the process. "Then He [God] said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy O mortal!"<sup>15</sup> And only after Yechezkel utters this prophecy are the bones revived. What purpose is there to Yechezkel's prophesizing to the bones and the breath? Couldn't God revive the dead without man's words? Yet, what having Yechezkel prophesize accomplishes is the creation of space for man to act as a catalyst for this miracle, even if practically this catalyst is unnecessary. Though only God can revive the dead, He stretches out His hand for man to join Him in the process.

In light of this *perek* and its example

of God and man acting as partners, the episodes of Elisha and Eliyahu no longer contradict Rabbi Yohanan's statement. Like Yechezkel, these prophets act as vessels, bringing life into the world. Rabbi Yohanan's words can be understood as stressing that the source behind the miraculous actions of the prophets, is not a messenger nor an angel, but God Himself. The *pesukim* he brings emphasize man's power in bringing such miracles to this world, while simultaneously serving as a firm reminder that though man plays a role in such miracles, they are acts of God. Perhaps this is the idea that Tosafot and Rashi are imparting when they limit Rabbi Yohanan's statement. Through stating that God does sometimes hand over the keys, but never all at once or permanently, Rashi and Tosfot relay that while oftentimes God empowers man and hands him a key, ultimately God is the source of all life.

*Exploring the context of pesukim quoted in Tanakh breathes new life into Talmudic statements, as the Talmudic statements breathe new life and understanding into pesukim*

An exploration of the context of Rabbi Yohanan's *pesukim* suggests that his statement is not only about God's power and a description of an are-

na where man and even angels have no control. Rather, Rabbi Yohanan's statement is also about the power of man and the partnership between man and God. Man's actions, words, and emotions shape when and how God interacts with this world. The idea of God's three keys reminds man to recognize the glory of God as they partner to bring about miracles. Furthermore, just as exploring the context of the *pesukim* enriches one's understanding of the Talmud, the Talmud's use of the *pesukim* gives the verses of Tanakh meaning beyond their immediate context. The opening of the heavens, Rachel's wombs, and the

graves of the dead are no longer independent events. Picking up on the repeated use of the root *patach*, to open, Rabbi Yohanan puts these *pesukim* in dialogue with one another. Suddenly these three seemingly unrelated occurrences are all connected events that open the world to new life; they

are God's acts of creation. Rain is a miraculous occurrence, a direct blessing from God, akin to childbirth and the revival of the dead. One realizes that expressing deep emotion to God can have the same power as a prophet's words bringing life into the world. Three seemingly unrelated *pesukim*

come together to illustrate how God's power and man's potential interact.

Exploring the context of *pesukim* quoted in Tanakh breathes new life into Talmudic statements, as Talmudic statements breathe new life and understanding into *psukim*. Together, they create a beautiful conversation

between man and God as divine words bring new meaning to human thought, and human thought reveals new meanings in divine words.

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1 Emanuel Levinas, "The Jewish Understanding of Scripture," *Cross Currents*, available at: [www.crosscurrents.org](http://www.crosscurrents.org)

2 Rav Shai, director of Nishmat's first year Israeli program and Rav Yehoshua Weisberg, director of Nishmat's Shana Ba'Aretz, both exposed me to the beauty of analyzing the context of *psukim* quoted in the Talmud. I

first studied the statement of Rav Yochanan that this article explores with Rav Yehoshua Weisberg.

3 Taanit 2a-b

4 Melachim Aleph 17:19-23, Soncino Translation

5 Melachim Bet 4:31-37, Soncino Translation

6 Rashi Taanit 2a

7 Rabbi Dov Berkowitz, *Hadaf Hakiyumi*, 245, Magid.

8 Devarim 28:12, JPS Translation

9 Devarim 28:1, JPS Translation

10 Bereishit 20:22

11 Bereishit 29:32

12 Bereishit 30:1

13 Bereishit 30:3

14 Yechezkel 37:13, JPS translation

15 Yechezkel 37:9, JPS Translation

## Of Angels and Men: Peshat As A Universal Tool<sup>1</sup>

BY AVRAHAM WEIN

In the opening pages of *Family Redeemed*, Rabbi Soloveitchik proclaims:<sup>2</sup> "I am sorry to say that many Jews don't look to Bible for guidance and that its spiritual message, so indispensable for man today, is completely ignored. Our approach to Biblical interpretation is too often homiletical; it is the pulpit and the synagogue approach. The Book of Books has become a compilation of sermonical inspirational texts, popular maxims and vulgar common sense. However, the most beautiful aspect of the Bible is its *Weltanschauung*, its world view, its spiritual outlook upon both the world and man".<sup>3</sup> While Rabbi Soloveitchik does not discount the value of homiletical biblical interpretations, his point strikes at a seemingly intuitive notion, that we should strive to understand what the Tanakh *itself* is saying. The impact of Tanakh on our lives is immeasurable. Rabbi Hayyim Angel states that Tanakh "shapes our religious worldview, our religious and moral behavior, and

our core values and ideals",<sup>4</sup> and thus it is only natural to desire to comprehend its messages. In sincere pursuit of this

end, new c a m p s h a v e f o r m e d and fresh methodologies h a v e been developed. In the last half century, a Tanakh "revolution"<sup>5</sup> has occurred in Israel.<sup>6</sup> The movement, with Yeshivat Har Etzion and Herzog College at the helm, has aroused controversy in other circles in the Religious Zionist world.<sup>7</sup> The primary element of this controversy has been a return to *peshto shel mikra*, which will be referred to as "peshat" for convenience. Another camp expresses the need to exclusively view

Tanakh through the eyes of Hazal and earlier commentators and not through grappling with the text to find the "simple meaning." They believe that only Hazal and early commentators were able to achieve an accurate understanding of the text. A careful analysis of each of these two approaches and the assumptions upon which their Biblical methodologies



will reveal the roots of their debate and reflect how struggling to find the "peshat" of the verses of the Tanakh should be perceived as a universally critical tool.

### The Peshat Methodology

Prior to analyzing the theological assumptions behind these move-

ments, a description of the methodologies employed, as well as few illustrative examples, is necessary. Before describing the peshat movement, it is imperative to provide a working definition of the term peshat. *Mori verabbi* Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein explains that "Peshat seeks to enter into the content of the text, to understand the meaning of the words, to explain the use of alternative expressions, to examine passages in their context and contrast similar passages."<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Hayyim Angel provides a briefer definition of peshat and defines it as "the primary intent of the author."<sup>9</sup> The essential methodological assumption of the *peshto shel mikra* movement is described by Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun, a founder of the movement, as "the key to learning Tanakh and understanding it, is found within it."<sup>10</sup> What this means is that there is no inherent need for help from external sources in order to understand Tanakh.<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Ezra Bick elaborates further: "there is a pe-

shat, a plain meaning, which is accessible and which is **meant** to be understood by the reader... the meaning of the text is found in the text and your job is to find it."<sup>12</sup> A thorough reader is deemed capable of understanding the meaning of a story or episode in Tanakh through grappling with the words of the text alone.

Literary analysis is another characteristic of the movement: structural, plot, and character analyses are used to understand the meaning of the text.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to most medieval commentators who analyzed verse-by-verse, the peshat movement often looks at an episode more broadly in order to understand it.<sup>14</sup> A final distinguishing characteristic of the peshat movement is its use of commentaries and midrashim. While others may study commentaries and their approaches as an end in itself<sup>15</sup>, the peshat school utilizes them differently. As Rabbi Ezra Bick puts it, "the pioneering work of Rashi and Ramban, Radak and Abarbanel, the Netziv and Rav Hirsch, are **aids**, not the subject itself."<sup>16</sup> This is consistent with the goal of the peshat school, to understand the text itself, and not the commentator. Rabbi Hayyim Angel sums up the nuanced approach to commentaries as: "We must consider them 'our eyes to the text' rather than as substitutes for the text".<sup>17</sup> Additionally, Midrashim are used to illuminate the text, sometimes by pointing out parallels, emphasizing linguistic nuances, or finding gaps in the narratives, but are not themselves the subject of study.

A few examples from a prominent figure within the peshat movement will help elucidate this methodology by demonstrating how finding another place where a word is used in Tanakh will help elucidate its meaning. Rabbi Amnon Bazak, in his book "*Nekudat Peticha*", attempts to explain the meaning of the words "*yad rama*" (*Shemot* 14:8) which appear in the context of Bnei Yisrael leaving Egypt<sup>18</sup>. Rashi comments that the words mean

"lofty and openly displayed might".<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Bazak challenges Rashi's reading because merely two verses later the Jews are described as being frightened. Rabbi Bazak says that there is room to present an alternate explanation which is in line with the peshat. He quotes two other verses in Tanakh where "*yad rama*" is used (Bamidbar 15:30, Devarim 32:27) and proves from there that what the verse means is that Bnei Yisrael had a sense of haughtiness, as if their exodus from Egypt was of their own doing. This example reflects three different aspects of the movement's methodology. It reflects dedication to a close reading of both the local verses and relevant verses found in other locations in Tanakh; it displays a willingness to disagree with the opinion of earlier commentators if their opinions are not in line with the peshat, and finally it represents the readiness to be critical of Bnei Yisrael if the peshat of the verses so indicate.

Another example that highlights the methodology employed by the peshat school is Rabbi Bazak's interpretation of the narrative involving *Hovav Ben Reuel* and Moshe in Bamidbar (10:29-32).<sup>20</sup> Moshe requests that he stay with Bnei Yisrael on their journey towards the Land of Israel. *Hovav* declines Moshe's offer but Moshe petitions him to stay in order to serve "as their eyes" and guide them toward Israel. Interestingly, the Tanakh does not record a response to Moshe's appeal. Rabbi Bazak notes the absence of an answer from *Hovav* and attempts to explain this peculiarity through a peshat

reading of the verses. He suggests that the lack of a response implies that the key point of the story is not the result but rather the question itself. Moshe's request should be viewed negatively since it is a plea to flesh and blood, which runs counter to the spirit of the surrounding verses. Those verses (Bamidbar 9:17-18, 10:33-34) and other verses in Tanakh (Devarim 8:15-16, Bamidbar 15:39-41) emphasize that Bnei Yisrael must rely on the help of God to lead them while in the desert and not man. Moshe and Bnei Yisrael must realize that they need not rely on the eyes of *Hovav* since the Ark of God will lead them. Rabbi Bazak arrives at this conclusion through a close textual

*Our approach to Biblical interpretation is too often homiletical; it is the pulpit and the synagogue approach. The Book of Books has become a compilation of sermonical inspirational texts, popular maxims and vulgar common sense. However, the most beautiful aspect of the Bible is its Weltanschauung, its world view, its spiritual outlook upon both the world and man*

reading and thereby noticing the gap in the narrative. Additionally, he makes use of both nearby and distant passages as a means to understand the Tanakh's approach to relying on human beings. Finally, it reflects a willingness to criticize a great biblical figure

even if Hazal and earlier commentators had not done so. Rabbi Bazak's analysis is emblematic of a number the key characteristics of the peshat school.

### The Derash Methodology

The other school of biblical interpretation will be referred to in this article as the "derash" school, and in general is characterized by the use of the tools of rabbinic interpretation to diverge from the simple reading of the text. Perhaps the most common reason for this is in order to look at the figures in the text in a more positive light

in order to view figures in the text as stellar role models for subsequent generations. In this pursuit, the "derash" school chooses specific teachings of Hazal or early commentators which aid their method of understanding.<sup>21</sup> One is not supposed to interpret the stories pertaining to great biblical figures in the manner that a simple reading of the text would imply. A reader is deemed incapable of understanding the text on his own since they lack the skills necessary to discover the abstract complexities which lead to uncover the deeper and more accurate meaning. Remarks of commentators that criticize biblical figures<sup>22</sup> should not be viewed as legitimate models of interpretation for a reader, only the esteemed status of the commentator justifies him understanding the verses in that way.<sup>23</sup>

A classic example of this approach is with regard to David and *Batsheva*. From the simple reading of the verses it seems clear that David committed a few grave sins relating to murder and adultery in the process of taking *Batsheva* as a wife. This approach is based on *Natan's* reproach of David as well as David's confession: "Wherefore hast thou despised the word of the LORD, to do that which is evil in My sight? Uriah the Hittite thou hast smitten with the sword, and his wife thou hast taken to be thy wife..." 'And David said unto *Nathan*: 'I have sinned against the LORD.'"<sup>24</sup> (Shmuel 2:12:9,13). This is indeed how a number of medieval commentators understand the story as well<sup>25</sup>. According to this reading, David's ensuing confession and repentance absolve him from these severe sins. In contrast, the "derash" school diverges from this approach and instead begins with the a-priori assumption that David could have not committed such serious sins because of his exalted status, reflected by his being the progenitor of the Messiah.<sup>26</sup> Instead they focus on the talmudic dictum "'Whoever says that David sinned is in error (*Shabbat 56a*).'" As a result, they understand David's sins to

be significantly less severe than a peshat reading would understand.

### Theological Assumptions of the Movements

The approach of the “derash” school is predicated upon a critical theological assumption, namely, we do not live on the same exalted plane of existence that the holy biblical figures lived on, and we are thus not capable of relating to them. They are fundamentally different than us and any attempt to analyze them based on our own frame of reference is simply a mistake<sup>27</sup>. They are viewed as near-angelic figures. This perspective can be extracted from the writing of Rabbi Aharon Kotler: “The actions of our forefathers, who, as we have said, were the foundations of the Jewish people and of the whole world, could not have been influenced in the slightest by personal inclinations and desires.”<sup>28</sup> Or as Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein describes this approach: “many in the religious camp adopt the approach, namely, that gedolei Yisrael are superhuman. One cannot draw any comparison between us and them. They have no emotions, struggles or drives, and certainly never sin.”<sup>29</sup> Rabbi Lichtenstein argues that “this approach evolves from an admirable concern for the preservation of our respect and reverence for our gedolim.”<sup>30</sup> This approach is based on a key assumption. For biblical figures like the *Avot*, Moshe or David to be considered worthy of the accolades and place they receive in our tradition, they need to be pristine characters. Plainly, for them it is inconceivable for great figures to have sinned since it would diminish their holy stature.

In contrast, Rabbi Mordechai Breuer, a monumental figure in the peshat movement writes: “To endeavor to understand the plain sense of the Bible is to accept the fundamental assumption that ‘the Torah speaks in human language’.”<sup>31</sup> We are deemed capable of understanding the actions of

great biblical figures. Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein describes the critical assumption of the peshat movement: “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 our forefathers.”<sup>32</sup> This stance is the justification for the peshat school. One is able to read the text through one’s own eyes simply because he or she can relate to the figures and dramas that fill the verses of the Tanakh.

### The Crux of the Debate

The true source of this debate revolves around one major question. What makes the figures in Tanakh like the *Avot*, Imahot, Moshe, and David so extraordinary? The derash school believes it is because biblical characters were superhuman, flawless figures imbued with exalted souls who never seriously erred. The peshat school answers this question completely differently, affecting their entire methodology. Simply put, it is not being superhuman that made them great, it was specifically the fact that they were human, and were capable of achieving greatness despite the difficult trials and tribulations inherent to man’s emotional existence.<sup>33</sup> Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein phrases it as follows: “The Torah, however, presents the forefathers to us as human beings, and their lives as human lives. Of course they are lofty, outstanding individuals, the elect

among men, the ‘beloved of God,’ but they achieve all this while retaining their human qualities- **and therein lies their greatness.**”<sup>34</sup> The fact that they sin is only natural as human beings. Yet their ability to nonetheless be extraordinary figures despite this is what makes them great.

The clearest proof of this perspective is found in the thought of the two founding *roshei yeshiva* of Yeshivat Har Etzion, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein and Rabbi Yehuda Amital. Rabbi Lichtenstein writes: “Were Avraham not to have had any human emotions or drives, and would thus have taken his son to be sacrificed just as one would an animal, then akeidat Yitzchak would not have constituted as monumental a

display of faith and religious resolve as it did; it would have lost its significance. Thus, we cannot overlook the sins of several of gedolei Yisrael, but we must view them in the broader context of Hazal’s overall attitude towards these exceptional personalities. These are giants who sinned, but whose sins do not diminish their greatness.”<sup>35</sup> Rabbi Amnon Bazak in describing the thought of Rabbi Amital makes a critical point: “Do we wish to see artificial, angelic figures, who neither err nor sin? What do such figures have to offer us? Should we falsify the plain sense of Scripture in order to create unrealistic characters? Or perhaps, just the opposite: based on an understanding of the complexity of Biblical figures, we should adopt a different approach to life, which does not view human complexity as something essentially negative.”<sup>36</sup> Rabbi Amital’s point is striking but intuitive. Instead of imposing our own perspective of the ideal nature of

man onto Tanakh, we should allow the perspective of Tanakh to influence our own.

### Usefulness of Peshat For the Derash School

Despite this fundamental disagreement, which is certainly *le’sheim shamayim*, what should not be lost in the crossfire is the pertinent value *peshuto shel mikra* possesses for both schools. As has been exhibited, the peshat school believes in the value of the simple reading of the text in addition to the meaningful teachings of Hazal and earlier commentators. Yet grappling to find the simple meaning of the text is equally important for the derash school. This is because in order to both understand and truly appreciate the words of Hazal and earlier commentators, one needs to understand how they arrived at their conclusions. Their interpretations and analyses were not created in a vacuum, but rather derive from the words of the Tanakh itself. Understanding the peshat of the verses leads to a deeper appreciation of the contributions of both Hazal through midrashim and early commentators.

With regards to early commentators, this approach can be discerned in a number of teachings from the peshat movement. In the introduction to his book “Passages”, Rabbi Michael Hattin states that “we will meet the *Rishonim* through the study of the text itself, via an attentive reading that will naturally introduce them. To study the text thoroughly is to anticipate many of their questions and to more fully appreciate their solutions. A student who immediately consults Rashi or Ramban after a cursory reading of the verse has failed to adequately understand either one of them or the subtleties of the verse itself.”<sup>37</sup> This idea is very intuitive. *Ramban* and *Rashi* examined and struggled with the text first before arriving at their conclusions. If they choose one approach to the text, we want to understand how they got

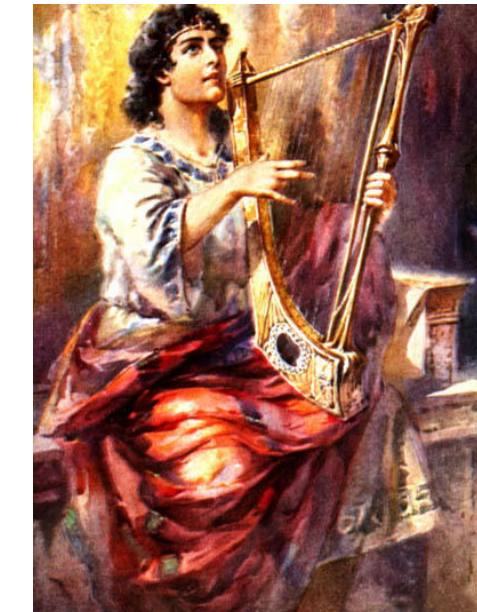
there. If they stray from the simple reading we must ask what educational, pedagogical, or religious message lies therein. A few examples will illustrate the value of this approach. Rabbi Menachem Leibtag, in his attempt to understand why there are so many interpretations of Moshe’s sin at *Meriva*, suggests the following methodology: “to better understand why there are so many different opinions, the first part of this week’s shiur carefully analyzes the key pesukim of this narrative. To understand why there are so many opinions, we must begin with the Torah’s own description of their sin... let’s do on our own what (most likely) all of the commentators did on their own before they wrote their commentaries... That would be the most logical way to figure out wherein lies his mistake.”<sup>38</sup> In doing so Rabbi Leibtag emerges with an understanding of what drove the various commentaries to reach their conclusions. Another illustration of this methodology can be found in the writings of Rabbi Hattin. After determining the many problems with Rashi’s chronology in his comments on *hayei sarah* he says the following: “It is not enough to simply say that Rashi’s interpretation is ‘wrong.’ Having concluded that it is untenable from a textual standpoint, the more important task now is to ascertain why Rashi may have proffered it... We must begin to ponder the deeper significance of the source, the implication of its reading that only on a surface level appears implausible. Perhaps Rashi’s

intent was to communicate far more important ideas, that only for the sake of brevity are couched in terms of the age of the protagonists.”<sup>39</sup> This methodology allows Rabbi Hattin to understand Rashi’s insights about *Yitzchak’s* part in the *akeidah*. The common denominator in these examples is that a close reading of the text and determining what the peshat might be, allows for greater understanding and respect of the commentaries.

A similar approach is true with regards to the Hazal’s midrashic comments, which were not created in a vacuum. Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein claims that “the midrash’s attempt to provide answers for questions of this kind is not arbitrary nor is it guesswork; it is based on an analysis of the motivating factors that underlie the text.”<sup>40</sup> For one to understand midrashim, one must begin with an analysis of the simple meaning of the text. This is for two primary reasons. The first is that very often the midrash’s goal is to enlighten us about the simple meaning of a narrative. Dr. Yael Ziegler writes “it has been my experience that a deeper examination of midrashim often uncovers a deep apprehension of the crux of the narrative”<sup>41</sup>. Therefore one must grapple with the simple meaning of the text itself in order to eventually understand what Hazal’s comments are revealing about it. Secondly, Dr. Ziegler comments that “when the midrashim do stray from the simple meaning of the text, it is often enlightening to ask why they did so and to try and deter-

mine the objectives of the midrash.”<sup>42</sup> How can one ascertain if Hazal are indeed straying from the simple meaning of the text in order to advance some type of message, if one has not previously grasped the simple reading?

An extraordinary example of this approach can be found in an article written by Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun. In *Bereishit* the verse states with regard to Lot’s hospitality of the angels in Sedom: “And he prepared a banquet for them, and baked matzot, and they ate” (*Bereishit* 19:2). Rashi commenting on the verse quotes a midrash which says “It was Pesach”. This comment is shocking. How can it have been Pesach if Bnei Yisrael had not even gone down to Egypt yet? Rabbi Bin Nun writes: “At some stage, the realization hit me. I read the chapter as it is written, and was suddenly struck by the depths of the insight possessed by Hazal and by Rashi. It is specifically when one reads the text itself directly – rather than through the eyes of the commentaries – that Hazal’s view emanates from the words of the verses... The many parallels between the overturning of Sedom and the plagues on Egypt practically shout out, ‘Pesach!’ Hazal had all these parallels in mind when they drew their conclusion in the midrash.” Rabbi Bin Nun continues by saying that by not trying to read the Tanakh in a simple and straightforward manner “we lose out on the treasures of the biblical text, which fill a person with supreme joy and with the love of God. We lose out on the joy of the simple, plain reading,



as well as on an understanding of the midrash... and its greatness. The midrash recognizes expressions characteristic of the Exodus from Egypt, within the story of Lot’s exodus from Sedom. Indeed, ‘it was Pesach.’”<sup>43</sup> This is a striking example of how only through attempting to understand the simple meaning of the text itself allows one to fully appreciate the brilliant comments of Hazal.

Thus, despite the deeply rooted debate between the peshat and derash schools, *peshuto shel mikra* should be seen universally as both a valuable and critical tool when studying Tanakh.

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1 I would like to thank Rabbi Shalom Carmy, Rabbi Moshe Rosenberg and Dr. Moshe Cohen for their willingness to share their time and expertise in preparation of this article.

2 While Rabbi Soloveitchik was not a member of the *peshuto shel mikra* school per se, he can be seen as a “father figure” to this school. His impact is significant on a number of leading figures in the peshat movement. See Mosheh Lichtenstein, *Moses: Envoy of God, Envoy of His People: Leadership and Crisis from the Exodus to the Plains of Moab* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Pub. House, 2008), 267.

3 Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships*. (Hoboken, NJ: Toras Horav Foundation, 2000), 3.

4 Hayyim Angel, “Introduction,” in Hayyim Angel, *Peshat Isn’t so Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York, NY: Kodesh Press, 2014).

5 The term revolution is relative because it can be seen a return to the roots of earlier biblical commentary. See Ezra Bick, “Preface,” in To-

rah MiEtzion: *New Readings in Tanach*, ed. by Ezra Bick and Yaakov Beasley (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2011), Xiv-xvi. Additionally see Yosef Markus, “A Collection Of Sources,” in *My Constant Delight- Contemporary Religious Zionist Perspectives on Tanakh Study* (Hebrew), ed. by Yehoshua Reis (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013), 219-46.

6 Although not exclusively in Israel. For examples refer to Hayyim Angel, “Literary Theological Methods”, in Hayyim Angel, *Peshat Isn’t so Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New

York, NY: Kodesh Press, 2014), 128.

7 See the writings and teachings of Rabbis Tzvi Tau and Shlomo Aviner. This movement has been referred to as the “Tanakh Bgoveh Shamayim” approach as opposed to “Tanakh Bgoveh Eineim”. While this is humorous, it is an unfair distinction simply because the peshat school firmly believes that their methodology is what Chazal desire.

8 Mosheh Lichtenstein, *Moses: Envoy of God, Envoy of His People: Leadership and Crisis from the Exodus to the Plains of Moab* (Jersey



## Sefirat HaOmer: Why Are We Counting?

By JOSH SCHILOWITZ

On the second day of Pesah during the times of the *Beit HaMikdash*, a *Kohen* offered the *Korban HaOmer*, a sacrifice of ground barley, and the Jewish nation would subsequently begin the offering's eponymous count: *Sefirat HaOmer*. This sacral countdown connected the *Korban HaOmer* of Pesah to the *Shtei HaLehem* offering of Shavuot. The Torah mandates "And you shall count for yourself from the morrow of Sabbath, from the day you bring the *Omer*, they shall be to you seven complete weeks until the morrow of the seventh Sabbath you shall count fifty days, and you shall offer a new meal-offering to Hashem"<sup>1</sup> and again in *Sefer Devarim* a similar commandment is listed, "You shall count seven weeks from the beginning of placing the sickle to the standing crop, you shall start to count seven weeks."<sup>2</sup> The Torah accentuates the role of the *Korban HaOmer* in initiating the count, however, *Sefirat HaOmer* continues to command the Jewish nation's attention from Pesah until Shavuot. Is our count merely a vestigial rite built to remind us of the bona fide counting that we yearn for with the speedy rebuilding of the *Beit HaMikdash*? A Mitzvah that occupies a full 49 days of the Jewish calendar certainly necessitates a thorough analysis. Specifically, what exactly are we accomplishing by counting nowadays?

The Gemara in *Menahot* 66a presents an ambiguous debate about the requirements of the count. *Abaye* thinks it is a Mitzvah to count the days and weeks. *Ameimar* only counts the days and not the weeks because the Mitzvah is "Zekher LeMikdash Hoo" (a remembrance of the *Beit HaMikdash*). The *Rabanan* of the *Beit Midrash* of *Rav Ashi* concurred with *Abaye*. The exact points of contention latent in this back and forth combined with the ambiguity of the *Pesukim* quoted above stoked an important *Mahloket* amongst

the *Rishonim* that may clarify the purpose of counting the *Omer* nowadays.

the *Rishonim* that may clarify the purpose of counting the *Omer* nowadays.

*Ran* (*Pesachim* 28a in the folios of *Rif*) believes that *Ameimar's* statement is fundamentally in agreement with the opinion of *Abaye*. Namely, all agree in principle that the Mitzvah nowadays is *DeRabanan* due to our lack of a functioning *Beit HaMikdash*. However, there is a debate about how to actualize the count in our times: *Abaye* thinks one needs to count

both the weeks and days passed, while *Ameimar* thinks one need only count the days passed. We count the days and weeks to acknowledge the majority opinion, which is evident from the Gemara noting the practice of the *Beit Midrash* of *Rav Ashi*. *Rashi* (*Menahot* 66a s.v. "*Ameimar Mani*") clearly explicates that *Ameimar* only counted days and not weeks because he felt that the Mitzvah is not obligatory when we cannot bring the *Korban HaOmer*<sup>3</sup>. *Tosfot* (*Menahot* 66a s.v. "*Zekher LeMikdash Hoo*") and *Rosh* (*Pesachim Perek* 10, *Siman* 40) also agree that nowadays the Mitzvah is Rabbinic in nature due to our inability to offer the *Korban HaOmer*.

So far, the *Rishonim* cited have all assumed that without the actual offering of the *Korban HaOmer* in the *Beit HaMikdash*, the Mitzvah of *Sefirah* is only Rabbinic in nature. A simple reading of the *Pesukim* would seem to bolster this position. The Torah clearly states that the counting should begin "from the day you bring the *Omer*." The *Rishonim* mentioned may have

felt it compelling to read the *Pesukim* as making the *Korban HaOmer* a sine qua non in beginning the count. The Torah establishes a contingent relationship in which only the ability to sacrifice the *Omer* would engender a count<sup>4</sup>. Consequently,

nowadays when we cannot offer the *Omer*, our count would be completely Rabbinic in nature, a tearful throwback to the days of the Temple or perhaps a hopeful harbinger of its hasty reconstruction.

If the entire count is dependent on bringing the *Omer*, the *Korban* itself would appear to play a very central and fundamental role in understanding the count. Indeed, the prevalent epithet of this Mitzvah, "*Sefirat HaOmer*," places the *Omer* as the axis upon which the Mitzvah turns. *Avudraham*<sup>5</sup> explains that the count plays a pragmatic role for farmers in an agricultural society during the times of the *Beit HaMikdash*. Farmers assiduously involved

in tending to their crops at this time of year were markedly susceptible to forgetting their obligation of *Aliyah LeRegel* (pilgrimage to Jerusalem). Thus, the Torah prescribes a daily counting from the bringing of the *Omer* on Pesah until the bringing of the *Shtei HaLehem* on Shavuot to ensure that farmers remember to trek to Jerusalem. *Avudraham's* reasoning highlights the significance of *Avodat Beit HaMikdash* in maintaining a daily count. It follows that without the possibility of *Avodat Beit HaMikdash* and the inapplicability of *Aliyah LeRegel*, the count could be relegated to the stature of *Zekher LeMikdash*. Our count would serve as a mere shadow of the archetypal count, which can only exist within the quintessential context of the *Korban HaOmer* and *Aliyah LeRegel*.

A second creative school of thought exists amongst the *Rishonim*. *Rabbeinu Yeruham*<sup>6</sup> thinks that there are two distinct Mitzvot contained within our count. We count the days passed, which is *DeOraita* even nowadays, and we count the weeks, which is *DeRabanan* nowadays<sup>7</sup>. *Rabbeinu Yeruham* reads the *Pesukim* carefully and notes that in *Parshat Emor*, only the weeks are mentioned in relation to the *Korban HaOmer*. The count of the days is mentioned in *Pasuk* 16 without reference to

*Is our count merely a vestigial rite built to remind us of the bona fide counting that we yearn for with the speedy rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash? Specifically, what exactly are we accomplishing by counting nowadays?*



City, NJ: KTAV Pub. House, 2008), 224.

9 Hayyim Angel, "From Black Fire To White Fire", in Hayyim Angel, *Peshat Isn't so Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York, NY: Kodesh Press, 2014), 13. I interpret Rabbi Angel's statement to mean what the author expected the reader to grasp. Additionally, Rabbi Shalom Carmy's writings discuss relevant issues in defining peshat. See Shalom Carmy, "Editor's Note: A PESHAT IN THE DARK: REFLECTIONS ON THE AGE OF CARY GRANT," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 43.1 (2010): 1-6.

10 Yoel Bin Nun, "On The Study Of Tanakh In Yeshivot" (hebrew), in *How I Love Your Torah: Essays In Honor Of Yeshivat Har Etzion On The Forty-Fifth Anniversary Of Its Founding* (hebrew) ed. by Yitshak Rakanti, Shaul Barth, and Reuven Ziegler (Alon Shevut: Yeshivat Har Etzion, 2014) 77.

11 Rabbi Carmy has pointed out that there can be different ways to define "external sources." Are the fields of archeology and linguistics considered external sources or are they a necessary background for the text (but the text still stands on it's own)? This important discussion is not within the purview of this article. See Shalom Carmy, "Editor's Note: A PESHAT IN THE DARK: REFLECTIONS ON THE AGE OF CARY GRANT," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 43.1 (2010): 1-6. Also see Hayyim Angel, "Literary Theological Methods", in Hayyim Angel, *Peshat Isn't so Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York, NY: Kodesh Press, 2014), 118-136.

12 Ezra Bick, "Preface," in *Torah MiEtzion: New Readings in Tanach*, ed. by Ezra Bick and Yaakov Beasley (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2011), Xv.

13 *ibid.* xvii. See Rabbi Amnon Bazak's introduction to the first volume of his book: "Amnon Bazak, *Nekudat Peticha* (Alon Shevut, Israel: Tzomet), 5766

14 Ezra Bick, "Preface," in *Torah MiEtzion: New Readings in Tanach*, ed. by Ezra Bick and Yaakov Beasley (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2011), xviii. Also see Rabbi Shalom Carmy's comments available at [http://www.lookstein.org/articles/imitate\\_ramban.htm](http://www.lookstein.org/articles/imitate_ramban.htm)

15 This can be viewed in part as the result of the extraordinary work of Dr. Nechama Leibowitz. It is subject to debate if this was actually her intent though. See Hayyim An-

gel, "The Paradox Of Parshanut", in Hayyim Angel, *Peshat Isn't so Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York, NY: Kodesh Press, 2014), 36-57.

16 Ezra Bick, "Preface," in *Torah MiEtzion: New Readings in Tanach*, ed. by Ezra Bick and Yaakov Beasley (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2011), Xv. *Emphasis added.*

17 Hayyim Angel, "From Black Fire To White Fire", in Hayyim Angel, *Peshat Isn't so Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study* (New York, NY: Kodesh Press, 2014), 13.

18 "Amnon Bazak, *Nekudat Peticha* vol. 2 (Alon Shevut, Israel: Tzomet, 2009), 71.

19 [chabad.org](http://chabad.org)

20 "Amnon Bazak, *Nekudat Peticha* vol. 2 (Alon Shevut, Israel: Tzomet, 2009), 153-154.

21 The methodology of "picking and choosing" can be viewed as dangerous. This topic is not within the scope of this article though. See Amnon Bazak's article in *My Constant Delight- Contemporary Religious Zionist Perspectives on Tanakh Study* (Hebrew), ed. by Yehoshua Reis (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013), 195-206.

22 See the Ramban's commentary on Bereishit 30:1 for an example.

23 See Yehoshua Reis, "Preface" (hebrew), *My Constant Delight- Contemporary Religious Zionist Perspectives on Tanakh Study* (Hebrew), ed. by Yehoshua Reis (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013), 9-10. Also see Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein's important analysis in *ibid.* 244

24 *Mechon-Mamre* translation

25 See the comments of the *Sefer Chassidim*, *Abarbanel*, and *Ralbag*

26 Avigdor Nebenzahl, *Sermons On Sefer Bereishit* (hebrew), (Jerusalem, 2003), 396.

27 *ibid.* 378-379

28 Aharon Kotler, *Mishnat Rabbi Aharon* pt. 3 (Lakewood, N.J., 5748), pp. 179-180.

29 Yosef Markus, "A Collection Of Sources," in *My Constant Delight- Contemporary Religious Zionist Perspectives on Tanakh Study* (Hebrew), ed. by Yehoshua Reis (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013), 244.

30 *ibid.*

31 Mordechai Breuer, *Pirqe Bereshit* (Alon Shevut, Israel: Tevunot Press, 1998), iii. Also see Ezra Bick, "Preface," in *Torah MiEtzion: New Readings in Tanach*, ed. by Ezra Bick and Yaakov Beasley (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2011), Xvi. and Yehoshua Reis, "Preface" (hebrew), *My Constant Delight- Contemporary Religious Zionist Perspectives on Tanakh Study* (Hebrew), ed. by Yehoshua Reis (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013), 11.

32 Mosheh Lichtenstein, *Moses: Envoy of God, Envoy of His People: Leadership and Crisis from the Exodus to the Plains of Moab* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Pub. House, 2008), 250. Also see the quote from Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein in Yosef Markus, "A Collection Of Sources," in *My Constant Delight- Contemporary Religious Zionist Perspectives on Tanakh Study* (Hebrew), ed. by Yehoshua Reis (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013), 245-46.

33 It is critical to note that this does not mean to view these figures crudely as unspectacular beings. Rather it means to understand their acts within the appropriate context of *chazal* and early commentaries. This point is clear from the writings of Rabbi Yaakov Medan, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein and others. See *ibid.* 186 and 245. I also heard this point from my esteemed teacher Rabbi Michael Rosensweig.

34 Mosheh Lichtenstein, *Moses: Envoy of God, Envoy of His People: Leadership and Crisis from the Exodus to the Plains of Moab* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Pub. House, 2008), 253. *Bolding is my own.* Also see Yosef Markus, "A Collection Of Sources," in *My Constant Delight- Contemporary Religious Zionist Perspectives on Tanakh Study* (Hebrew), ed. by Yehoshua Reis (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013), 236.

35 *ibid.* 245-246

36 Amnon Bazak, "The Legitimacy to Be Human in the Thought of Rav Amital", in *Alei Etzion* 17, ed. by Reuven Ziegler (Alon Shevut, Israel: Yeshivat Har Etzion, 5772), 23. For a similar educational perspective see Yuval Cherlow's article "David the King Of Israel Lives" (hebrew) in *My Constant Delight- Con-*

temporary Religious Zionist Perspectives on Tanakh Study (Hebrew), ed. by Yehoshua Reis (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013), 189-194.

37 Michael Hattin, *Passages: Text and Transformation in the Parasha* (Jerusalem, Israel: Urim Publications, 2012), 8.

38 *Tanach.org*. Menachem Leibtag, n.d. Web. 15 Apr. 2015.

39 Michael Hattin, "Chronology and Interpretation," in *Torah MiEtzion: New Readings in Tanach*, ed. by Ezra Bick and Yaakov Beasley (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2011), 236. For another interesting example see "Joshua Berman, "Hearing the Baby's Cry," in *How I Love Your Torah: Essays In Honor Of Yeshivat Har Etzion On The Forty-Fifth Anniversary Of Its Founding* ed. by Reuven Ziegler (Alon Shevut: Yeshivat Har Etzion, 2014) 74.

40 Mosheh Lichtenstein, *Moses: Envoy of God, Envoy of His People: Leadership and Crisis from the Exodus to the Plains of Moab* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Pub. House, 2008), 224.

41 Yael Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation To Monarchy* (New Milford, CT: Maggid, 2015), 11.

42 *ibid.*

43 Yoel Bin Nun, "Lot's Pesah and Its Significance," in *Torah MiEtzion: New Readings in Tanach* (Shemot), ed. by Ezra Bick and Yaakov Beasley (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2012), 152-154.

the *Omer*. Thus, the count of days exists, even without bringing the *Omer*, as a Mitsvah *DeOraita*, while the count of the weeks is only a *Kiyum DeOraita* (a Torah level fulfillment) following the actual offering of the *Omer*. *Rabbeinu Yeruham* also rereads the Gemara in *Menahot* in this light. *Abaye* is telling us that there is a Mitsvah to count days and a separate Mitsvah to count weeks. *Ameimar* tells us the character of each Mitsvah by telling us his personal practice and downgrading the count of the weeks as a *Zekher LeMikdash*. *Ramah* subscribes to this approach as well and

adds that one should not try to decipher the Torah's reason for distinguishing between the Mitsvah to count days and the Mitsvah

to count weeks<sup>8</sup>. Despite the warning of *Ramah*, the *Or Sameah*<sup>9</sup> provides a fascinating basis for the distinction between the Mitsvah to count weeks and the Mitsvah to count days. He explains that the count of days gives the holiday its moniker of “*Atseret*” and lets it act as a day to connect to Hashem. The count of weeks gives the holiday its title of “*Hag HaShavuot*” and allows the offering of *Korbanot*. The *Or Sameah* points out that the Torah never mentions the name “*Shavuot*” in relation to the count of days. Based on this analysis, he explains that the holiday always functions as “*Atseret*” and allows us to bond with Hashem. Therefore, the count of days is still *DeOraita* because improving our relationship with Hashem is timeless. The count of weeks is only a function of our ability to bring *Korbanot* and connect to the holiday as “*Hag HaShavuot*” and thus the count of weeks is *DeRabanan* today.

The distinction between counting weeks and counting days is particularly cogent based on the *Peshat* of the *Pesukim*. As both *Ramah* and *Rabbeinu Yeruham* point out, the Torah ties the weeks specifically to “your bringing of the *Omer*” and to “the beginning of placing the sickle to the standing crop” while only mentioning the days in regards to “*Maharat HaShabbat*.” Here we see a fastidious examination of the *Pesukim* acutely affecting the way *Rishonim* determine *Halakhik* minutiae<sup>10</sup>. It appears that the *Mahloket* about the current stature of *Sefirah* ex-

presses itself not only in *Halakhik Nafka Minot* (practical ramifications), but also in *Nafka Minot* in understanding the *Peshat* of the *Pesukim*.

*Rambam* presents a potential third understanding of the Mitsvah to count. In *Sefer HaMitsvot Aseh* 161, *Rambam* writes that the Mitsvah is “to count 49 days from the cutting of the *Omer*” and he quotes the *Pasuk* of “and you shall count from the morrow of the Sabbath.” He then specifically preempts the explanation of *Rabbeinu Yeruham* and *Ramah* by saying that there is one Mitsvah, and that the days and weeks are two parts of the same Mitsvah. His clear proof is that we don’t make two *Brakhot* and that we count the days and weeks together. He concludes that women are exempt from this Mitsvah.

In *Mishnah Torah*, *Rambam* discusses *Sefirat HaOmer* in the seventh *Perek* of *Hilkhot Temiddin U’Mussafin*. In the *Koteret* (introductory heading) to these *Halakhot*, he writes that it is a Mitsvah “for every man to count seven weeks from the day of the bringing of the *Omer*.” It is interesting to note that he describes the Mitsvah using only the count of weeks. In the *Halakhot*<sup>11</sup>, *Rambam* writes that “there is a positive

commandment to count seven complete weeks from the day of bringing the *Omer* as it says ‘and you shall count from the morrow of the Sabbath seven weeks’ and it’s a Mitsvah to count the days with the weeks as it says ‘you shall count fifty days’.” In *Halakhah* 24 he states: “This Mitsvah is upon every Jewish man in every place and in every time and women and slaves are exempt from it.” Surprisingly, *Rambam* believes the Mitsvah to count applies on a *DeOraita* level even without the *Beit HaMikdash*<sup>12</sup>.

There are a few puzzling details contained within *Rambam*’s opinion. In *Sefer HaMitsvot*, he amplifies that there is one Mitsvah to count both weeks and days despite initially describing the Mitsvah as a count of 49 days. However, in the *Koteret* to *Hilkhot Temiddin U’Mussafin*, he only describes the Mitsvah as counting weeks. What is his basis for exempting women from this Mitsvah?

*Rambam* believes the Mitsvah applies as equally today as it did when the *Korban HaOmer* was actually offered. This is true even though he describes the count as beginning from the day of bringing the *Omer*” in *Sefer HaMitsvot*, in his *Koteret* to *Hilkhot Temiddin U’Mussafin*, and in the *Halakhot*. Perhaps even more shockingly, he discusses this Mitsvah in *Hilkhot Temiddin U’Mussafin* right after discussing *Korbanot* and *Ketsirat HaOmer* (cutting of the *Omer*). There seems to be a stark contradiction within *Rambam*’s delineation of *Sefirat HaOmer*: he believes that the Mitsvah is independent of the *Omer*, while seemingly doing whatever he can to describe the Mitsvah in the context of the *Omer*.

In answering why *Rambam* interchanges days and weeks in his various descriptions of the Mitsvah, we might suggest that this is his way of saying that there is no difference between the descriptions. The ability to interchange days with weeks and vice versa only flows from his disclaimer

in *Sefer HaMitsvot* that each is part of one total Mitsvah. In order to properly fulfill the Mitsvah to count, one must count the days with the weeks, as he says in *Hilkhot Temiddin U’Mussafin* 7:22.

The key to understanding *Rambam*’s opinion may be his exemption of women. The *Kesef Mishnah*<sup>13</sup> states simply that *Rambam* considers this Mitsvah a *Mitsvat Aseh SheHaZeman Grama* (time-bound Mitsvah). In contrast, *Ramban* (*Kiddushin* 33b s.v. “*Ve-Havei Yodeiya*”) lists *Sefirat HaOmer* as a paradigmatic example of Mitsvot that are not time-bound. The *Mahloket* may depend on the definition of the Mitsvah of *Sefirat HaOmer*. *Ramban* thinks that the count only begins as a result of offering the *Korban HaOmer*. Although technically a function of time, the *Korban HaOmer* acts as the primary impetus in beginning the count, and thus the count cannot be considered bound to time<sup>14</sup>. *Rambam* may believe that the count begins irrespective of the *Korban HaOmer* and stems naturally from the calendar date, lasting 49 days<sup>15</sup>.

Based on *Rambam*’s understanding of the count as time-bound and independent of the *Korban HaOmer*, his position on the purpose of the Mitsvah may shed further light on his thinking. *Sefer HaHinukh*<sup>16</sup> quotes from *Rambam*’s *Moreh Nevukhim*<sup>17</sup> to explain that counting the *Omer* is a natural result of our unbridled anticipation of *Kabbalat HaTorah*. Just as one counts the days and weeks until he sees an intimate friend, so too we count the days and weeks until our rendezvous with the *Ribbono Shel Olam* on *Shavuot*. This was especially true in the *Midbar* as *Rambam* explains that we count from *Pesah* until *Shavuot* to signify that the ultimate goal of *Yetsiat Mitsrayim* (the Exodus from Egypt) was to enable *Kabbalat HaTorah* at *Har Sinai*<sup>18</sup>. Again we see that *Rambam* seems to deny any particular importance for the *Korban HaOmer* in the



Mitsvah to count.

This leaves two salient questions: Why does *Rambam* emphasize the *Korban HaOmer* in beginning the count if he thinks it is fundamentally ancillary to the Mitsvah to count?<sup>19</sup> Moreover, how does *Rambam* deal with the *Pesukim* that seem to explicitly demonstrate the role of the *Omer* in beginning the count?

To solve these problems, it may help to analyze *Rambam*’s classification of a *Niddah*<sup>20</sup>. The Torah<sup>21</sup> proscribes “You shall not approach a *Niddah* to uncover her nakedness.” By using the descriptive term “*Ervah*” (nakedness), the Torah appears to categorize a *Niddah* as one of the “*Arayot*” (forbidden relationships). Nevertheless, *Rabbeinu Tam* (*Sefer HaYashar Helek HaTeshuvot* 80) discusses whether a *Niddah* can truly be classified as *Ervah*. He ultimately concludes that she is not

1 *VaYikra* 23:15-16

2 *Devarim* 16:9-10. All translations are mine.

3 *Rashi* only explains the position of *Ameimar*. It is not clear from his comment whether he thinks *Abaye* agrees that the count is Rabbinic nowadays. It may be safe to assume that this is *Rashi*’s only comment on the *Sugya* be-

cause he is trying to explain why *Ameimar* felt it sufficient to only count the days. *Abaye* would agree fundamentally to *Ameimar*’s characterization of the Mitsvah as *Zekher LeMikdash*. This is in fact how the *Kesef Mishnah* to *Rambam* *Hilkhot Temiddin U’Mussafin* 7:24 reads this *Rashi*.

Using a similar methodology, we may be able to explain *Rambam*’s opinion on *Sefirat HaOmer*. He reads the *Pesukim* as indicating the calendar date on which the count should begin,

just the ability to offer the *Omer* would create the beginning of the count. However, the *Ran*, *Rosh*, and *Tosfot* all seem to emphasize that the actual bringing of the *Omer* starts the count.

4 It may be possible to suggest that

“from the day you bring the *Omer*,” meaning the second day of *Pesah*. The count begins independent of the *Omer*. However, he also believes that the Torah’s use of the *Omer* to frame the Mitsvah is not irrelevant or inconsequential. On the contrary, he thinks that the conceptual echo of the *Korban HaOmer* is important even when offering the *Korban* is a technical impossibility. Perhaps the intent of *Rambam* is that the count exists equally in all times because *Kiyum HaMitsvot* is consistently relevant, and through counting, we are trying to anticipate *Kabbalat HaTorah*. The centrality of the *Omer* in the *Pesukim* and in the writings of *Rambam* is meant to focus our *Kabbalat HaTorah*. During the times of the *Beit HaMikdash* we strive to appreciate our full ability to serve Hashem through the *Korbanot*, and during our times, we yearn for the day when we can serve Hashem in the prototypical fashion. We begin and end the count with *Avodat Beit HaMikdash* to exemplify the acceptance of Torah that we are trying to anticipate.

In a similar vein, *Arukh HaShulhan* (OC 489:3) explains that *Rambam* believes that the *Omer* and *Shtei HaLehem* are merely symbols of our journey from *Pesah* to *Shavuot*. The *Omer* consists of animal food and represents us before we received the Torah, while the *Shtei HaLehem* is a bountiful offering meant to represent us after receiving the Torah. The underlying assumption within *Arukh HaShulhan*’s approach is that the crux of the Mitsvah is anticipating *Kabbalat HaTorah*, and the *Korbanot* are meant to typify our con-

current spiritual experience<sup>24</sup>. There is an ideal count that begins and ends with *Avodat Beit HaMikdash* to instantiate consummate *Kiyum HaMitsvot* and *Kabbalat HaTorah*. Today’s count that lacks the kickoff of the *Korban HaOmer* and the coda of the *Shtei HaLehem* is less ideal, however our anticipation of *Kabbalat HaTorah* shaded by our blatant lack of a *Beit HaMikdash* is still a valid *Kiyum DeOraita*.

5 *Sefer Avudraham* *Tefillot Pesah*

6 *Toldot Adam VeHavah*, *Netiv* 5 *Helek* 4

In sum, there is a massive *Mahloket* amongst the *Rishonim* in just understanding the *Peshat* of the *Pesukim* about *Sefirat HaOmer*. Some believe the Torah means to teach us that the count is contingent on offering the *Omer*. Others believe the Torah bifurcates the Mitsvah based on a careful reading of the *Peshat*. *Rambam* believes that the *Peshat* is meant to color our ideation of the optimal *Halakhah*, even if the practical applications don’t always reflect the ideal. The count for *Rambam* is meant to mark our march from the physical freedom of *Pesah* to the spiritual freedom of *Shavuot*. We anticipate *Shavuot* every year and hope for the ability to fulfill the totality of Hashem’s commands through *Avodat Beit HaMikdash*. The holiday of *Shavuot* entails *Kabbalat HaTorah* and acts as the spiritual apex of Jewish history and every Jewish calendar year. *Rambam* teaches us that the attitude of yearning for *Limmud HaTorah* and *Kiyum HaMitsvot* surely should pervade “all places in all times.”

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*Rav Yeruham Fischel Perlow* in his commentary to *Rav Sa’adya Gaon*’s *Sefer HaMitsvot Aseh* 51 believes that *Rabbeinu Yeruham* thinks a separate *Brakhah* would be made on the count of the weeks during the times of the *Beit HaMikdash*. *Rav Perlow* also points out that the possibility of making a *Brakhah* on a *Zekher LeMikdash* Mitsvah is itself subject to discussion.

8 Iggerot HaRama Siman 79. Rama clearly holds that Ameimar agrees that the count of days is independent of the Omer and DeOraita nowadays. He seems to believe that Abaye might hold that the count of weeks is also independent of the Omer and also DeOraita nowadays. This may be possible to read into Rabbeinu Yeruham too.

9 Or Sameah commentary to Rambam Hilkhoh Temiddin U'Mussafin 7:22.

10 The point being made is that a careful reading of the Pesukim shaped Rabbeinu Yehuram's view of the practical Halakhah. It is theoretically possible that the causal relationship works the other way in that his Halakhik approach determined his read of the Pesukim. However, a close read shows that Rabbeinu Yeruham first explains his interpretation of the Pesukim and only then determines the Halakhah. Therefore, it seems more plausible that his view of the Pesukim influenced his Halakhik view.

11 Hilkhoh Temiddin U'Mussafin 7:22-25

12 Ran in Pesachim ibid. reads Rambam as saying the Mitsvah is DeOraita today. This read appears to be the consensus.

13 Kesef Mishnah to Hilkhoh Temiddin U'Mussafin 7:24.

14 This is similar to a suggestion of Turei Even to Megillah 20b. He explains that Bikkurim is not considered Zeman Grama because time itself does not cause it to apply. An external factor of "Zeman Simkhah" that characterizes the harvest season allows bringing Bikkurim. Thus, if the harvest would last past Hanukkah, it would still be considered "Zeman Simkhah" and Bikkurim could still be brought. The window of time to bring Bikkurim is determined by the harvest and not by time itself, and therefore the Mitsvah is not considered time-bound.

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15 This would fit very well with Rambam's own definition of Zeman Grama in Hilkhoh Avodah Zara 12:3 as "MeZman LeZman" (passing from time to time).

16 Sefer HaHinukh Mitsvah 306

17 Moreh Nevukhim 3:43

18 Ramban to VaYikra 23:36 describes the period between Pesah and Shavuot as "Hol HaMoed." This would seem to strengthen the natural connection between Pesah and Shavuot.

19 Rav Perlow in his commentary to Rav Sa'adya Gaon's Sefer HaMitsvot Mavo Perek 12 asks why Rambam counts the Mitsvah in Hilkhoh Temiddin U'Mussafin thereby connecting the Mitsvah to the Korban if he really believes that the Mitsvah is DeOraita nowadays. Based on the strength of this question, Rav Perlow suggests that Rambam reversed his position in Mishnah Torah from the one he takes in Sefer HaMitsvot. Instead of think-

ing there is one integrated Mitsvah, Rambam in Mishnah Torah takes an approach similar to Rabbeinu Yeruham that the count of days is DeOraita today, while the count of weeks is DeRabanan. This view seems untenable, as Rambam never qualifies his statement that this Mitsvah applies in all times. Furthermore, in the Koteret, Rambam only lists the count of weeks even though that would seem to be the less relevant Mitsvah according to Rav Perlow's suggestion. In Mishnah Torah itself Rambam says the Mitsvah is to count days with the weeks. He combines the two parts, which would seem to indicate an integrated Mitsvah as opposed to two distinct Mitsvot. Finally, in Halakhah 24, Rambam refers to the count in the singular – "Mitsvah Zu."

20 Rav Rosensweig briefly discussed the following conceptual treatment of a Niddah while learning the Sugya of Chuppat Niddah this year.

21 VaYikra 18:19

22 For example: There is a rule "Ein Davar Ervah Pahot MiShnayim" (matters relating to Ervah require two witnesses). However, a Niddah is solely responsible for counting her "clean" days.

23 See for example Hilkhoh Issurei Biah 21:4 and 22:1. There he explains that a man can gaze at his wife who is a Niddah and can be alone with her despite the fact that she is Ervah.

24 Arukh HaShulhan may be suggesting that the whole purpose of beginning and ending the count with these Korbanot is to represent our spiritual progress. Alternatively, if we take the approach that the Korbanot are meant to represent total Kabbalat HaTorah, then his suggestion may still help explain why specifically these two Korbanot are used to begin and end the count. Even if Arukh HaShulhan's approach is distinct, he still clearly believes Rambam assigns significance to the Korbanot despite thinking they don't affect the practical Halakhah.

## When Torah Comes to Life: Abarbanel and the Concept of *Peshat*

BY COBI NADEL

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu began arguably the most important speech of his life, his controversial 2014 address to Capitol Hill with the following words.

Tomorrow night, on the Jewish holiday of Purim, we'll read the Book of Esther. We'll read of a powerful Persian viceroy named Haman, who plotted to destroy the Jewish people some 2,500 years ago. But a courageous Jewish woman, Queen Esther, exposed the plot and gave the Jewish people the right to defend themselves against their enemies. The plot was foiled. Our people were saved. Today the Jewish people face another attempt by yet another Persian potentate to destroy us.<sup>1</sup> Netanyahu stated that the Ayatollah was no different than Haman, that the new decree of Iranian nuclear power would have just as much potential to be lethal as the previous Persian decree against the Jewish people. In this pivotal moment in Netanyahu's career he looked to the bible to draw comparisons to his dilemma. This approach is not unique to the Prime Minister of Israel. From the Pulpit Rabbi's weekly address to Martin Luther King's legendary "I Have a Dream" speech<sup>2</sup>, poets and politicians, preachers and statesmen have looked to contemporize biblical passages and biblical characters to find the messages

*To put it succinctly, is our understanding of biblical text unwavering, or does the Bible's reflection of contemporary times cause even our peshat understanding of the text to change over time.*

that are relevant to the ideas they are trying to convey. Recognizing the significance of current events in the cultural spreading of the Bible, one must wonder what role relevance to current events plays in the formal *study and interpretation* of Bible. Is the synthesis of bible and contemporary issues con-

finied to the world of *Drush*, or does this synthesis expand to the world of *Peshat* as well? Is our basic understanding of biblical text supposed to be consistent with the national and personal experiences of the current generation of Jewish people? To put it succinctly, is our understanding of biblical text unwavering, or does the Bible's reflection of contemporary times cause even our *peshat* understanding of the text to change over times. Taking a closer look at Don Isaac Abarbanel's<sup>3</sup> well-known exegesis on the bible, there is evidence to say that he had a unique perspective on the questions mentioned above. In looking at Abarbanel's introductions to much of his *Parshanut*, and a few examples of this self-described *Pashtan's*<sup>4</sup> innovative interpretations of specific passages in the bible, a fascinating approach to the question of current-event's relationship to the bible can be seen. Due to his deep rooted belief in a *Torat Hayyim* (a living Torah), as is evident throughout Abarbanel's introductions to his commentary, contemporary issues and the Jewish people's current dilemmas play a significant role in Abarbanel's interpretation of the *peshat* of the text.

For Isaac Abarbanel, the concept of *Torat Hayyim* means much more than a mere appreciation of the myriads of possible interpretations for a given biblical text. In the Abarbanel's mind, *Torat Hayyim* is the realization that the Bible's story is the constant story of the Jewish people. This idea is most evident in the detailed biographical introductions<sup>5</sup> that begin

many of Abarbanel's works. It is in these introductions, where Abarbanel tells his own story through the Biblical story, that Hayyim Angel's high praise for the Abarbanel's becomes most apparent. It

is in Abarbanel's recounting of his own life that "Abarbanel injects his personality and historical setting into his writings, thereby modeling the direct link between Tanakh and real life."<sup>6</sup> By first analyzing some of Abarbanel's introductions to respective books of Tanakh, and in turn gaining an understanding of the living Torah model, we will be able to gain a glimpse into how Abarbanel views the concept of *peshat* in his commentary.

One such example of Abarbanel's living Torah can be seen in the beginning of his introduction to his commentary on *Kings*. In the introduction to his commentary on *Kings*, he recounts the terrible tragedy that befell the Jewish people only weeks before his completion of the *sefer*, the tragedy of the Spanish Inquisition of 1492. In the Abarbanel's identification with numerous biblical passages throughout his account of the Inquisition, he makes clear that the *hurban* he had just experienced, as with every dimension of Jewish people's national experience, should be looked at through the prism of the biblical story. For example, in recounting the details of King Ferdinand's decree to exile the Jews, Abarbanel makes clear reference to a previous decree in Jewish history. He writes in his introduction to Melakhim:

And thereafter the matter of the king and his law became known as the law of all Medea and Persia. And the herald cried aloud: Thus say to all the house of Israel. When you pass through the

water if you fall down and worship the Gods of the nations, you'll eat of the land.... But if you refuse and you do not mention my Gods names, and you do not direct your prayers to him, get up and leave from the midst of my nation, from the midst of the lands of Spain.<sup>7</sup> This portrayal of King Ferdinand's decree is clearly referring to the very decree Nevukhadnetsar had placed on the Jewish people of his exile two thousand years before the Spanish Inquisition. In his description, Abarbanel refers to the laws governing over all Media and Persia, the realm of Nevukhadnetsar, not the realm of Ferdinand. Furthermore, the only time in the Bible a king's decree is referred to as "And the herald cried aloud: Thus say to all"<sup>8</sup> is in Nevukhadnetsar's decree for all the Jewish people to worship his gods or be thrown into a fire. In addition, the same commandment of *Seged* (fall down) and *Tiplun* (*worship*) used in Ferdinand's degree can be seen in Nevukhadnetsar's decree as well. Nevukhadnetsar similarly declares that "whoever does not fall down (*Seged*) and worship (*Tiplun*) my idols shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace."<sup>9</sup>

This is not the only biblical allusion in Abarbanel's recounting of the Inquisition. Upon hearing the decree, Abarbanel describes himself as saying to King Ferdinand the same exact words that the Jewish court officials said to Pharaoh<sup>10</sup> after Pharaoh's harsh decree on them, "why are you doing so to your servants?"<sup>11</sup>



The Jewish people, in Abarbanel's words, even undergo the same sense of loss that was felt by the Jews of Shushan<sup>12</sup> after Haman's decree went public: "And in every province, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews."<sup>13</sup>

In Abarbanel's retelling of the tragic Alhambra Decree, which led to the Spanish Inquisition, he goes far beyond merely telling the story of the Jews of Spain. He tells the story of the harsh decrees against the Jews of post-*hurban* Babylonia, the enslaved Jews of ancient Egypt, and the unprotected Jews of Shushan as well. As his introduction to *Kings* shows, in the Abarbanel's eyes the bible does not only tell the story of Jews of the past, it tells the story of the Jews of the present.

As Abarbanel concludes his auto-biographical introduction to *Kings*, it becomes clear that he also looks to the bible for the immediate future of his people. The response that is only hinted<sup>14</sup> to in the miracles that God brings about to reverse the evil decrees of the Pharaohs and Nevukhadnetsars Abarbanel mentioned above, becomes apparent in the conclusion of his recounting of the Jewish people's exodus from Spain. As the Jews of Spain embark on the arduous journey, according to Abarbanel their last words in Spain are the following: "If we live, we will live, and if we die, we will die, but under no condition can we desecrate our covenant. And our heart is not turned back. We will continue to walk in the way of Hashem, our God."<sup>15</sup>

The phrase that Abarbanel puts in the mouths of the people should immediately jolt our tanakh-ready ears to a chapter in psalms. "Our heart is not turned back," are the same words that are at the center of Psalms 44<sup>16</sup>, a Psalm that in Abarbanel's eyes tells the story of his people. In Psalm 44 the Jews refer to Hashem as he who "has given us like sheep to be eaten; and has scattered us among the nations." He

who "makes us a taunt to our neighbors, a scorn and a derision to them that are round about us." The Psalmist even goes on to call out to God, "Why are you hiding your face?"<sup>17</sup> The Jews of Spain in 1492 surely could ask God the same question. Yet, even with that lack of God's presence in the Psalm's world, the Psalmist, and thus Abarbanel as well, calls upon his people to remember that "Our heart is not turned back." As can be seen, from the narrative of national tragedy to the narrative of national response, to the personal dialogue of companions about to embark on a dangerous journey, Abarbanel shows in his biographical-introduction to *Kings* that the entire experience of his generation of Jews is found in the pages of the Bible.

Abarbanel's introduction to Joshua gives it readers another glimpse into Abarbanel's life – this time not on a national, but on a personal level. Abarbanel's works on Joshua, Judges, and Samuel was completed in 1483, ten years before the Inquisition and his completion of his work on *Kings*. Like his commentary on *Kings*, the impetus for Abarbanel's writing of his commentary on *Joshua* was a tragedy of epic proportions. After years of garnering wealth, and dutiful work as a confidante and trusted advisor of King Alfonso of Portugal, Abarbanel was left in a precarious scenario when the King passed away. His son Joao took the throne, and within a few months was wrongly<sup>18</sup> calling Abarbanel a traitor. Abarbanel was forced to flee for his life. In his introduction to Joshua, written in the immediate aftermath of his expulsion from Portugal, he recalls this devastating turn of events, and his subsequent crisis of faith.

Throughout Abarbanel's auto-biographical introduction to Joshua he makes numerous references to the stories of the Bible. However, it is in the spiritual crisis that is the aftermath of Don Abarbanel's personal exile, though, that the commentator's concept of a *Torat Hayim* is once again



highlighted. After losing his wealth, his precious library, and most of his family he turns to God in shock. Abarbanel angrily writes, "Why does God not listen to me even when I scream and cry out to him."<sup>18</sup> The words "even when I scream and cry out to him," are directly quoted from *Lamentations*.<sup>19</sup> He continues his questioning of God in the words of *Jeremiah*, "Why is Hashem making himself like a weak man<sup>20</sup>" when Don Isaac Abarbanel has not stopped praying for God's help? Even in his moments of crisis, when he is angry at God, Abarbanel feels compelled to look to the Bible to provide him with the proper questions, the proper anger.

Abarbanel's response to his personal tragedy likewise is found in his identification with numerous passages in *Tanakh*. In his identification though, Abarbanel not only finds his future plan of action, he finds purpose in his tragedy as well. Abarbanel realizes that the answers to his tragedy could be found in the end of Deuteronomy.<sup>21</sup> As he writes, it is "because God is not in my midst that I have experienced all these evils."<sup>22</sup> This is the very same realization that Hashem tells Moses that the Jewish people will come to recognize after "they rise up, and go astray after the foreign gods of the land."<sup>23</sup> After facing these hardships, the Jewish people, and in turn Abarbanel, will realize that the evils are due to the fact that they have created an environment

where "God is not in my midst."

What did Abarbanel do, though, that caused him to "rise up and go astray after the foreign Gods of the lands"? Abarbanel writes<sup>24</sup> that in his busy life pursuing wealth and politics in the house of King Alfonso of Portugal he had abandoned what was most precious to him. Abarbanel had abandoned the Torah. Abarbanel concludes that, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted, in order that I might learn your statutes. The *Torah* of your(-God's) Mouth is better for me than thousands of gold and silver."<sup>25</sup> Here too, in telling his own story, Abarbanel directly quotes Psalm 119<sup>26</sup>. Through his personal afflictions, through the loss of his material wealth to the hands of King John of Portugal, Abarbanel gratefully says that he learned what is actually wealth in this world, "the *Torah* of your(God's) Mouth."

Shockingly here, Abarbanel refers to biblical passages as the causes and effects of his personal history. His personal punishment was directly caused by his lack of heeding to the warnings Moses gave the Jews at the end of Deuteronomy. His personal exile from Portugal was caused by his inability to identify with the words of Psalms 119. In his introduction to Joshua, as in his introduction to *Kings*, it can be seen that to Abarbanel, the bible was much more than a divine textbook on morality. According to Abarbanel, the living bible in its stories, its ora-

tions, and its conflicts simultaneously tells the story of the Jewish individual and the Jewish people of the past, the present, and the future.

It is with this thought on the purpose of the bible in mind that we can begin to get a new perspective on Abarbanel's view of contemporary experience's influence on his *Parshanut*. Abarbanel viewed the bible as a living, breathing entity that holds within it the story of each generation of Jews struggles and success. Such a Bible, by definition, must be able to confront the contemporary issues of the time. Even the simple meaning, the *peshat*, of Abarbanel's living bible has to twist and turn to the conditions of the current generation of Jews, or Abarbanel's bible would be unable to live. Isaac Baer highlights this very idea in his critique on the Abarbanel's work. Baer writes that, "From his[Abarbanel's] lengthy exegesis sometimes there emerges a pure voice and clear language of a *new living Torah* that arises from his *experiences* as a veteran statesman and from his innovative humanist outlook."<sup>27</sup> Abarbanel's belief in the timeless relevancy of the biblical message leads to contemporary experience playing a significant role in his *Parshanut* methodology. In Abarbanel's search for the *peshat* of the biblical text throughout his commentary, he defines *peshat* as the plain meaning of a text that is relevant to contemporary society

Dr. Avigayil Rock<sup>28</sup> in her work on the Abarbanel, brings one such example of the relevance of the dilemmas of his generation to his interpretation. In the aftermath of the Spanish inquisition, an untold numbers of Jews were placed in a challenging predicament. Many Jews, while believing and practicing Judaism in secret, publically converted to Christianity to save their own lives. These Jews were known as *Anusim* or Conversoes. Abarbanel responds to the theological question of the status of these *Anusim* in his commentary on the concept of *Teshuvah* at the end of *Deuteronomy*. In one *pasuk* in *Deuteronomy* it is written, "And you shall

return to your hearts from all nations to which Hashem, your god sent you." In the very next *pasuk* it is written, "And you will return to the Lord your god..."<sup>29</sup> With contemporary issues in mind, Abarbanel deals with this seeming repetition in the following manner.

Faith in exile is divided into two parts: the small part of them who keep the faith and follow the Torah of God, and they are called by the name of Israel, and they are a special few left of many. The other part is the majority of the people; they change their religion out of distress and the weight of the exile... Therefore, it was said corresponding to the two parts of the people (30:1-2): "and you shall return to your

hearts from all nations to which Hashem, your god sent you, and return to Lord your God..." The first statement is said about those *Anusim*. It says "among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you," meaning that they are mixed in with them and considered like them, but in their heart they will return to God... And when they return to God and go after Him... everyone according to his status and his ability, he promises that Exalted God will bring them close to Him...<sup>30</sup> According to the Abarbanel's interpretation, the *Anusim* at the end of the days will be able to perform *Teshuvah*. In creating this novel exegesis of the passage, the Abarbanel was able to provide some national comfort to the struggling Conversoes. Furthermore, with Abarbanel's grandfather, Samuel, being a *Converso*<sup>31</sup>, providing this sense of comfort for the *Anusim* of his day was likely important for the

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Abarbanel on a personal level as well. It was only through Abarbanel's view of the Tanakh, as a true *Torat Hayyim*, that he was able to innovatively direct the *peshat* to refer to a concept of *Teshuvah* that was important for him on both a personal and national level.

Possibly an even stronger example of how contemporary experiences tied into Abarbanel's interpretation of the text can be seen in his well-known view on the desirability of kings in a Jewish society.

With the exception of King Alfonso of Portugal, Abarbanel had extremely negative relationships with the kings of his era. King John of Portugal attempted to murder Abarbanel in 1483. King Ferdinand of Castile exiled Abarbanel and his people in 1492. Then, the King of France pillaged his home in Naples in 1495<sup>32</sup>. After these experiences with the Kings of his time, it comes as no surprise that Don Isaac Abarbanel takes a well-known negative stance on the Bible's view on kingship. In both his commentary on Samuel written immediately after King John's assassination attempt, and his commentary on Deuteronomy written immediately after the King of France's pillaging of his home, he mentions the same viewpoint on kingship.

Abarbanel does not hold that the Torah command's the Jews to have a king. He, in fact, draws similarities between the Torah's discussion of establishing a king and the Torah's discussion of the commandment of taking foreign women during wartime (*eshet yefat toar*). In both cases God gives permission to the Jews to commit these less than ideal acts in a regulat-

ed setting, so as to ensure they will not commit even more heinous acts. According to the Abarbanel, though, ideally the Jews should be without a king. He backs up this opinion with strong biblical proof. For example, Samuel rebuked the Jews when they asked for a king. Furthermore, if it was a *Mitsvah* to establish a kingship, why do the Jews wait until the times of Samuel to establish a king? Statements like these bring strong biblical foundations for Abarbanel's opinion. However, Abarbanel does not just mention biblical proofs to provide support for his opinion. He cites current examples stating: "And our experiences are even greater than our questions on kings. Go out and see the lands that are being led by kings and notice the idolatry and corruption. Every man can do what he wants and the land is filled with violence..."<sup>33</sup> In the words of Eric Lawee, "The result was as substantially and rhetorically powerful a case against monarchy as the Jewish Middle Ages would ever see, in which argumentation grounded in exegesis and reason was supplemented by Abarbanel's vast knowledge of political regimes past."<sup>34</sup> Abarbanel by no means abandoned rabbinical sources, but he explicitly uses his personal experiences to buttress his viewpoint. Here too, in the example of kingship, he creates his *peshat* interpretation of the bible through reflections on his personal experiences and their relationship to a *Torat Hayyim*.

The cases of Conversoes and Kings in Abarbanel's *Parshanut* are two examples out of many in his biblical commentary that accurately portray how Abarbanel's belief in the bible's contemporary relevance plays a significant role in his biblical interpretation. In doing so, Abarbanel paints an inspiring picture of the biblical corpus. Through Abarbanel's overwhelming belief in the Bible's relevancy to real life and the modern man, the Bible can be seen as much more than a history book. Abarbanel's bible becomes a generational book in which the reader,

through his own time-bound experiences is expected to write the next *peshat* based chapter. Abarbanel's bible becomes the constant reminder to us, the readers, that our Torah is the living, breathing text that until time immemorial will be the defining story of our people.

*Cobi Nadel is an intern for Kol HaMevaser*

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1 Netanyahu, Binyamin. *Joint Address to Congress. Capitol Building, Washington D.C.*

2 Martin Luther King Jr. *refers to Amos 5:24, Isaiah 40:4-5, and Psalms 30:5 in his "I Have a Dream" speech*

3 For the preference of this spelling of Abarbanel's last name, see Sid Z. Leiman, "Abarbanel and the Censor," p. 49, n. 1. When citing writers who used other spellings I have retained their preferences. I am in credit to Hayyim Angel's article on the Abarbanel, cited below, for pointing me to this source.

4 See Abarbanel Former Prophets Pg. 13. See, as well Hayyim Angel's Abarbanel: Commentator and Teacher Celebrating 500 Years of his Influence on Tanakh Study for a thorough analysis of Abarbanel's role as a Pashtan.

5 Abarbanel wrote brief auto-biographical introductions to nearly every single one of his commentaries on the bible. Most of these introductions just briefly state the Abarbanel's genealogy as well as when he began and finished writing the respective commentary. Some of his notable biographical introductions are his introduction to Joshua where he recounts in detail his banishment from Portugal; his introduction to Kings where he recounts in detail the Spanish Inquisition, his introduction to Daniel where he recounts the messianic fervor of the Jewish people after the Spanish Inquisition; and his introduction to Deuteronomy where he recounts

the pillage of Naples.

6 Hayyim Angel: Abarbanel: "Commentator and Teacher Celebrating 500 Years of his Influence on Tanakh Study" Tradition: Pg.25

7 Abarbanel Former Prophets: Pg. 422.

8 Daniel 3:4 All translations taken from JPS Tanakh, with slight modifications

9 Ibid. 3:6

10 Exodus 5:15

11 Abarbanel Former Prophets: Pg. 422

12 Esther 4:3

13 Abarbanel Former Prophets: Pg. 422

14 In all the decrees that Abarbanel alludes to, the Jews are saved from the harsh decrees in miraculous means. They are saved because they refuse to acquiesce to the Emperor's demands. The Jews of Bavel refuse to worship the Babylonian Gods, Mordekhai refuses to bow down to Haman's idols, and the Jews retain their faith in the land of idolatry known as Egypt. In Abarbanel's referral to these three historical episodes of the Jewish people, he could be reminding the Jews to follow the path their

forefathers gave them. The Inquisition is strongly pushing for the Jews to convert to Christianity. Perhaps the Abarbanel's message is that the Jews of Spain must retain their faith, to refuse Christianity like their forefathers, and good things will surely follow.

15 *ibid.*

16 Psalms 44:19

17 Psalms 44: 14, 23, 25

18 Abarbanel Former Prophets: Pg. 3

19 Lamentations 3:8

20 Jeremiah 14:9

21 Deuteronomy 31:17

22 Abarbanel Early Prophets: Pg. 3

23 Deuteronomy 31:16

24 See Abarbanel Early Prophets: Pg. 3 for details

25 Abarbanel Early Prophets: Pg. 3

26 Psalms: 119:72

27 Isaac Baer: "Don Isaac Abravanel and his Relation to Problems of History and Politic" Tarbiz 8 Pg.246

28 Dr. Avigayil Rock, "Abarbanel" The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash, available at: [www.vbm.com](http://www.vbm.com).

29 Deuteronomy 30:1-2

30 Abarbanel on Deuteronomy: Pg. 283. Dr. Avigayil Rock's translation

31 See Pg. 9-11 of Eric Lawee, "Isaac Abarbanel's Stance toward Tradition Defense, dissent, and Dialogue" for further details

32 See Abarbanel on Deuteronomy: Pg. 3 for further details of Abarbanel's exile from Naples

33 Abarbanel on Deuteronomy: Pg.165. See pages 162-168 for further details on Abarbanel's opinion on kings

34 Eric Lawee, "Isaac Abarbanel's Stance toward Tradition Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue" (Albany: SUNY Press 2001), 38



in.<sup>5</sup> While Auerbach's essay has seen its share of criticism in the years since its publication,<sup>6</sup> it still seems that one of his points stands: the mindsets of many characters in biblical stories are notably opaque, and we, as close readers, must attempt to explain the thought process of biblical characters.<sup>7</sup>

Before getting caught up in this characterization of biblical literature, however, it is worthwhile to appreciate the difficulty of examining an ancient text through the eyes of a modern scholar of literature. As James Kugel points out, even if Auerbach is correct that the biblical characters are "fraught with background," this only is true if we look at these characters through modern eyes. If the literary backdrop that these texts were written in did not require more than foreground for characters, is it really true to the text to focus on the brilliance of the suspension of background?<sup>8</sup> More generally, literature, and the tools utilized by literary works, may be totally different for moderns than it was for the ancients, and to use our conception of literature to analyze the Bible would be completely anachronistic.

To these objections, it is worthwhile to cite Robert Alter's responses. Alter admits that there are differences between literary conventions of the Iron Age and the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Despite this, Alter posits, literary works throughout the ages do contain some of the same mechanisms, or at least mechanisms that are similar enough to modern artistic conventions, that the

tools of 21<sup>st</sup> century literary analysis can be used to study them. In addition, the very fact that modern scholars are aware of the dangers of anachronistic readings provides some, although not complete, protection from misreading, and should lead critics to look for features that are truly biblical, and not "modern."<sup>9</sup>

Another, and perhaps more important, point for a religious audience to consider is that the attempt to understand biblical works through the prism of modern literary criticism might be disconcerting. Viewing the Bible as literature allows the assumption that what is under study is not a divine composition, and the practitioners of the literary theory often have conclusions about biblical stories that go beyond what the religious community is comfortable with. However, as Moshe Bernstein observes, the literary study of the Bible provides us with methods and categories of reading, not simply interpretations and evaluations of sources. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this critical literary categorization, and in fact they can further our understanding of *devar Hashem*.<sup>10</sup> In this vein, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein argues that critical literary studies do not necessarily need to be critical, as in judgmental. One can study biblical works using literary methods, without resorting to evaluating the merits of one book's style, for example, and can instead attempt to elucidate aspects of the text itself.<sup>11</sup>

The following essay is an at-

tempt to understand the story of Yehudah and Tamar, Genesis 38, in light of the poetics of Meir Sternberg, an Israeli literary critic and biblical scholar at Tel Aviv University.<sup>12</sup> Sternberg posits that the Bible utilizes a method he terms "gapping" in its story telling. Simply put, for Sternberg, all literary works are networks of gaps. The reasons behind occurrences of the story, how characters feel about each other, and the norms of the society of the story are all examples of features that are often left open for the reader to determine due to the absence of their explicit discussion within the text. Usually, when studying a text the reader will choose the most simple and obvious explanation as an answer to these questions. However, Sternberg argues that often in biblical narrative there are multiple legitimate, though mutually exclusive, explanations that the reader could choose that could fill the gaps.

These gaps are not the result of sloppy writing, or used as a simple literary trick, however. For Sternberg, "generally speaking, gaps and indeterminacies have no aesthetic value."<sup>13</sup> Rather, when a narrative has two or more possible readings at odds with one another, and the text itself, intentionally for Sternberg, never provides a resolution to the open-ended gaps therein, an analysis of the gaps can be substantive.<sup>14</sup> Keeping in mind Auerbach's comment that biblical characters are "fraught with background," and that their background "demands" an explanation, this article will utilize Sternberg's view of "gapping" in the Bible to examine the story.<sup>15</sup>

In order to examine the importance of the gaps in Genesis 38, it is worthwhile to analyze the structure of the chapter and understand the tension that these gaps form.<sup>16</sup> The story begins with Yehudah leaving his brothers and starting a family. The first section of the chapter establishes the basic rhythm of life in Yehudah's setting:

1 And it came to pass at that time, that Judah went down from his brethren, and turned in to a certain Adulla-

mite, whose name was *Hirah*. 2 And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was *Shua*; and he took her, and went in unto her. 3 And she conceived, and bore a son; and he called his name *Er*. 4 And she conceived again, and bore a son; and she called his name *Onan*. 5 And she yet again bore a son, and called his name *Shelah*; and he was at Chezib, when she bore him.<sup>17</sup>

In these five verses, Yehudah's household is portrayed as a center for reproduction and the establishment of the next generation. In verse 6, Yehudah chooses Tamar as a wife for his first-born, Er, leading the reader to believe that Yehudah's household will continue to expand. This narrative, however, is disrupted by the deaths of Yehudah's first two sons and Tamar's expulsion from Yehudah's house. The rest of the story, with Tamar's deception of her father in law and trial, all work to get to verse 27, where Tamar finally has her children. The structure of the narrative, then, is concerned with the establishment of Yehudah's lineage.<sup>18</sup> The end cyclically returns to the beginning, albeit in an unexpected manner, giving a sense of reestablishment and completion through the continuation of Yehudah's lineage.

However, this structure, and particularly the sense of completion it carries with it, degenerates slightly when the specific content of the chapter is studied. Specifically, examining the personal perspectives of the characters, their awareness of God's hand in the story, and the viewpoint of the other characters can alter how one views the end of Tamar's trial. In order to examine this, two preliminary questions, whose answers are not apparent from a simple reading of the story, must be asked: Are Yehudah and Tamar aware of God's involvement in the deaths of Er and Onan?

How does the answer to the first question affect their view of one another?

When the deaths of Er and Onan are recounted in chapter 38, the text goes out of its way to point out that God had

BY YAKOV ELLENBOGEN<sup>1</sup>

The 20<sup>th</sup> century literary critic Erich Auerbach (1892-1957) famously wrote that some biblical narratives and their characters are "fraught with background." While there are moments of action in these biblical stories, the thoughts of characters are suggested, rather than explic-

itly spelled out.<sup>2</sup> This, for Auerbach, was all part of an effort on the Bible's part to accurately portray the historical, religious and theological truth. By omitting the background of these characters, the text implies that it carries a "second, concealed meaning."<sup>3</sup> This is opposed to other non-biblical narra-

tives, which attempt to simply create a legendary reality with their stories in order to entertain. Auerbach attempts to prove this by comparing the story of the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 38 and an episode from Book 19 of *The Odyssey*. In the course of this comparison, Auerbach points out that, due

to the lack of psychological insight in the biblical texts, these stories "require subtle investigation and interpretation... demand them"<sup>4</sup>. The close reader will, and must, ponder the mindset of the characters and the presence of God in the story in order to uncover their background and the truth there-

a direct influence on the events. **7** And Er, Judah's first-born, was wicked in the sight of the Lord; **and the Lord slew him.** **8** And Judah said unto Onan: *Go in unto thy brother's wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother unto her, and raise up seed to thy brother.* **9** And Onan knew that the seed would not be his; and it came to pass when he went in unto his brother's wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest he should give seed to his brother. **10** And the thing which he did was evil in the sight of the Lord; **and He slew him also.**

After this, Yehudah sends Tamar away with the promise that she will be the wife of his youngest son, Shelah. When he does this, however, what is his thought process? What does he think it will accomplish?<sup>19</sup> If he knew that God killed his two older sons because of their evil actions, then it is reasonable to accept Ramban's interpretation, that, "[Yehudah] did not want [Shelah] to perform the levirate marriage while he was still young, lest he sin with her like his brothers [had sinned]." <sup>20</sup> With this interpretation, Yehudah sends Tamar away in order to protect Shelah from his own actions. However, if Yehudah was not aware that Er and Onan were subject to divine punishment, then Tamar was sent away for different reasons, likely because it was assumed that she was somehow causing the deaths of her husbands.<sup>21</sup>

Analyzing Tamar with this approach, however, is more difficult. Beyond the initial gap regarding whether she is aware of God's actions in the story, a second gap is opened, in that the text is unclear whether Tamar knows what Yehudah thinks. The options are not as simple a dichotomy as Yehudah's thought process was. Of course, Tamar could either realize that God was involved, or not. Even if she knows that

God killed off her first two husbands,<sup>22</sup> does she think that Yehudah knows this? If she does, then Yehudah would be protecting Shelah from sinning again, a perfectly logical act. However, if she does not, then Yehudah has done

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a great injustice, accusing her of killing her husband when it was divinely decreed, and separating her from her next husband.

This gap in our understanding of Tamar, however unsettling it may seem, is only one part of our greater ignorance of her character. Although Tamar sets events in motion that end with the establishment of Yehudah's lineage, the text says very little from her perspective. Yehudah takes Tamar as a wife for his sons in verse 6. Although much attention is paid to her actions when she dresses in the clothes of a prostitute, we do not see the deception of Yehudah through her eyes. Instead, we know that Yehudah comes upon her, and does not recognize her because she covers her face. And in the end of their dialogue, the reader only sees the transaction of Yehudah's staff and seal to Tamar through his eyes, and does not understand their purpose until later, when her life is threatened. Finally, while she is present after her trial at the birth of her children, Tamar fades away after verse 26. The focus of the story of the birth of Peretz and Zerach is on what her sons and nursemaid do, and Tamar does not even name them, unlike Yehudah's wife in the beginning of the chapter. So while Tamar is the agent through which Yehudah's house is established, a hero of sorts in the narrative, her thoughts and motivations are extremely marginal.<sup>23</sup> This gap is not simply a coincidence, and fits quite well within Sternberg's poetics. The ambiguity of the narrative, between the structure of the story, where Tamar is portrayed as the hero, and the content,

where Tamar in marginal, allows two totally divergent readings of Tamar's character to emerge.

The gaps in characters' relationships between themselves and their surroundings reach a high point at the conclusion of the chapter with Yehudah's claim that Tamar is "*Tsadekah Mimeni*" in verse 26.<sup>24</sup> The structure of the chapter would seem to imply that at this point Yehudah realizes the complete scope of his actions. Additionally, *Targum Neofiti*, an ancient Aramaic translation of the Torah, develops a fascinating expansion of this moment saying that:

Immediately Judah rose to his feet and said "I beseech you, brothers and men of my father's house, listen to me... with the measure with which a man measures it will be measured to him, whether a good measure or a bad measure. And happy is every man whose deeds are revealed. Because I took the garment of Joseph, my brother, and dyed it with the blood of a goat and said to Jacob, 'Recognize! Recognize! Is this your son's garment or not?' now it is said to me 'The man to whom these, the signet ring, the cord and the staff, belong—by him I am pregnant.' Tamar my daughter-in-law is innocent. By me she is pregnant. Far be it from Tamar, my daughter-in-law— she is not pregnant with sons through illicit intercourse!"<sup>25</sup>

This interpretation of events by the *Targum* views Yehudah in verses 25 and 26 as ultimately learning from the events of the chapter. The *Targum* equates Yehudah with Yaakov his father, pointing out that both of them were deceived with garments, and that both of them were demanded to recognize something. However, in Chapter 38 the tables are turned, and Yehudah must recognize. According to *Targum Neofiti*, Yehudah learns from his past mistakes, taking the high road and admitting what had happened. Chapter 38, in this view, is not only the story of the establishment of Yehudah's lineage; it also tells the tale of the Yehudah's moral renewal.

However, this reading does not sit well once one considers the gaps in the narrative. While it is possible that Yehudah, after not realizing that God had taken his sons away from him, had a moral revelation where he admitted his wrongs to Tamar, this is not the only way to read his admission of "*tsadekah mimeni*." It is conceivable that Yehudah was simply saying that Tamar was legally correct; that the child was his and that she should be returned to Shelah.<sup>26</sup> This is especially plausible once one considers that it would be strange for a morally awakened Yehudah to claim that Tamar was righteous, after she had tricked him and incestuously become impregnated by him.<sup>27</sup> In this second reading, Yehudah does not emerge as a morally admirable character. Instead he continues to be disappointingly unaware of his surroundings.

Ancient interpretations also seem to be aware of this gap in the penultimate section of the narrative. *Targum Neofiti* says that after Yehudah's admission "a voice went out from heaven and said 'Both of you are innocent. From before the Lord is the decree.'"<sup>28</sup> This would make it unavoidable that Yehudah is completely aware of what has happened, as he hears it from the mouth of God Himself. However, the fact that this insertion had to be made points to an ironic gap, that, even though Yehudah decides that Tamar is innocent, God's judgment is never made clear in the text itself. This is particularly upsetting because although, as Robert Alter comments, biblical stories often avoid judging characters explicitly,<sup>29</sup> God was present in the beginning of the narrative, and was actively judging people and carrying out those judgments. While He was so apparent at the beginning of the narrative, God is conspicuously absent in the end, and we must ask ourselves: In the end of the day does Yehudah realize what has happened when he says that Tamar is "*tsadekah*?" This article is not intended to be comprehensive. Other gaps in the narrative, such as Tamar's intentions when she

tricked Yehudah, have been left open. However, by utilizing Sternberg's view of gapping in biblical stories readers can appreciate the deep irony found in Genesis Chapter 38. While the struc-

ture of the chapter seems to imply a redemptive story, the content is murkier, with a heroine who is rarely the focus of the narrative, and a resolution that might or might not resolve all of the

problems. With both of these equally possible readings present in the narrative, it is easy to gain a deeper appreciation of the saying that biblical narrative is "fraught with background."

1 This article was originally presented, albeit in a different form, to the YU Tanakh Club

2 Erich Auerbach, transl. by Willard R. Trask *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 12. I thank Professor David Lavinsky for introducing this text to me.

3 *ibid.* 15

4 *ibid.*

5 This is investigated further in the first chapter of *Mimesis*, "Odysseus's Scar," 3-23

6 See William Whallon "Old Testament Poetry and Homeric Epic," *Comparative Literature* 18, 2 (1966): 113-131, and Egbert J. Bakker "Mimesis as Performance: Rereading Auerbach's First Chapter," *Poetics Today* 20, 1 (1999): 11-26 for two examples of the different types of criticism of Auerbach's work.

7 This point may be especially apparent to those familiar with Midrash, which often provides readings that work to solve ambiguities in the Biblical text. For an insightful analysis of how midrash fills gaps in narrative, see Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 39-56

8 James Kugel, "On the Bible and Literary Criticism," *Prooftexts* 1,3 (1981): 217-236, at p. 230

9 Robert Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-Scene," *Prooftexts* 3,2 (1983): 115-130, at p. 117-118

10 Moshe J. Bernstein, "The Bible as Literature: The Literary Guide to the Bible: Robert Alter and Frank Ker-

mode, eds.," *Tradition* 31, 2 (1997): 67-82, at p. 76-78

11 Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, "Criticism and Kivvei ha-Kodesh," in Rav Shalom Banayikh: *Essays Presented to Rabbi Shalom Carmy by Friends and Students in Celebration of Forty Years of Teaching*, ed. by Hayyim Angel and Yitzchak Blau (Jersey City, New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, inc., 2012) p. 15-32. I cite this source with the hope that I am not violating the authors' wishes that all citations of his essay are done "in the spirit with which it was written" (p. 31). This is not to say, of course, that just because there are potential benefits in applying literary studies to biblical texts everyone must appreciate the endeavor to the same extent. As R. Lichtenstein has put it elsewhere, some works that employ critical methods may simply not be "every ben Torah's cup of tea." However, the endeavor itself should not be discounted *prima facie*. Cf. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, "Foreword," in Nathaniel Helfgot, *Mikra and Meaning: Studies in Bible and its Interpretation* (Jerusalem; New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2012), p. ix-xiii.

12 "Poetics" simply refers to the "systematic working or study of literature as such." Meir Sternberg *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 2

13 Sternberg, p. 225

14 This is similar in practice to Wolfgang Iser's theory of indeterminate meaning as presented in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*

15 Sternberg's theory is presented at length in *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* p. 186-229. To be sure, Sternberg does not agree with Auerbach on the whole (see, for example, p. 232), but their theories seem to go hand in hand in that they agree that much is left unsaid in biblical narrative.

16 This analysis of the structure of Chapter

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paragraph.

23 This analysis is heavily influenced by Esther Marie Menn, *Judah and Tamar* (Genesis 38) in *Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics* (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1997), 28-35

24 Due to the unclear nature of this admission, it has not been translated in this article. While the JPS translation renders the phrase as "She is more righteous than I," I am hesitant to adopt this understanding for reasons that will be explained in the course of this article.

25 Translation taken from Esther Marie Menn, *Judah and Tamar* (Genesis 38) in *Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics* (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1997), p. 219

26 This follows both the first interpretation of Rashi to 38:26 s.v. *Tsadekah* and *Mimeni* and the comments of Bechor Shor ad loc. s.v. *Tsadekah Mimeni*

27 An issue dealt with by both Seferorno to 38:26 s.v. *Tsadekah Mimeni* and Bechor Shor ad loc. s.v. *Tsadekah Mimeni*. It is also possible that the first interpretation in Rashi ad loc. s.v. *Tsadekah* and *Mimeni* is sensitive to this issue.

28 A heavenly voice playing into Tamar's vindication is also a feature of Gen. Rabbah 85:12, and also appears in Makot 23b

29 Robert Alter "Introduction to the Old Testament" in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 23

## Tower of Babel: Lessons for Humanity<sup>1</sup>

BY MICHAL SCHECHTER

The story of the Tower of Babel has captivated the imagination of generations of scholars and commentators. What is the purpose of this short biblical narrative, which relates the story of a people who came together to build a tower, only to then be dispersed across the earth by God? A simple, cursory reading might initially indicate that the meaning of the *Migdal Bavel* story is to provide an explanation for the origination of linguistic diversity<sup>2</sup>. However, a closer reading brings to light a

more complicated perspective. Why is it important to mention the use of bricks for building the Tower? Why must God 'come down' to see the Tower-can He not see it from the heavens? Why is there a mention of both a Tower and a City<sup>3</sup>? Finally, why did God deem it necessary

to stop the people from building?

Some commentators explain the divine disruption of the people's building plans as an indication that they sinned and offended God. The exact offense committed by the Tower generation ranges among the various commentators: from a full-scale revolt against God (Rashi<sup>4</sup>), to corruption of urbanization and technology (Abravanel<sup>5</sup>), to idolatry (Seforno<sup>6</sup>). Other commentators have argued that the builders were not evil. Rather, they simply made a human error which was not in line with God's plan for the world, so God had to 'come down' and fix it (Ibn Ezra<sup>7</sup>). Often, the story of the Tower of Babel is taught in elementary school, where the nuances and deeper meanings of this important Biblical narrative remain unexplored. In reality, this short story teaches a number of timeless lessons, some of which may

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hold special resonance among readers living in the modern world.

Ancient Near East Context:

Some modern commentators, most notably M. D. Cassuto, have noted that this Biblical narrative appears in the text right before God's covenant with Abraham. Cassuto interprets the text as a satirical polemic against the paganistic Babylonian religion, and as an explanation for the necessity of the covenant between God and Abraham. In the ancient Near East, every city had a ziggurat, which was a tall, rectangular, stepped tower that had a temple at the top. For the pagans, ziggurats served as a literal physical link between the earth and the heavens, and were a designated place of meeting and praying to their deities<sup>8</sup>.

The greatest ziggurat in ancient Babylonia was called *etemenanki*, also known as the Temple of Marduk. Rising to an impressive 300 feet, the ruins were unearthed by archeologists about 100 years ago. A number of scholars have suggested that this Temple is the Tower that was described in the Torah. The Babylonian people were extremely proud of their beautiful Temple of Marduk, and even credited their deities for creating it. The Akkadian Creation Epic, which centers on the supremacy of the Marduk deity and the servitude of humankind, describes how the deities used bricks to create this massive ziggurat in honor of Marduk. This claim may explain the Torah's seemingly insignificant focus on the peo-

ple's brick-making: by stating that it was the people who built the temple with bricks, the Torah is mocking the Babylonians' claim that it was their deities who made the bricks<sup>9</sup>.

Additionally, God's "descent" in the Torah is meant to deride the Tower generation's attempt at coming closer to God through the physical height of the ziggurat-no matter how tall the ziggurat, God must still descend to humanity's level. Finally, the Torah even speaks against the name of the city of Babel. The Babylonians obtained the name of their city from the Akkadian word *babilim*, which means "the gate of the god". The Hebrew meaning of the word *bavel* is confusion. The Torah was taunting the Babylonians, and telling them that while they considered their city to be "the gate of the god", in reality they were wrong and confused. The famed city and Tower that were so glorified and prized in the eyes of the Babylonians were singled out by the Torah and made into a satire against paganism and mythology. Ultimately, it was the arrogance of the Tower generation that led them to create an idolatrous society and introduce idol worship into their community. It is this Biblical narrative that provides the backdrop for the re-introduction of Monotheism into the world<sup>10</sup>.

Freedom of Religion and Culture:

Rashi, among other authorities, suggests that it was Nimrod, the ruler of Shinar, that led the building of the Tower of Babel. Nimrod is described as a powerful and ruthless leader, who arrogantly attempts to displace God from His position as king of the world<sup>11</sup>. R. David Kimchi takes this description a step further, and expands on Nahmanides' view of Nimrod as a power-hungry monarch. According to R. Kimchi, Nimrod set out to conquer the world and to bring all of humanity under his dominion. Nimrod planned to oppress the people he had vanquished and make the world into one nation, which would have one religion. When God dispersed the people of the City of Babel, He ensured that the different groups of people located in different regions of the world would develop their own cultures and philosophies<sup>12</sup>.

The Maharal of Prague notes that when a ruler suppresses opinions that differ from his own, it is an indication that the ruler's philosophy cannot survive or even flourish when it must compete with other value systems. Indeed, a ruler who must do this is a weak leader. God's forced dispersal of the Babylonians caused different societies to form all over the world. When many cultures, and even religions, are allowed to exist and develop, and humankind does not experience oppression, and freedom of

speech and culture is allowed and even encouraged, the world becomes a better and healthier place for all of its inhabitants<sup>13</sup>.

Pluralism and the Search for Truth:

Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi, the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Talmudist and physician, opposes Rashi's negative view of the Tower generation and describes the city of Babel as a highly moral society<sup>14</sup>. According to him, the inhabitants of the city had learned from the mistakes of the generation of the Flood, and put great effort into creating a loving and harmonious community. Rabbi Ashkenazi builds<sup>15</sup> his explanation off of Abraham Ibn Ezra's interpretation of the "single language" as a reference

1 I extend my thanks and gratitude to Dr. Michelle Levine, who exposed me to many of the sources I used in this article.

2 In fact, Genesis 10:5 (which precedes the story of Migdal Bavel) indicates that there were a number of languages already in existence.

3 See: Joel S. Baden, "The Tower of Babel: A Case Study in the Competing Methods of Historical and Modern Literary Criticism", *Journal of Biblical*

Literature. Vol. 128, No. 2, 2009, 209-224.

4 Genesis 11:1

5 Ibid.

6 Genesis 11:4

7 Ibid.

8 The Ancient Near East: An Encyclopedia for Students, Vol. 4, 175-177.

9 M.D. Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham*, translated by Israel Abrahams. *Genesis Chapter 11*, 225-249.

10 Hayyim Angel, "The Tower of Babel: A Case study in Combining Traditional and Academic Bible Methodologies", *Conversations. Issue 15*, 2013, 135-143.

11 Genesis 10:8

12 Genesis 10:9

13 Be'er Hagola, "Seventh Well", chapter 2 (as quoted in Lippman Bodoff, *The Binding of Isaac, Religious Murders & Kabbalah: Seeds*

of Jewish Extremism and Alienation? 2005, 157-160).

14 Eliezer Ashkenazi, *Sefer Ma'aseh Hashem* (reprint, New York: Grossman 1962), folios 75a-76b.

15 Pun intended.

16 Byron L. Sherwin, "The Tower of Babel in Eliezer Ashkenazi's *Sefer Ma'aseh Hashem*", *Jewish Bible Quarterly. Vol. 2 No. 2*, 2014, 83-88.

17 Psalms 62:12

repressed the independent search for truth. The divine creation of a pluralistic society was a prerequisite for the discovery by humanity of the truth of God. In order to discover God, a person must have the freedom of thought and choice to search for Him. In fact, we learn soon after the fall of the Tower of Babel that our forefather Abraham discovered God. Only when Abraham found himself in a pluralistic society was he able to embark on an independent, intellectual, religious journey and properly evaluate the belief systems around him. Abraham's rational quest for the truth eventually led him to discover God, and thereafter he spent the rest of his life proclaiming His Oneness to the rest of humanity<sup>16</sup>.

The abundance of lessons that

may be learned from the story of the Tower Of Babel is a beautiful example of a well-known verse in Psalms: "One thing God has spoken, these two have I heard<sup>17</sup>". According to Jewish tradition, multiple interpretations in the Torah may all be correct, even if these teachings contradict each other. The Torah, when interpreted responsibly, encompasses all the wisdom in the world. Innovative readings of the Tower of Babel are integral to ensuring the continuation of the Jewish legacy of *shivim panim laTorah*.

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of Jewish Extremism and Alienation? 2005, 157-160).

14 Eliezer Ashkenazi, *Sefer Ma'aseh Hashem* (reprint, New York: Grossman 1962), folios 75a-76b.

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17 Psalms 62:12

## R. Zvi Dov Kanotopsky and the Kosher Switch

BY ARYEH SKLAR

YU's Thinkers of the Past: A Series

A series of articles exploring the ideas and opinions of rabbis of YU's past, especially as they pertain to the issue of the month. We have seen Dean Revel's response to the dean of a college with crosses on their diplomas. We have seen Rabbi Shkop's short tenure at YU and his idea of community and holiness. This issue will discuss the ideas of R. Zvi Dov Kanotopsky and his philosophy of the Sabbath.

The past few weeks have seen a renewed interest and debate over the halakhic and socio-religious merits of the "Kosher Switch". The device purports to be a light switch that allows a person to actively turn his/her lights on or off during the Sabbath day

in a completely permitted manner. It makes brilliant use of several leniencies in halakha, by introducing delays, randomness, and indirect causes to the process. In an attempt to raise funds for its manufacture, and to raise awareness in the Jewish community toward the product (which has actually been out publicly since 2011), the creators of the Kosher Switch began a Indiegogo campaign recently. The campaign has been fairly successful in the Orthodox Jewish community, managing to raise a hefty \$57,000 in the last few weeks, with more than 20 days left and already 15% more than their original goal.<sup>1</sup>

However, rabbinic opposition has been swift and harsh. While it is true that

several rabbis (including our own Rabbi Ben Haim) have supported the product, several top American rabbis such as R. Shmuel Kaminetzky, R. Dovid Feinstein and R. Yisroel Belsky have signed a document strongly disagreeing with its purported halakhic viability. Their collective letter declares that contrary to the claims of the makers of the Kosher Switch (my translation), "it is built upon heterim that are not reliable."<sup>2</sup> R. Belsky went as far as to call it in his own letter, a "Rube Goldberg contraption comprising an entire *melocho* [Shabbat violation]... If the Sanhedrin were empowered, that act would be punishable by *mitat bet din* [the death penalty]."<sup>3</sup> But what is more interesting is that

these missives also include declarations as to the spirit of the Sabbath and how the implications of the Kosher Switch run counter to it. In the letter signed by R. Kaminetzky, R. Feinstein, and others, it states that (my translation) "it is clear that it is a denigration of the Sabbath, and by this standpoint alone it cannot be permitted."<sup>4</sup> In R. Belsky's own letter, he declares the Kosher Switch "an agonizing distortion of Torah values... It portrays the holy and wonderful Shabbos as a nuisance and a problem to be solved... The limitations of Shabbos are what characterizes (sic) it and what endows (sic) it with its sweetness and majesty."<sup>5</sup> To this writer, the "spirit of Shabbos"



is a particularly nebulous concept that ends up becoming “how the Sabbath has been until now”, and that any change from this somehow becomes “not in the spirit of the Sabbath”. Sabbath clocks, which turn lights on and off in a home according to a schedule set before the Sabbath, was also once a controversial issue. Now, it is so common that to not use it would raise eyebrows. Similarly, the permissibility of the “Sabbath mode” on ovens was hotly debated, with Rav Heineman, a major rabbi in Israel, having supported it. And the entire tractate of Eruvin is dedicated to creating semi-privatizing fences to allow for carrying on the Sabbath. R. Belsky doesn’t seem to make a distinction between the Kosher Switch and these leniencies, which don’t take away the “sweetness and majesty” of the Sabbath. It appears that under this definition of the “spirit of the Sabbath”, if/when the Kosher Switch becomes normalized in the Jewish community, it will be difficult to claim any violation of the spirit of the Sabbath. It is thus necessary to examine what the goals and philosophy of the Sabbath is, in order to determine its spirit. A disclaimer is first in order: I will not be commenting on the halakhic implications of changing times, but only if the Sabbath spirit can accord with such a device. There are many articles being written about the halakhic advantages and disadvantages of the Kosher Switch, and it is not my place to make any declaration as to their merit. That said, regarding the Sabbath spirit, I am drawn toward an idea I once saw in the writings of the late R. Zvi Dov Kanotopsky. R. Zvi Dov Kanotopsky was a beloved rabbi at Yeshiva University for 28 years. He learned as a student from the Rav, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, whom he considered his *rebbe muvhak*. He was also the rabbi of the Young Israel of Eastern Parkway, and later, the rabbi of the Young Israel of West Hempstead. He taught many students who became accomplished teachers and leaders in their own right. R. Avishai David, the *rosh yeshiva* of Yeshi-

vat Torat Shraga in Israel, considers R. Kanotopsky his closest rabbi, his *rebbe muvhak*. Former OU president and current OU chairman Stephen J. Savitsky remembers R. Kanotopsky as having a great influence on him as his high school *rebbe* and synagogue rabbi during his formative years.<sup>6</sup> R. Shlomo Riskin, Chief Rabbi of Efrat, was his student in Yeshiva University High School in Brooklyn. The list goes on. His passion for the land of Israel manifested in bringing his family to Israel in a time when it was rare for an established rabbi to do so. After making *aliyah* in 1970, he became the head of the Institute for Advanced Talmud Study at Bar-Ilan University, while also teaching at Hebrew University and Michlala College for Women in Jerusalem. Tragedy struck his family when R. Kanotopsky passed away at the age of 50 in 1973. R. Kanotopsky was well-known for his sermons, as well as his examination into the psychological background of the characters and commandments of the Torah. Though he kept meticulous notes of all he spoke about, he published very little in his own lifetime, save for a book on Jewish values in 1956 entitled “Rays of Jewish Splendor”, and several articles in various Jewish journals. After his passing, his wife, children, and close students compiled a book of some of his choicest essays on the Torah, calling it “Night of Watching”. It was republished under the name “The Depths of Simplicity” in 1994. In 2007, some of his holiday sermons were put together by David Zomick, another close student of R. Kanotopsky, at the request of the Kanotopsky family, which turned into a book called, “Rejoice in Your Festi-

vals.”<sup>7</sup>

It was a dusty, ear-marked and marked-up “Night of Watching”, which I discovered in a secondhand bookstore in Jerusalem in 2010, that impelled me to learn more about this great rabbi, so integral to Yeshiva University’s history, yet somewhat forgotten. His general methodology of reading Tanakh is quite fascinating. Every essay in the book discusses an engaging and far-reaching philosophical concept. He then he proceeds to show in an extremely meticulous manner how the concepts discussed can be found embedded in classical sources of Judaism. His unique approach highlighting the psychology of characters and the uniquely Jewish philosophies that emerge is particularly resonant today. How did Jethro fulfill his fatherly role toward Moses? How can the laws of impurity and a newborn be looked at as a rehabilitative structure necessary for a puerperal mother? What was Joseph’s plan when he confronted his brothers in Egypt? The text itself is mined for these gems of insight into characters and laws in a creative, yet solidly founded way. His very first essay in the book discusses the concept of the Sabbath and is a great example of how he approached the text. His analysis is framed through a debate between Maimonides and Nahmanides.<sup>8</sup> He notes that while the Decalogue in Exodus 20:11 relates the command of the Sabbath to the theme of creation, the second version of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy 5:15 connects it to the drama of the Exodus from Egypt. According to Maimonides (Guide for the Perplexed 2:31), this indicates that the Sabbath is meant to commemorate both themes - creation as a truth, and exodus from Egypt as an impression of true freedom. Nahmanides, however, posits (Deuteronomy 5:12) that Sabbath is only meant to

commemorate creation, and the exodus from Egypt is remembered as evidence of the Creator of nature by the very fact that the Jews were redeemed by means of a disruption of nature’s laws. Meanwhile, there is a similar debate between Maimonides and Nahmanides regarding the symbolism of the festival of Sukkot. According to Maimonides (Guide 3:31), Sukkot is a festival celebrating agriculture - represented by the ritual sitting in huts outside with vegetation for shade, and by the gathering of various plants, at the end of an agricultural season. But for Nahmanides (Leviticus 23:36, 40), Sukkot is a festival celebrating creation - the agricultural symbols are only in terms of the theme of creation. The seven main days of Sukkot are parallel to the seven days of creation, and the eight represents Israel together with the Sabbath. The various species of fruit and vegetation are meant to atone for the sin of Adam and the forbidden fruit. On this point, R. Kanotopsky asks, how can it be that Nahmanides attributes the same symbolism - that of creation - to two different festivals, Sukkot and Passover? According to Nahmanides, apparently the Exodus is merely just proof for creation, and Sukkot celebrates creation itself. Why, then, are both necessary? His answer is that there are really two implications in *creation ex nihilo* - one is the creation itself, and the other is the initiation of a process that sets into motion the world’s events and will eventually culminate in the redeemed world of the Messiah in the future. Nahmanides sees Sukkot as purely reflecting the creation of the world, while Passover is the perpetual revelation of the forces of nature - two aspects of creation. If so, what is the Sabbath meant to commemorate? The Sabbath reflects a combination of these two themes of the divine drama of creation. R. Kanotopsky proposes that both are manifest in the two characters interacting with the Sabbath - God, and the Jewish people. God is the Creator. But the Jews, in keeping the Sabbath, are invited to

take part in this initiated process. What remains unclear is exactly how, within this consideration, is the Sabbath considered a continuation of the process of creation? Jews are specifically enjoined to refrain from creative acts on that day, *not* to continue them. Perhaps the answer can be seen in a sermon written by R. Kanotopsky in the 1954 RCA Sermon Manual.<sup>9</sup> In his essay on the portion of *Va-etchanan*, which records the second version of the Decalogue, he examines an interesting midrash that pertains to the Sabbath. In Genesis Rabbah 11:8, the rabbis portray the Sabbath as complaining to God. Whereas every other day of the week has a mate/partner, Sunday with Monday, Tuesday with Wednesday, and so on, the Sabbath stands alone, as the odd day out. God’s response is that the Sabbath’s partner is the nation of Israel. What is this meant to indicate? R. Kanotopsky favors the interpretation of R. Isaac Arama, the medieval author of *Akedat Yitzchak*. As explained by R. Kanotopsky, R. Arama submits that the Torah abhors a lack of creativity. All of nature, even the days of the week, need to have a “partner”, a creative mate that can produce good for the world. Seemingly, the six days of the week have all the creative power, yet the Sabbath seems to lack it. Where is its creative partner? “Israel, through its observance of the Sabbath, makes the day productive in a very real sense,” writes R. Kanotopsky. How? R. Kanotopsky points to the ability on the Sabbath to devote one’s time to Torah learning and a spiritually-charged home atmosphere. But he also adds, “The prohibitions of Shabbos are also creative, in a positive sense. When one

recognizes these prohibitions as Divine directives and learns to limit and regulate his own activities in consonance with these directives, he is in an affirmative sense engaged in a fruit-bearing activity.”<sup>10</sup> But R. Kanotopsky goes further than finding the creativity of the Sabbath in its prohibitive nature; it is also to be found through the creative process in which “inventive and originative impulses can be realized” in the Jewish people. For R. Kanotopsky, Sabbath is not only a day commemorating creation, but the initiation of a process the Jewish people are meant to take part of. With this idea of the Sabbath in mind, one can view the Kosher Switch in two senses. In one sense, it is brilliant in its creative use of the directives of the Sabbath to allow the observance of the Sabbath that much easier to maintain. But in another sense, it adds nothing itself toward the “inventive and originative impulses” that the Sabbath is meant to engender. I believe the existing Sabbath leniencies are indeed successful in this regard. Let’s examine the eruv as a case point. Perhaps the earliest example of a Sabbath “leniency” is the eruv, that allows carrying on the Sabbath within the rabbinical prohibitions of carrying objects from private to public spaces and vice versa. Today, a typical eruv is comprised of near-invisible string tied to poles at strategically spaced intervals around a certain area of a town to allow carrying within it on the Sabbath. The eruv is mocked by both Jews and non-Jews for its supposed legal fiction, in what appears to be a device that “tricks God.” Yet it is precisely within this leniency

where we find the spirit of the Sabbath. Common problems without an eruv like being stuck in prayer without one’s *tallit* or siddur, or a person being in pain because he was forced to walk to shul without his cane, this is against the creative spirit of the Sabbath. Not being able to bring one’s children to the park or shul, not being able to carry the house key and therefore worrying about one’s unlocked door all of the Sabbath, these again detract from the Sabbath spirit. The eruv really adds to the ability of the Sabbath to provide productive prosperity, and the Talmudic rabbis saw that, and found ways within the law to accommodate its spirit. Similarly, the satisfaction and joy in warm food and family, through “Shabbos mode” ovens, contribute to quality creative contentment. I cannot know what R. Kanotopsky would say about the Kosher Switch, but his philosophy of the Sabbath makes it difficult for me to see the action of turning on and off lights on the Sabbath as within this viewpoint. The Kosher Switch is marketed as a positive development to the entire Sabbath experience, for all people, when it can only ever relieve a negative one in specific cases. Perhaps in cases of necessity, of pain and disturbance, I would submit, can this device be useful in terms of the spirit of the Sabbath. Only when something is disturbing the marriage of Jewish people to the Sabbath day, as R. Kanotopsky would phrase it, can the switch be kosher in terms of the Sabbath spirit. But however creative in halakha the switch may be, it must accord with the productivity found in its restful nature. R. Kanotopsky recognized that the To-



rah must be shown to be relevant with the times and new situations. In his essay on Nitzavim for the 1954 RCA Manual, R. Kanotopsky calls upon teachers and rabbis to look to the Torah for lessons within the context of modern life.<sup>11</sup> Quoting Deuteronomy 30:11’s “It is not too distant from you,” he writes, “This is intended to silence the argument that Torah itself has been left behind in the scientific and technological progress of our times. Torah surely has a living, vital message for us, far superior to the message of physics or the message of psychology.” But while we live in ever-changing times, the Torah’s lessons are timeless. Seeking to improve the Sabbath must be done carefully, with great thought as to the philosophy of the Sabbath and what its goals are in the present day. The way to do so is to follow R. Kanotopsky’s example in studying Torah and Tanakh - search for its “living, vital message” in the creative and productive capacity that has been granted to us, and taking part in the created world’s ongoing procession toward the redemption.

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<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Yair Hoffman, “HaRav Yisroel Belsky Writes Letter Slamming ‘Kosher,’” *The Yeshiva World News*, 23 April 2015, available at: <http://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/headlines-breaking-stories/303911/harav-yisroel-belsky-writes-letter-slamming-kosher-switch.html>

<sup>6</sup> Stephen J. Savitsky, “Review: Rejoice

<sup>1</sup> As recorded on their IndieGoGo fundraising page, viewed here <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/kosher-switch-control-electricity-on-shabbat>

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Yair Hoffman, “The Kosher Switch Part II Follow Up,” *The Yeshiva World News*, 23 April 2015, available at: <http://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/headlines-breaking-stories/303911/harav-yisroel-belsky-writes-letter-slamming-kosher-switch.html>

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Yair Hoffman, “HaRav Yisroel Belsky Writes Letter Slamming ‘Kosher,’” *The Yeshiva World News*, 23 April 2015, available at: <http://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/headlines-breaking-stories/303911/harav-yisroel-belsky-writes-letter-slamming-kosher-switch.html>

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Yair Hoffman, “The Kosher Switch Part II Follow Up,” *The Yeshiva World News*, 23 April 2015, available at: <http://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/headlines-breaking-stories/303911/harav-yisroel-belsky-writes-letter-slamming-kosher-switch.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/headlines-breaking-stories/303891/the-kosher-switch-part-ii-follow-up.html>

<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Yair Hoffman, “The Kosher Switch Part II Follow Up,” *The Yeshiva World News*, 23 April 2015, available at: <http://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/headlines-breaking-stories/303891/the-kosher-switch-part-ii-follow-up.html>



in *Your Festivals: Penetrating Insights into Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot*," *Jewish Action*, 13 September 2008, available at [https://www.ou.org/jewish\\_action/09/2008/rejoice\\_in\\_your\\_festivals\\_penetrating\\_insights\\_into\\_pesach\\_shavuot\\_and\\_sukkot/](https://www.ou.org/jewish_action/09/2008/rejoice_in_your_festivals_penetrating_insights_into_pesach_shavuot_and_sukkot/)

7 Zvi Dov Kanotopsky, *Rejoice in Your Festivals: Penetrating Insights Into Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot*, Urim Pub., 2007

8 Harold B. Kanotopsky, *Night of Watching:*

*Essays on the Torah*, 1977, 17-18

9 RCA Sermon Manual, 1954, p.184 available at <http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req+12874&st=Kantopsky&pgnum=184>

10 Although not explicitly mentioned by R. Kanotopsky, it seems to me that he is referencing here to a concept discussed in an expanded way by R. Soloveitchik regarding the kabbalistic notion of *tzimtzum*. *Tzimtzum*,

literally "constriction", refers generally to the creation of the world as God having "constricted" Himself to allow it to exist. To the Rav, this had implications for how Jews, in their imitation of the divine are meant to live as well. My grandfather, Rabbi Chaim Zev Bomzer, who studied under the Rav as well for many years, quoted the Rav regarding this in a sermon I have in my possession. "Tzimtzum symbolizes self-control, discipline, the ability to restrain oneself... Present any mitzvah and it is possible to point out the aspect of *tzimtzum* it represents. Tefillin, Shabbat, Kashrut - these

are limiting ourselves from certain natural tendencies, in thought, action, even diet... The goal of Torah and mitzvot is to emulate G-d and withdraw ourselves, our intellect and our desires, natural drives (sex, food, power), thereby sublimating them to the service of God."

11 RCA Sermon Manual, 1954, p.200 available at <http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpage.aspx?req+12874&st=Kantopsky&pgnum=200>

*We wish our outgoing editors Shoshanna Halpern, Raphi Ozarowski, and Dovi Nadel the best of luck with their future endeavors and congratulate next year's editors, Eleorah Sandman, Daniel Shlian, Sima Grossman, and Alex Maged on their new positions for the upcoming academic year. Many thanks as well to Miriam Jacobson, our layout editor, for her tireless work throughout the year. Thanks to all the hardworking staff and writers who made this year of Kol Hamevaser so successful.*