

## Curricula, Methodologies and Values in Orthodox *Tanakh* Study: Where They Can Help Us

Nathaniel Helfgot

**Abstract:** This article argues that there are benefits to using modern literary and academic methods of studying *Tanakh* in the Modern Orthodox classroom at different stages of the educational pyramid. It responds to critiques that the use of such methodologies undermines the *yir'at shamayim* (religious faith) of students. The article further attempts to show that proper integration of these methods helps enrich Torah study, and that it can ultimately yield a more sophisticated understanding of *Tanakh* as *Devar ha-shem* (Word of God).

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“The greatest deficiency in *yir’at shamayim* (fear of heaven) that is not well connected to the light of Torah is that fear of thought replaces fear of sin. Because a human being begins to be afraid of thinking, he drowns in the morass of ignorance, which robs him of the light of soul, weakens his vigor, and casts a pall over his spirit.” R. Abraham I. Kook<sup>2</sup>

“*Kayle veren! Einerken kayle veren sitzendig in kandy store!*” (To go bad religiously! One can go bad sitting in a candy store!) R. Yitzhak Hutner

## I. Introduction

This paper addresses key issues surrounding the use of modern approaches to Bible study in the context of traditional study of Tanakh as the word of God (“*devar ha-shem*”). Specifically, I would like to analyze whether the critique that the modern approaches to Tanakh study undermines *yir’at shamayim* (religious faith) is a valid one, and if not, how may Modern Orthodox teachers utilize modern Bible approaches to enhance *yir’at shamayim*?

In the first part of the essay, I present preliminary remarks to frame the discussion. In the second, I focus on the areas of Bible study in which the “new” or “modern” methods alluded to in the questions above have taken a hold in Modern Orthodox educational settings, both for children and adults.<sup>4</sup> I have personally devoted a large

amount of my intellectual efforts to Bible study and teaching, trying to integrate both traditional and modern methods. I conclude the essay with a short afterward containing personal reflections, and offer this paper as a passionate presentation of a point of view, an apologia of sorts, rather than a detached academic recitation of the various positions in this debate.

## II. Terms

My preliminary remarks relate to definitions of the terms that I will use and the scope of the issues under discussion.

1. The term ‘*yir’at shamayim*’ is elusive, often connoting different meanings in different settings and to different people. Consider one startling example from a contemporary rabbinic scholar, R. Yosef Gruenwald, ז”ל, a leading decisor in the Pupa Hasidic

<sup>1</sup> This essay is an abridged and edited version of a paper, originally presented at the 18th Orthodox forum convened annually by Yeshiva University, which will appear in a forthcoming volume. I thank R. Robert Hirt, series editor of the Orthodox Forum, and Yeshiva University for permission to publish the essay here. I would also like to thank Rabbis Yitzhak Blau, Shalom Carmy, Seth Farber, Ysoscher Katz, Dov Linzer, Jeffrey Saks, and Moshe Simon for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Lastly, I want to particularly thank Prof. David Shatz and Marc Stern for their reviews of the original drafts and suggestions. The translations of the quoted Hebrew texts are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Opening to *Orot ha-godesh*, vol. 3, pg. 26. The translated word ‘drowns’ conforms to the actual word R. Kook used—*tovei`a*—as found in the original manuscript published in *Shemonah qevatzim –Qovetz 1:267*, (Jerusalem, 2004). The printed text in *Orot ha-godesh*, edited by R. David ha-Kohen, popularly known as the Nazir, softens the idea slightly by changing it to “*tovel*”—“dips or immerses.”

<sup>3</sup> R. Aharon Lichtenstein, “The Ideology of Hesder,” *Leaves of Faith* (Jersey City, 2003) Vol. 1, pg. 156.

<sup>4</sup> In this I believe I am following the schema set out in a previous conclave of the Orthodox Forum on the theme of *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*. Fully two thirds of the presentations focused on Bible study while Talmud study received the last third of time and attention.

community. When asked if it was appropriate for a *shohet* (ritual slaughterer) to drive a car to work, he replied:

My father and teacher, [R. Yaacov Gruenwald] ז"ל, was asked whether it is appropriate for a *shohet* to ride a bicycle, and he responded that it is proper to prevent him, because firstly, the hands become tired through this and moreover, *this is not the appropriate action of a talmid hakham*...Now regarding the first issue it would appear that the first reason does not apply [in our case], for driving a car is not real work as in riding a bicycle...however, the second reason is applicable here...In sum then, I am also of the opinion that one should prevent a *shohet yarei' shamayim* from this act [of driving a car].<sup>5</sup>

It is unlikely that any layperson or rabbi in the mainstream yeshiva or Modern Orthodox community in America would see driving a car to work or school as reflecting a lack of *yir'at shamayim*. The example highlights that one's person's *yir'at shamayim* may be another person's uniquely pietistic view that has little in common with classical notions rooted in Tanakh and Hazal.<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this essay, I would define *yir'at shamayim* as:

a) Commitment to and observance of *mitsvot*, coupled with a passion for that observance. Observance of *mitsvot* is a broad term encompassing the wide range of practices that exist within the world of halakhically observant Jews on issues of both great and minor import.<sup>7</sup>

b) An attitude reflecting a mixture of respect, awe, and, at times, self-negation before God, and commitment to a religious life devoted to nurturing a relationship with the Divine. A derivative of this attitude is the respect and deference one feels towards past and present traditional rabbinic authorities.

c) Affirmation of basic core beliefs (*emunot ve-de'ot*) such as the existence of God, the divinity of the Torah, including the Oral Law, and the binding nature of *halakhab* in all eras and aspects of life, recognizing that there is a range of legitimate interpretations of these beliefs within the framework of traditional Judaism.<sup>8</sup>

2. The topic under consideration should focus on the use of modern methods of approaching classical Jewish texts in *the context of a religious educational setting*, e.g. day schools and yeshiva high schools, *Tanakh* classes in Israeli *yeshivot besder*, and selected popular American yeshiva or women's programs in Israel. I refer to settings where both *Tanakh* and Talmud classes incorporate

<sup>5</sup> *Shut Va-ya'an yosef*, (Brooklyn, 1992) Yoreh de'ah #5.

<sup>6</sup> This phenomenon is not simply a uniquely Hasidic one. I recall, close to twenty years ago, R. Aharon Lichtenstein recounted that R. Yaakov Kaminetsky ז"ל was still upset decades later recalling that when he had been in the Slabodka Yeshiva in his youth the administration had looked askance at Rav Yaakov's having taken out a boat on a lake to relax during a break period as inappropriate behavior for a ben torah.

<sup>7</sup> Note for example the diversity of practice within the halakhic community on issues such as halakhic criteria for determination of death, use of the *heter mekhirah*, shaving on *hol ha-mo'ed*, use of exclusively *yashan* products in the Diaspora, changing the text of *nabeim* on Tishe'ah be-Av, legitimacy of women's Talmud study, proper methods for reheating food on Shabbat, *metsitab be-feh* in circumcision, validity of women's prayer groups etc.

<sup>8</sup> Thus this formulation would recognize that a wide range exists on fundamental questions of Jewish thought and dogma. For a full exposition of this thesis see the richly researched volume of M. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology* (London, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Examples of the first category include Yeshivat Kibbutz Ha-Dati, Maaleh Gilboa, and Otziel. Examples that fall in to the second category would be Yeshiva and Stern Colleges and Bar Ilan University, post-collegiate institutes such as Beit Morasha and MATAN, teacher's seminaries such as Herzog Teacher's College or Efrata Teacher's Seminary, graduate programs such as BRGS and Touro College Graduate School of Jewish Studies, rabbinical programs such as R.I.E.T.S. and YCT Rabbinical School, yeshiva high schools as well as adult-education programs under the aegis of synagogues and community *kollelim*.

these modern methods into their entire curriculum or in selected classes.<sup>9</sup> I am *not* addressing the study of sacred texts in a secular university setting, which is a different phenomenon with its own set of issues.<sup>10</sup>

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*Some students suffer an erosion of their commitments as result of exposure to modern disciplines*

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*Yir'at shamayim* is an attitude and state of being nurtured in an educational context that is infused with devotion to Torah and *mitsvot*—i.e., an all-embracing religious ethos with an experiential component of Torah living. It is in such educational settings where many other factors help enhance the religious commitments of students and congregants. Most importantly, it is where sacred texts and the Oral Torah are studied for religious meaning and truth and as part of the commandment to study Torah and where they are taught by genuine Torah scholars infused with *yir'at shamayim*.

3. Despite the points enumerated above, some students suffer an erosion of their passion and commitments, in part as result of exposure to modern methodologies and disciplines. The problem in attempting an evaluation of this phenomenon is that there are no empirical data on whether this phenomenon is insignificant or of greater magnitude. We are thus left with only an impressionistic or anecdotal method with which to approach our subject. Given this reality, I would like to share my personal observations culled from the twenty years of experience in informal and formal Jewish education.

There is no doubt that there is the occasional student, who like a character in a Chaim Potok novel will eventually become full-blown devotee of academic Bible Criticism after reading the essays in the Hertz *Pentateuch and Haftorahs* or the writings of R. Mordechai Breuer. For some, the questions and exposure to these methods simply overwhelm any traditional response or traditional religious message. For these individuals, the path of further study erodes

<sup>10</sup> This crucial point is often lost in some of the over-heated rhetoric that is heard in discussing these issues with those opposed to engagement with modern methodologies. If an Orthodox student's commitment to observance of *halakhab* and to the tenets of classical Judaism wanes during his tenure at a private liberal arts college in some pastoral New England setting, it is highly unlikely that it is primarily due to the interesting literary chiasmic structures of Deuteronomy and/or comparisons and contrasts of the *Sefer ha-berit* of Exodus 20-23 to the Laws of Eshnuna or the Hittite Code that his YC/Revel-educated, *Megadim*-subscribing, *lumash* teacher exposed him to in eleventh grade in yeshiva high school. Factors such as the absence of a critical mass of fellow Orthodox students, the influence of the popular college culture and its aggressively secular ethos, professors who approach sacred texts in a detached or secular vein, and the decency/ friendliness (or the lack thereof) of Orthodox role models, friends and members of the community encountered throughout high school and college are more likely critical factors. In addition, a desire to explore other identities, the highly hedonistic popular culture that we are engulfed in, the philosophical or moral qualms that young adults struggle with in relation to classical Jewish thought and practice, together with the need to challenge authority and any past negative family or school dynamics are more likely candidates as underlying causes for the erosion of *yir'at shamayim*. For some, exploration of the reasons for the attrition rate in observance or abandonment of religious life by a significant percentage of young adults raised in the modern-Orthodox community see S. Fisherman, "*No'ar ha-kippot ba-zeruqot*" (Elkanah, 1998), the widely discussed internet essay, Gil Perl and Yaakov Weinstein, *A Parent's Guide to Orthodox Assimilation on University Campuses*, as well as selected chapters of the recently published F. Margolese, *Off the Derech* (Jerusalem, 2005). For a focus on diminution of religious commitment and fervor, as well as full blown defection from Orthodoxy in the more Haredi sectors of Orthodox society see S. Barzilai, *Lifrots me'ah she'arim* (Tel-Aviv, 2004) and the recently published H. Winston, *Unchosen: The Hidden Lives of Hasidic Rebels* (Boston, 2005). In general terms, the entire role of the classical intellectual challenges to Judaism emerges a limited factor in the abandonment of faith, with other elements such as the cultural, sociological, experiential, family life and a whole host of other factors playing a much more dominant role. "Modern" modes of Torah study and exposure to them are almost entirely absent as a factor in individuals' decision to abandon commitment or weakening their standards of observance.

religious commitment. In addition, there is a larger group that maintains basic commitment to traditional Judaism experience, yet their passion and religious sensibilities wane a result of their exposure to modern methods.

I sense that this is a rather small piece of what is happening in our schools. If so, educators should carefully consider the potential benefits that can accrue from using modern methodologies that have enriched our study of *Tanakh* and strengthened many students in their love for learning, rather than resort to an excessive conservatism.

Many of the new literary methods and disciplines brought to the traditional curriculum are not themselves problematic nor do they create conflicts or crises. Indeed, many of them expand on traditional modes of exegesis or attempts at determining the correct manuscripts, following in the tradition of the *risbonim* and significant *aharonim* such as the Ga'on of Vilna. In areas potentially more laden with ideological pitfalls, it is my sense that when we incorporate the newer disciplines into Torah text study and distill them through the prism of committed teachers in a yeshiva, they can ultimately enrich faith, provide profound insight and enhance our students' abilities to address challenges from within and without regarding the Torah as divine.

Instructive here are the comments of R. Aharon Lichtenstein regarding a similar issue, namely the potential corrosive impact of studying general culture on religious faith and commitment. Towards the end of his essay "Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict,"<sup>11</sup> he cites the oft-repeated anecdote of one of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik's students who approached the Rav for counsel regarding whether he should pursue graduate studies in philosophy. The Rav famously replied that "airplanes are known to

crash and yet people fly." Regarding that vignette R. Lichtenstein writes:

The Rav's reply is nevertheless understandable, but only if we bear in mind (as he, of course, did) first, that very few repeatedly run even the minimal risks of flight for the sheer thrill of the adventure; and second, that the incidences of crashes be reasonably low so that the risk-benefit ratio is acceptable...Only where the possibility of true spiritual benefit is perceived, tested faith being regarded as either sturdier or worthier, or if exposure is valued as enhancing the ability to cope with the *apikoros* within or without, or if in a more positive vein, the material itself or the encounter with it is deemed as stimulating meaningful insight into Judaism, can the prospect of ideologically problematic pursuits be countenanced.<sup>12</sup>

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*Regardless of the methodologies employed,  
Torah study in all its manifestations should  
play a central role*

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It is my sense that the study of this material in religiously supportive frameworks does meet the standards R. Lichtenstein sets out. In the overall cost-benefit calculus, such study often emerges as positive, enriching and highlighting the richness and depth of Torah.

Modern Orthodox educators should strive to inculcate *emunah temimah*—pure faith—in their students. We should foster in our student a complete devotion and commitment to God in the primary Biblical sense of the meaning of the word *emunah* (i.e. steadfastness, loyalty and trust) as a supreme value. To that end, the study of Torah in all its manifestations should play a central role,

<sup>11</sup> Printed in *Judaism's Encounter With Other Cultures*, ed., J.J. Schachter (New Jersey, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> P. 284.

regardless of the methodologies employed, in our pursuit of understanding the word of God.

However, *emunah temimah* can be understood in one of two ways. If *emunah temimah* is merely the assent to propositions without investigation, avoidance of problems or questions and the conscious shutting down of intellectual struggle, this conception flies in the face of Modern Orthodox thought and engagement in Torah study. This perspective of “simple faith” has a distinguished pedigree in Jewish tradition and I do not belittle it. Yet the world-view of the Modern Orthodox community in American or the national religious community in Israel is rooted in the tradition of Maimonides and the host of *rishonim* and *aharonim* who took seriously the charge of *fides quarrens intellectum*, of a life predicated on faith seeking understanding in the philosophical realm, halakhic realm or in the world of classical biblical interpretation. This understanding also dominates the intellectual discourse that attempts to confront modernity head on, explore and benefit from the wisdom of secular studies, engage with the non-Jewish world and work intensively for the return of the Jewish people back into active history, i.e. religious Zionism.

In the last century, the two dominant models of our religious worldview, Rav Kook and Rav Soloveitchik, understood the complexity of the religious struggle and the need to make use of one’s intellect, to confront challenges and to live the life committed to Torah in all situations and settings.<sup>13</sup> A prime example is

that we teach our students evolution, history, literature and the range of general studies, clearly underscoring the fact that we believe in engaging the world, even if *prima facie*, it raises questions about the “traditional” perspective.

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*Rav Kook and Rav Soloveitchik understood  
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How, when, and by whom these subjects as well as the “problematic” issues, texts, methodologies in the realm of Torah study are taught is the critical educational issue. Yet clearly, our community has not opted for an educational philosophy of a hermetically sealed classroom. We strive to inculcate a *yir’at shamayim* and love of Torah that is ultimately broad and complex in its understanding, full of scope and depth. To cite Rav Lichtenstein again regarding the Modern Orthodox life: “Its very essence is to shy away from simplistic and one-sided approaches, of its very fabric to strive to encompass and encounter reality in its complexity, and, with that encounter, to seek the unity that transcends the diversity.”<sup>14</sup>

5. Along with *yir’at shamayim* and love of Torah, the rigorous search for truth must be a critical component of our study of Torah. The myriad references in *Tanakh* and *Hazal* to the importance of the search for truth, that the very seal of the Almighty is truth, do not need elaboration here.<sup>15</sup> Part of the biblical conception of faith also relates to the

<sup>13</sup> This is not meant to claim that the Rav or Rav Kook adopted the Maimonidean conception of the meaning of *emunah* and viewed it in those terms. In fact, both the Rav and Rav Kook, living in a post-Kantian and Copernican world, were far from the rationalistic enterprise and belief that one could prove God through a series of rational proofs. A reading of the first pages of *The Lonely Man of Faith* or the first of Rav Kook’s *Shemoneh qevatzim* highlight that for both authors faith is conceived much closer to the intense, passionate experiential notions rooted in the biblical vision and the writings of Yehuda Ha-Levi than the abstract rationalism of Maimonides. On this see the excellent essay recently published by my friend and teacher, Rav Yoel Bin Nun, “*Emunah ve-hafakheba*” in *Al ba-emunah*, ed. M. Halbertal, D. Kurzweil, A. Sagi (Jerusalem, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> *By His Light* (Jersey City, 2003) pg. 223.

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed summary of the sources and their relationship to our topic see U. Simon, *Ha-mikra va-anahnu* (Tel-Aviv, 1979), pp. 13-41.

Hebrew word *emet*. The Master of the Universe is the God of truth and justice, of *yosher* (honesty) who does not abide falsehood and deception. Thus our *yir'at shamayim* and commitment to Torah must be honest, true to the sources and seek to plumb the meaning of the Divine Word. This central principle of our tradition leads us to benefit from the use of modern information and methodologies that enable us to look at texts in a new way and re-evaluate previously held “truisms.”

Abstract truth is not the only value in our arsenal. It must be integrated with other values, and the questions of how to determine truth and what are legitimate sources of truth are require profound discussion. The simple point, however, is that to ignore truth in our discussion of *yir'at shamayim* and faith distorts our rabbinic tradition. Moreover, this approach potentially denies us many of the insights that ultimately strengthen our faith and lasting love of Torah.

### III. The Revival of Tanakh Study in Modern Orthodox Education

It is not uncommon to hear that many students often experienced the “traditional” methods of studying and teaching Torah—e.g. studying *humash* verse by verse with classical commentaries or the presentation of selected *midrashim* and the text as a springboard for ethical messages without any attempt to see the literary structure of the text or to bridge the gap between the *midrash halakbah* and the text, or an obliviousness to the *realia* of the biblical personalities and their world—as de-motivating and “uninspiring”.

The anecdotal evidence suggests that those very traditional methods that are regarded by many as “part of the continuity of tradition” often breed skepticism among rationally and imaginatively inclined students regarding the

wisdom of Torah study and its interpreters. Instead of enhancing their sense of love of Torah and *yir'at shamayim*, they have the opposite effect, making Torah study an object of boredom or scorn.

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*Traditional methods often breed skepticism among rationally and imaginatively inclined students*

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I can attest to my own personal experience with just such study. During my high school years at MTA, I found our study of *Humash* and *navi* almost unbearable. The clear message from the school, conveyed by the limited amount of time devoted to the subject, the allocation of resources to its teaching and the lack of trained teachers in this field, was that their study was not very important. More telling was the utter lack of any conception of teaching these sacred texts with depth, sweep and vision. *Humash* and *navi* class were dreaded parts of the week, rarely fostering any sense of love of Torah.

My saving grace was that in the late 1970's Rabbi David Silber gave a weekly *humash* class at the conclusion of the early *minyan* at Lincoln Square Synagogue in Manhattan. In that class the characters of *Tanakh* came to life in their fullness of humanity and towering spirituality. There the literary structure of the narratives began to make sense, the exquisite patterning that occurs in the Book of Genesis, the profound psychological insight, the exploration of the literary and theological theme of an entire *sefer*, the richness and excitement of exploring the *pashat* (plain meaning), working out how *Hazal* and the *midrashim* were engaged in close textual reading and often achieved the depth of the textual meaning. It in those weekly classes that my passion and inspiration for engaging the word of God in *Tanakh* was kindled.

With all my love of and for *Tanakh* and its study I recognize the significance and need for the emphasis placed by classical yeshivas on the study of Talmud and *halakhab*. As Rav Lichtenstein has written, “The encounter with God as commander lies in the heart of Jewish existence; to the extent that it is realized through Talmud Torah, the legal corpus, as developed in the Oral tradition, is a prime vehicle for this encounter.”<sup>16</sup>

But we should not be blind to the price that we pay for the Talmud-centric focus in our curriculum, particularly in the settings where training a learned and committed laity is the primary goal and not the production of the rabbinic elite. As many traditional sources attest and owing to the unique challenges we face in modernity, the rabbinic elite as well need to possess profound mastery of *Tanakh* and Jewish thought. Throughout the ages many *gedolei yisra'el* have bemoaned the lack of incorporation of serious *Tanakh* study in the yeshiva curriculum and its dire consequences for achieving a proper understanding of Torah. The frequent price is a narrow religious vision and a disjointed development of the Torah personality.

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*R. Bloch bemoaned that fact that Orthodoxy had abandoned Tanakh to the Maskilim*

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This has been highlighted in the last two hundred years when Orthodoxy has become increasingly defensive and often rejected curricular suggestions stemming from non-traditional elements, even when they had clear antecedents in tradition. In many circles of traditional Eastern European Jewry, *Tanakh* study beyond superficial study of *Humasb* and Rashi were perceived as “enlightened” and frowned upon. Indeed, in

a celebrated letter, R. Avraham Elyahu Meir Bloch bemoaned that fact that Orthodoxy had abandoned *Tanakh* to the “*maskilim*” the Land of Israel to the Zionists, and Hebrew to the modernists, to our great detriment and chagrin.<sup>17</sup>

In the last century, Rav Kook and Rav Soloveitchik were both personally and communally devoted to the importance of *Tanakh* and Jewish philosophy for lay persons and the rabbinic elite. It is a commonplace in the writings of Rav Kook that the constriction of Torah study to the four cubits of *halakhab*, albeit for understandable reasons, was a negative phenomenon generated by exile. In the generation of the return to Zion and the rebirth of the people, this curricular imbalance needs to be adjusted and the study of *Tanakh*, Jewish thought, *aggadah* and even *qabbalah* should be pursued.<sup>18</sup>

While devoting the bulk of his energies to unraveling the intricacies of *halakhab*, R. Soloveitchik devoted a substantial portion of his creativity and teaching to in-depth study of *Tanakh*. This is evident from any reading of *Confrontation*, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, *U-viqqashtem mi-sham* and the manuscripts now being published; his unpublished manuscripts contain whole commentaries on books of the Torah; the *derashot* he delivered in various forums on biblical episodes and figures; and of course, the Saturday night lectures he delivered in Boston for over twenty-five years. Lastly, we now have available to us the recently published 1955 letter of the Rav to Dr. Samuel Belkin, in which he argues strenuously for a revamping of the traditional ordination curriculum at RIETS:

A thorough knowledge of the Pentateuch with its two basic commentaries is a must. The candidate for rabbinical degree ought to

<sup>16</sup> “Study” in *Contemporary Religious Thought* (eds. Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes Flohr) New York, 1987, p. 933.

<sup>17</sup> Printed in J.D. Epstein, *Mitsvat ha-Shalom* (New York, 1969), p.605-607. This letter was omitted in subsequent published editions.

<sup>18</sup> *Be-Ikvei ha-Tzon* pg. 144.

know not only the intricate laws of *migo*, but also the five books of Moses. The teaching of the Pentateuch must pursue a two-fold purpose. First, the knowledge of the halakhic components of the *Humash*...Second the, profound understanding of the Biblical narratives not only as historical records of a distant past but also as parts of the great historical drama of our people and as archetypes of the Jewish paradoxical destiny charged with powerful ethical motifs”<sup>19</sup>

During the last fifty years, this perspective has penetrated the worldview and curricula of many Modern Orthodox schools, particularly in Israel. Serious engagement with *Tanakh* has often become a component of the distinction between a Modern Orthodox high school and its *haredi* counterpart, in which Talmud remains the exclusive focus. The phenomenon of reinvigorating *Tanakh* study was brought about through the pioneering work of the early German-Orthodox educators who emigrated to Israel and brought with them a broader Jewish education, whether influenced by from Rabbis S. R. Hirsch or Esriel Hildesheimer and who began to staff the schools of the young community, as well as the influence of the teachings of s Abraham and Tzvi Yehuda Kook, who raised students to see *Tanakh* and Jewish thought as important parts of the renaissance of the Jewish people in its land.

More recently, the monumental educational enterprise of Prof. Nehama Leibowitz and her students raised Bible study to a central place of pride in most of the Israeli national religious educational world. Decades after her influence in Israel in the 1950’s and 60’s, her work also began to influence American educators, as many of her notes were printed in book form and as more and more

American students flocked to Israel and started to study with her directly.<sup>20</sup> Together with this work, the trail blazing efforts of Modern Orthodox scholars such as Yehuda Elitzur, Gabi Cohn, Amos Hakham and Yehuda Kil, who produced the *Daat Mikra* series in the mid 1970’s through the 1990’s, helped encourage sophisticated *Tanakh* study to flourish in national religious circles in Israel and by extension in Modern Orthodox circles in the United States.

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*Serious engagement with Tanakh is part of the distinction between Modern Orthodox and haredi schools*

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This phenomenon has affected the American Modern Orthodox community, for many students have studied in Israel, becoming exposed to high level discourse of *Tanakh* study and bringing it to their studies back home. The impressive work of R. Menachem Leibtag, one of R. Bin Nun’s premier students who uses the internet to disseminate the literary-theological method at the heart of the new methodology, cannot be underestimated. Together with the influence of the Torah of the Land of Israel, the indigenous contributions of R. Soloveitchik, his student, R. Shalom Carmy, who has taught thousands of students at Yeshiva College, the work of other religious academics in similar settings at Yeshiva University and Touro College, and the thousands of students taught by R. David Silber, have all brought *Tanakh* study in Modern Orthodox schools and communities to new heights of interest.

It is critical to note that the renaissance of *Tanakh* study that now plays such a crucial role in shaping the Modern Orthodox heart

<sup>19</sup> *Community, Covenant and Commitment* (New York, 2005), ed. Nathaniel Helfgot, pg.104-105.

<sup>20</sup> Indeed it is interesting to note that in the last fifteen years of her life, Nehama was teaching more classes to American students, American *Tanakh* teachers on sabbatical or on teacher-training seminars, as well as visiting principals, than to native Israeli teachers. For various and sundry reasons beyond the scope of this footnote, while her methodology and published studies on the weekly Torah portion had achieved almost canonical status, many Israeli students and teachers were exploring other avenues of *Tanakh* study.

and mind is due precisely to many of the new and modern methods employed by these myriad of teachers.<sup>21</sup> It is astonishing to see over a thousand teachers and laypeople flocking annually to spend an entire week engaged in intensive study of *Tanakh* at the study days at Michlelet Herzog, the Yaacov Herzog teacher's College every summer or the more modest hundreds who attend the recently established *yemei iyun* in *Tanakh* sponsored by Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School in the New York City area every June. Thousands throughout the length and breadth of synagogues in America regularly study the weekly internet classes sent out R. Menachem Leibtag and Yeshivat Har Eztion.

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*The sophisticated study of Tanakh is critical to religious life*

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The reinvigorated sophisticated study of *Tanakh* is critical to ensuring that Modern Orthodox religious life is complete, and it is a welcome complement to the intense study of Talmud. *Tanakh* study helps us focus on the central categories of our religious and national lives and the purposes of our existence as a people, the national, personal and communal aspect of our divine mission, the central role of heartfelt intention (*keavvanat ha-lev*) and spirituality, the living presence of the Divine in our lives and the need to seek Him, the role of the Land of

Israel in our history and destiny, the significance of avoiding religious hypocrisy and the significance of creating a society and world of justice and righteousness.<sup>22</sup>

*Tanakh* properly studied also helps us see the purposes of *halakhah* and avoid viewing it as an obstacle course to overcome. The sophisticated study of *Tanakh* can help us find our ways amidst the trees and ensure that we not miss the forest of God's word. It puts seeking direct communication with God, our covenantal relationship with Him, God as an active participant in our history, as well as a host of central religious categories at the very center of our religious consciousness.<sup>23</sup>

Not all segments in our religious community share the sentiments outlined above. Moreover, many who share the overarching sentiments and goals take issue with the specific methods that are employed in the current Modern Orthodox study of *Tanakh*. It therefore is valuable to turn now to a detailed description of the unique elements that make up aspects of the Modern Orthodox approach to *Tanakh* study and the critiques sometimes leveled against these methods, especially relating to issues of *yir'at shamayim*.

#### IV Issues in Contention

##### 1. Studying of the Plain Sense of the Text (*Peshuto Shel Miqra*)

One hallmark of the modern study of *Tanakh* in Modern Orthodox settings is the initial

<sup>21</sup>In teaching the "Latter Prophets" (more aptly, the "literary prophets") in a way that integrates traditional and modern methods over the last fifteen years to teenagers, college students, and adults, I have found that at least once a semester a student will have an "aha" moment and say something to the effect that: "I always was bored by *Navi* and thought that they were simply repeating the same thing over and over. The methods you employed showed me how to understand the unique message of each prophet and each specific chapter in its historical context and how each fits into the overall structure of the book and its themes."

<sup>22</sup>For an expanded discussion on the foundational role *Tanakh* should have in creating an authentic religious personality and society see the stimulating essay by R. Yuval Cherlow, "*Ha-im ba-tanakh hayah?*" *Megadim* 33, pp. 75-122.

<sup>23</sup>It is telling that many of the philosophical writings relating to issues of faith, nationhood as well as man's place in the world by three of the leading American Orthodox theologians of the second half of the twentieth century—R. Soloveitchik, R. Eliezer Berkovits and Dr. Michael Wyschogrod—are almost exclusively Bible-based, with citations from halakhic literature playing a minor role. For example *Confrontation, The Lonely Man of Faith, and U-vaqashtem mi-sham* (R. Soloveitchik), *God, History and Man* (R. Berkovits) and *the Body of Faith* (Michael Wyschogrod) are fundamentally rooted in a return to a direct and intense encounter with biblical theology and the exegesis of that theology through the prism of the theologian and his concerns.

focus on the plain sense of the text using internal biblical, linguistic, historical and philological tools. It is only then that one moves to reading the text through the eyes of others, whether the readings of *Hazal* or *Netsiv*. To cite the famous quip of Nehama Leibowitz, “One must first study *Humash* just as Rashi did, without any Rashi on the bottom!”

This is simply continuing the mainstream tradition of the *rishonim* such as Rashi, Ramban, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam and *Bekhor Shor* and *aharonim* such as Abravanel, the Ga’on of Vilna, Netziv, R. David Tzvi Hoffman, R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk and R. Soloveitchik, who often attempted to get to the plain sense of the text, each in his own way. This mainstream tradition saw the pursuit of *peshuto shel miqra* as a legitimate pursuit and often emerged with creative readings thorough this enterprise in the spirit of Rashbam’s celebrated pursuit of “*peshatim ha-mithaddeshim be-khol yom*”—meanings that are newly created each day. R. Yuval Cherlow has eloquently expressed the point:

A direct, unmediated reading of Tanakh, prior to turning to the commentaries, also allows for a unique encounter of each individual with the word of God. Every human being encounters the Torah in a unique fashion appropriate to his unique soul, and this profound internal encounter between the soul of the individual and the Torah reveals to him new insights.”<sup>24</sup>

This concern for *peshuto shel miqra* often reveals to us significant educational messages glossed over in our rush to consult the commentaries<sup>25</sup> and, on occasion, yields

<sup>24</sup>. *Pirkei ha-avot* (Alon Shvut, 2005) pg. 13.

<sup>25</sup>. See the important essay by U. Simon “*Mashmoutam ha-datit shel ha-peshatim ha-mithaddeshim be-khol yom*” in *Ha-miqra va-anahnu* (Tel Aviv, 1979), pgs. 133-152.

<sup>26</sup> Numerous examples of this phenomenon can be found in the exegetical work of R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, author of *Mesbekh hokhmah*.

<sup>27</sup>The simplistic presentation to middle school or high school students of the “fact” that Rebecca was three years old when she married Issac or that each Jewish woman in Egypt gave birth to twelve children at once or that that “*ve-avado le-olam*” means the Jubilee year without any discussion of the exegetical underpinnings of what may have led the *midrash* to suggest these readings or what *Hazal* are really driving at can often undermine respect for rabbinic tradition and personal *yir’at shamayim* far more than any *peshat*-oriented suggestion raised in that very classroom.

important insights taking on normative character.<sup>26</sup>

The freedom to explore the meaning of the text has a distinguished history. The Sages pronounced that *ein miara yotsei mi-dei peshuto* (a verse does not forgo its plain meaning) and the geonic tradition that was adopted by major *rishonim* and *aharonim* maintained that the traditions of the rabbis in the narrative sections of *Tanakh* did not trace back to Sinai, but were the learned suggestions of rabbinic figures. Hence one need not accept them as binding, and freedom of interpretation reigned supreme.

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*Every human being encounters Torah in a unique fashion appropriate to his soul*

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The Sages’ dictum was taken as license by Rashbam, Ramban and the Ga’on of Vilna among others to offer readings of verses that differed from those found in legally authoritative halakhic *midrashim* (without, of course, suggesting that the *halakhab* should be changed as a result of their readings) In our era the pursuit of *peshat* is also fueled by an unspoken reaction to the more traditional mode of teaching *Humash* and commentators, i.e. reading every *midrash* into the text as fact, oblivious to its potentially disastrous educational results.<sup>27</sup>

I emphasize that this approach should not cause us to abandon the intense study of *midrash* and classical and modern *parshanut*. Even in our pursuit of the plain text, the insights, comments, solutions and directions developed by our ancestors often help us get

to the deeper level of the *peshat* itself. Second, even in those areas where the exegetical tradition does not meet the test of what might be considered *peshat*, the *derash* and subsequently *parshanut* itself take on a life of their own and should be explored. We read and live the *Tanakh* as Jews, with its rich exegetical and normative tradition as a part of the essence of embracing the *Tanakh*.<sup>28</sup> As Ramban perceptively noted, the Sages did not state “*ein ba-miqra ella peshuto*” meaning that *peshat* alone is the only meaning, but that “*ein miqra yotsei mi-dei peshuto*,” i.e. “We have the *midrash* alongside the *peshat*...and the text countenances both meanings, and both are true.”<sup>29</sup>

These issues have taken on an even more central role in the ongoing polemical battles of the last two hundred years that Orthodoxy has waged with heterodox approaches to the nature of *torah she-be`al peh* and its normative

truth.<sup>30</sup> Let me to offer the perspective that resonates with me and that I believe holds the greatest potential educationally.<sup>31</sup> In the

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*These issues have taken on a central role in the polemical battles that Orthodoxy wages with heterodox approaches*

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comment cited above, Ramban and Rashbam, as well, stated repeatedly that *peshat* and *derash* are two distinct methods, each of which is “true” and “correct” in its own way of interpreting the multivalent text of the Torah. Yet the willingness to offer interpretations conflicting with accepted halakhic interpretation never detracted from the fidelity of figures such as Rashi, Rashbam and Ibn Ezra to passionate observance of

<sup>28</sup> Professor James Kugel has argued strenuously in his various writings that not only Jews read the Bible through the eyes of its interpreters but that it is impossible for anyone to read and understand the Bible, with a capital B, as the foundational religious text of western civilization in a vacuum, bereft of how it was read in antiquity: “We like to think that the Bible, or any other text means ‘just what it says.’ And we act on that assumption: we simply open a book—including the Bible—and try to make sense of it on our own. In ancient Israel and for centuries afterward, on the contrary, people looked to special interpreters to explain the meaning of the Biblical text. For that reason, the explanations quickly acquired an authority of their own...And so it was this *interpreted* Bible- not just the stories, prophecies, and laws themselves, but these texts as they had, by now been interpreted and explained for centuries that came to stand at the very center of Judaism and Christianity.” James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible* (Cambridge, 1998) pp. 2-3.

<sup>29</sup> Glosses to *Sefer ha-mitsvot shoresb* 2. R. Moshe Lichtenstein has nicely summarized and expanded the relation of *peshat* and *derash*: “The distinction between *peshat* and *derash* is not necessarily one of probability, of one which prefers the logical and more likely simple sense of the text over the far-fetched *derash*. It is rather a distinction between two legitimate approaches that are divided by methodological distinctions ... *Peshat* attempts to explain the text and the narrative that appears before us in the text, while the goal of *midrash* is not the explanation of the biblical narrative itself, but rather the attempt to develop the text and add to it additional layers of meaning beyond what is written in them...If we would formulate this in philosophical language, we would say that the litmus test criterion for *peshat* would be its *correspondence to the text*, the criterion for the *derash* is the internal logic, *the coherence* of the proposed rendering of the drama, and its likelihood...In other words it is even possible to state that *peshuto shel miqra* presents and clarifies to us the legal and historical content written in the text-whether the topic under discussion is analyzing the commandments given at Sinai or clarifying the narrative e dramas of the heroes and heroines of *Tanakh*- while the *midrash* creates literature, for what took place or was said is in the category of history. (Let there be no misunderstanding, it is important to emphasize that the term ‘history’ does not come to state that the biblical text is primarily a historical document and not *devar ha-shem*, rather it is noting that the object of the commentary is the words of the text that were actually spoken to Moses, and are interpreted by the commentator through his exegetical principles compatible with its status as *devar ha-shem* without an attempt to recreate an event that does not appear in the text), while the attempt to understand the meaning of the text from the context of what should have been or what one may guess did happen is in the category of literature.” *Tz'ur Va-Tson* (Alon Shvut, 2002), pp. 215-216, 219-220.

<sup>30</sup> See e.g, Jay Harris, *How Do We Know This?* (Albany, 1995).<sup>31</sup> See especially Ahrend, p. 35-37 and Maori, pp. 213-219

accepted halakhic practice that is rooted in the truth of halakhic *midrash*. And it is this very multi-dimensional meaning of the text in areas of *halakhab* or narrative that rabbinic tradition saw as part of its divine origin.<sup>32</sup>

## 2. The Literary-Theological Approach to Tanakh

One result of returning to a focus on the study of the plain sense of the text has been the flowering of the literary-theological approach to *Tanakh* study. This approach makes systematic use of the literary methods that have come to the fore in the last hundred years together with a firm control of classical exegetical literature to tease out the religious meaning of the text. It builds upon the insights of *midrash* and classical commentaries, but strives to engage the text

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*Tradition saw divine origin in the multi-dimensional meaning of narrative and halakhic texts*

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directly as well. This method makes use of techniques such as close reading, patterning, inter-textuality and textual self-reference, literary echoes, enveloping, character and plot developments, word-plays, parallelism and chiasmic structure and a host of other tools brought to bear on the text. It has moved *Tanakh* study from a primarily atomistic focus on individual verse to identifying entire literary units.

The structure of entire episodes and legal units has become a major sub-field in the study of *Tanakh*, an enterprise that was largely unnoticed by the classical commentators. This has also led to appreciating the structure and order of entire

books of *Tanakh* and yielded wonderful insights regarding form, content and their interdependence. Moreover, this method has uncovered recurring motifs and broad patterns underlying *Tanakh* as a whole. While each one of the literary methods and techniques has precedents in *rishonim*, the systematic use of the phalanx of techniques is a direct byproduct of integrating the best and most sophisticated literary readings and sensibilities in approaching *Tanakh* as the Divine Word.

This method has sparked such wide interest in and excitement for the study of *Tanakh* in many of our circles and is unapologetically predicated on “*Dibberah torah ki-leshon benai adam*”—“The Torah speaks in the language of human beings.” This perspective was fiercely maintained by a wide swath of classical *rishonim* and *aharonim*, who understood that God, in His infinite wisdom, chose to reveal His will to humanity within a specific historical context in terms understandable to the human ear and heart. He chose to make His will known in the form of the written word, in the form of literature, in its broadest meaning.<sup>33</sup> From this perspective, the Torah is *sui generis* in its content and message as the Word of God, yet it is encased in the clothes of a literary work fully accessible to human understanding.

Finally, it should be noted that the results of the literary-theological method highlighting interconnected patterns of various parts of the Bible also has the potential to undercut some of the force of the documentary hypothesis of multiple authorship spread over hundreds of years. As David Berger has written: “You can allow the ‘redactor’ just so much freedom of action before he turns into an author using various traditions as ‘raw material.’ Such an approach must ultimately

<sup>32</sup> Expressed in the rabbinic phrases, “*Ahat dibber eloqim shetayim zu shama`ti*” (“God spoke one, yet I heard two.”) and *Ke-patish yefotseits selah* (“as a hammer splinters a rock”). See BT *Sanbedrin* 34a.

<sup>33</sup> For an excellent detailed discussion of this exegetical perspective and its roots see Mordechai Cohen, “The Best of Poetry: Literary Approaches to the Bible in the Spanish *Pesbat* Tradition,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal*, 6, pp. 15-57.

shake the foundations of the regnant critical theory, not merely tinker with its periphery.”<sup>34</sup>

### 3. Presentation of and Engagement with *Parshanut*

A number of years ago I participated on a panel with a prominent *haredi* educator. Our charge was to teach Genesis 1, highlighting our different approaches to the text while teaching an eleventh-grade class. I presented my mini-lesson emphasizing the structure of Genesis 1, the key words, the relationship between the pairs of days, the literary envelope of verse 1 and the first verses of Ch 2. I proceeded to mention that I might discuss some of the direct polemic that Genesis 1 highlights in relation to the prevalent Babylonian creation myths, referring to the work of Cassuto and others. I concluded with a few words outlining *parshanut* issues that might come up such as the meaning of the first verse, *Bereishit barab elokim* (In the beginning, God created...). I mentioned in passing that I would divide the class into groups, consider the various translations and then ask the students to explore various commentaries, argue them out and present to the class the position each group felt was correct and why.

It was only this last pedagogical technique that got my interlocutor’s dander up. She took great umbrage at the notion that students should be given an assignment to determine which approach they felt was convincing. In her estimation, we should simply present the approaches and discourage the students from expressing their opinion as to which was more cogent. The educator did not fully develop her opposition to my technique, but I suspect that lurking behind it was the belief that the classical commentators wrote with some form of *ruah ba-qodesh* (divine inspiration). Who are we

lowly human beings to evaluate the cogency of their interpretations?

Modern Orthodox *Tanakh* study approaches the study of *parshanut* (the interpretive tradition) differently and is rooted in all the precedents cited earlier: freedom of interpretation, the non-binding nature of a particular commentary, the fact that the commentators themselves constantly critiqued each other strongly and never claimed for themselves the mantle of divine inspiration. We are trying to understand the text and not simply recite a laundry list of previous suggestions. For us, the essence of Torah study is an intense struggle with the

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*Who are we lowly human beings to evaluate traditional interpretations?*

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words and ideas of the Sages and medieval commentaries, attempting to understand and appreciate their meaning and depth. Finally, this type of Torah study, done within the proper atmosphere of respect for our greatest thinkers, aims at energizing students and stimulating them to be passionately involved in and care about the studying our sacred texts. Our *Tanakh* study is a vehicle for the text to become, in *Hazal’s* imagery, “*Torah de-lei*”—a Torah that has become part of one’s very being.

On this point, Prof. Nehama Leibowitz has written:

Proper regard for scholars consists of studying in depth what they have written.<sup>35</sup> Rashi, who was modest enough to say “I don’t know” would certainly have approved if through studying and analyzing his words students might, at times, come to prefer the explanation of

<sup>34</sup> *Commentary* 61:3, (NY: American Jewish Committee) p. 16.

his grandson (Rashbam) or even to agree with his critic, Ramban. If granting students “the right to vote” vis-à-vis the commentators strengthens their degree of attachment to *Tanakh*, which I am certain it will, the scholars receive no greater respect than to have the Torah brought closer to its students as a direct result of what they wrote. The essential thing is that they should study Torah from all angles, search it out, choose interpretations and reject interpretations—provided that they engage in Torah out of love.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. Use of Sources Written by Non-Observant Jewish or Non-Jewish Scholars

One of the sharp dividing lines between the methodology of *haredi*, semi-*haredi*, and religious-Zionist *haredi* worlds on the one hand and the Modern Orthodox world on the other is the willingness to use of non-Orthodox and non-Jewish scholarship in the study of *Tanakh*. The “traditional” position articulated by leading thinkers of that camp argues that our belief in *Torah min ha-shamayim* (the divine origin of the Torah) precludes citation of any comments or suggestions, even on neutral matters, from the pens of those not committed to that tenet.<sup>37</sup> They assert that when a teacher cites writers such as Yehezkel Kaufman, Martin Buber, Umberto Cassuto, Benno Jacob, Moshe Greenberg or ideas from the Anchor Bible or ICC series together with the comments of the classical rabbinic commentators, he blurs the distinctions between Torah giants and secular scholars and unwittingly establishes an equivalence that may lead students to adopt non-religious lifestyles or attitudes.

This debate goes back to antiquity, with the *locus classicus* being the talmudic episode of R. Meir’s continued study with R. Elisha ben Aviyah after Elisha abandoned traditional life and belief. The Talmud formulates this dilemma as “eating the fruit and discarding the peel.” Our discussion is different, since we are not discussing direct contact with non-observant or non-Jewish scholars, but exposure to their ideas. Yet this issue, as well, has agitated rabbis throughout the ages and continues to be a fault line till today.<sup>38</sup> Embedded in the notion of “Torah speaks in the language of human beings” is that the text can be fathomed not only by observant Jews, but by all human beings who seriously study it.

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*Embedded in the notion of “Torah speaks in the language of human beings” is that Torah can be fathomed by all human beings*

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The Modern Orthodox world and its leading lights of *Tanakh* study like Nehama Leibowitz, the authors of the *Da`at miqra* series,<sup>39</sup> Rabbis Yoel Bin Nun and Shalom Carmy and others have adopted the approach articulated most forcefully by Maimonides in his introduction to *Shemoneh pera'iqim*. Defending his subsequent citations of Greek philosophers in his treatise, he proclaims: “Accept the truth from whoever says it.” In his commentary to *Shir ha-shirim*, R. Yosef Ibn Akinin suggests this was not a Maimonidean innovation but an accepted tradition:

We find in the books of R. Hai Gaon...that he made recourse to the words of the Arabic scholars...and made

<sup>35</sup> See a similar sentiment expressed by R. Moshe Feinstein in a responsum penned to a young scholar residing in Benei Beraq who was concerned that in the course of his *shi`urim* he sometimes takes issue with the positions of the *Hazon Ish*.

<sup>36</sup> *Torah Insights*, (Jerusalem, 1995) pg. 161.

<sup>37</sup> See R. Yehuda Cooperman’s pamphlet, *Sugyot ba-torah ve-talmudan al pi ba-meqorot* #18 (Jerusalem, 1966).

<sup>38</sup> For a thorough review of the rabbinic and educational literature on this topic see N. Gutel, “*Bein qabbalat ha-emet mi-mi she-amerah le-vein qabbalatah mi-malakh ha-shem Tseva-ot*” in *Havanat hamiqra be-yameinu* (Jerusalem, 2004), pp. 129-158.

<sup>39</sup> (Mossad Ha Rav Kook; Jerusalem 1991).

use of the Quran...and such was the custom of R. Sa`adyah before him in his Arabic commentaries. In this regard the Nagid describes in his book...after citing many comments of the Christian scholars that R. Matsliah b. Albazek told him upon his arrival in Bagdad that one day they were discussing the verse “*shemen rosh al yani roshi*” (Ps. 141:5) in the yeshiva and a debate ensued as to its meaning. R. Hai directed R. Matsliah to go to the Catholic [priest] and ask him what does he know about the meaning of the verse. It was evil in his eye, and when R. Hai saw that R. Matsliah was distraught over this, he reprimanded him and said that the forefathers and the early pious ones who are for us exemplars would inquire members of other faiths about the meaning of words and interpretations.<sup>40</sup>

From anecdotal evidence and personal experience, I believe that recourse to non-Orthodox sources rarely causes a diminution of *yir'at shamayim* or love of Torah. Just the opposite: the ability to integrate the most insightful comments to achieve a richer and deeper understanding of the text is often appreciated and helps persuade students to seek truth and honesty in their intellectual pursuit. At the same time, we should not inadvertently give our students the sense that the Maimonides and Moshe Segal are on equal footing as religious role models. We can ensure this by using two well known techniques. First, the use of these materials should be integrated into a holistic context of careful text study, extensive use of the interpretations of the Sages and classical commentaries and supplemented afterwards by other resources. Indeed, a class in Genesis where the instructor quotes only Buber and Rosensweig or Gunkel and Kaufman presents a skewed focus and has potentially troubling results. Yet this is not what actually occurs. For those who oppose using this

material, merely one citation of a non-Orthodox source in a book of 600 pages is enough for censure.

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*Recourse to non-Orthodox sources rarely causes a diminution of love of Torah*

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Second, it is important to maintain a distinction between classical commentators who reflect our religious commitments and those who do not, either through explicit explanations of the distinction or noting biographical and ideological information about the scholar cited. An example I use from time to time is: “The following solution to our problem is suggested by Benno Jacob, a modern Bible scholar, who was a Reform rabbi, many of whose beliefs and practices are in sharp conflict with our Orthodox worldview. Nevertheless, he waged a fierce battle with the Bible critics in his day, and was a close and excellent reader of the Humash. He often has important comments that help us understand the Torah more profoundly.”

#### 5. Perspectives on Biblical Heroes

Another fault line within the Orthodox world revolves around the “proper” perspective on the teaching of the narratives related to our biblical heroes. The ultra-Orthodox world has generally adopted the view that teaching about the mistakes or critiquing the actions of Abraham, Moses or David is beyond the pale and even that attributing any human emotions, feelings or instincts to these figures is worthy of condemnation.<sup>41</sup> This position was articulated in a lecture in the 1960’s by R. Aharon Kotler of the Lakewood yeshiva where he stated:

When one teaches students a section dealing with the actions of the Patriarchs, one must explain to them that we are not

<sup>40</sup> A.S. Halkin, *Hitzgalut ba-sodot ve-hofa`at hame'orot-peirush shir ha-shirim* (Jerusalem, 1964), pp. 493-95.

speaking about regular human beings who have character traits and desires. Rather we are discussing individuals of whom we cannot in any way understand their level, people devoid of all human desire and internal will, and, just as we have no criteria by which to evaluate angels, so, we have no way of evaluating and appreciating the level of the forefathers.<sup>42</sup>

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*Tradition regards our patriarchs and their successors as great people, but sees their greatness related to their humanity*

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There exists an extensive literature containing the arguments and sources for the alternative Modern Orthodox approach to *Tanakh*.<sup>43</sup> Actually in this instance it is actually the ultra-Orthodox approach that is the “modern” or “new” one, since it turns a blind eye to the text of *Tanakh* itself, and much of rabbinic tradition. R. Aharon Lichtenstein has noted:

Advocates of hagiographic *parshanut*, which portrays the central heroic figures of scriptural history as virtually devoid of emotion, can only regard the sharpening of psychological awareness with reference to *Tanakh* with a jaundiced eye. But for those of us who have been steeped in *midrashim*, the Ramban<sup>44</sup> and the *Ha’ameik Davar*<sup>45</sup>—in

a tradition, that is, which regards our patriarchal *avot* and their successors as very great people indeed but as people nonetheless, and which moreover sees their greatness as related to their humanity-enhanced literary sensitivity can be viewed as a significant boon.<sup>46</sup>

To Modern Orthodox educators, the truth of the text and of rabbinic tradition is found in an honest and full reading of the narratives in all their complexity. Beyond that, we posit—and the anecdotal evidence bears this out—that a rich, sophisticated reading of *Tanakh* and its heroes that appreciates their humanity, their psychological complexities and even their flaws, makes those characters more meaningful and worthy of emulation for both our students and ourselves. When these characters struggle to achieve holiness and to fulfill the divine mandate in their humanity and complexity, they speak to us. Conversely, placing biblical figures beyond our grasp makes them so inaccessible that they fail to have any impact on our day-to-day religious lives. Thus a student can become jaded to the point where *Tanakh* and its heroes are less meaningful and relevant than other influences in his life. As R. Samson Raphael Hirsch argued so strenuously, we deify no man, great as he or she may have been. Our ultimate reverence is directed only upwards, toward God himself, and even the greatest of the great cannot be

<sup>41</sup> The public and concerted attacks on the writings of Rabbis Adin Steinsaltz, Shlomo Riskin, Yuval Cherlow, Yoel Bin Nun, Avi Weiss and others in the last two decades are some of the more famous cases of this phenomenon.

<sup>42</sup> In *Mishnat rebbi aharon* (Lakewood, 1988) vol. 3. Similar sentiments, with individual nuances, have been expressed in various fora by R. Shlomo Aviner and R. Yisrael Tau, major leaders of the *haredi*-nationalist stream in Israel.

<sup>43</sup> See for example A. David, “Perspectives on the *Avot* and *Imahol*” in *Ten-Da’at* 5:1, Z. Grumet “Another Perspective on the *Avot* and *Imahol*”, *Ten-Da’at* 6:1, S. Riskin, *Heiruto shel parshan ha-miqra*, *Akdamos* 3, M. Lichtenstein, *Tsir ve-Tson* (Alon Shvut, 2002) pp. 235-257, H. Dietcher, “*Bein malakhim li-veni adam*” in *Havanat ha-miqra be-yameinu* (Jerusalem, 2004) pp. 193-212, D. Berger, “On the Morality of the Patriarchs” in *Understanding Scripture* (Paulist Press, 1987) and the discussion on the pages of *Hatzofeh* in the spring of 2002 on the topic of *Tanakh be-govah einayim*, accessible at [www.hatzofeh.co.il](http://www.hatzofeh.co.il).

<sup>44</sup> One could add Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, Bekhor Shor, Hizkuni, Seforno and Abravanel amongst others.

<sup>45</sup> And one could add the writings of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, R. Avaraham Yitzhak Ha-Kohen Kook and the Rav amongst others.

<sup>46</sup> “Torah and General Culture: Congruence and Conflict” in *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures*, ed. J. J. Schachter (New Jersey, 1997) pg.227. On a number of occasions in the mid-1980’s, R. Lichtenstein was even sharper in his formulation, arguing that the *haredi* approach often turns the patriarchs into “ossified figures of petrified *tzidket*” from whom we can learn precious little in the real world we inhabit and the spiritual challenges that we confront.

placed in that unique category of demanding total trust and reverence.

More recently, R. Shalom Carmy commented on a discussion he had with a teacher who was troubled by the negative impression his students had of King Saul from their study of the Book of Samuel. R. Carmy suggested that the teacher explore with his students parallel stories in general literature to examine stories of gifted individuals destined for roles they never sought and the subsequent unraveling of their lives. The teacher rejected this advice as irrelevant because “How can one compare *Tanakh* to literature?” When prompted for his solution the teacher intoned ceremoniously that “I say he’s *Shaul Melekh Yisrael*. (Saul, King of Israel) ” R. Carmy notes:

Something else disturbed me about the proclamation *Shaul Melekh Yisrael*—“His majesty the King”—in that particular intonation. As much as the speaker wished to avoid the slightest tinge of alien accent, he had failed. It sounded like a cartoon notion of medieval pageantry. And attentive teenagers, whether or not they could put their finger on it, may well have heard a message antithetical to that so sincerely intended by the teacher: There is a reality we encounter in high political and personal drama, then again there’s a sense of the world one gets by watching the “adventures of Crusader Rabbit.” What we learn in *Tanakh* is more like what you get in cartoons than what is found in Shakespeare. If that is the impression students carry away, their study of *Tanakh* is not contributing to *yir’at shamayim*. Quite the contrary.<sup>47</sup>

We must be on guard against a shallow misapplication of this approach where the genuine respect we feel toward the Patriarchs

is compromised by cheap psychobabble or tendentious readings. There are three principles that can help us achieve a constructive balance between honesty to the text and maintaining an appropriate sense of reverence toward biblical heroes. First, the language, tone and perspective we choose to use when we discuss the real human dimension of great biblical figures must not be flippant, or worse, vulgar. We should be wary of facile and unsubstantiated suggestions that are careless and shallow in their message.

Second, we should emphasize to our students the notion of character development, the ups, downs and challenges of spiritual life, the real-life trajectory from which great people evolve into their final stature. They do not simply emerge in uni-dimensional fashion, perfect from the womb. In a celebrated letter to a young man who had expressed his despair at the spiritual missteps he had taken and his religious failings, R. Yitzhak Hutner responded with words of encouragement by noting:

It is an evil malady in our circles that when we discuss aspects of perfection of our spiritual giants that we deal with the final summary of their stature. We speak of their paths to perfection, while at the same time skipping over the internal struggle that took place in their souls. The impression conveyed by our discussion about our spiritual giants is that they emerged from the hand of the craftsman in their (ultimate) stature and character (fully formed). Everyone discusses, reacts with astonishment and holds up on a pedestal the purity of speech of the author of *Hafetz Hayyim zt”l*. However, who is aware of all the struggles, obstacles, stumbles and retreats that Hafetz Hayim experienced in his battle

47. “To Get the Better of Words: An Apology For Yirat Shamayim in Academic Jewish Studies” in *The Torah U Maddah Journal*, Vol. 2, pg. 11-12.

with the evil inclination...? The result is that when a young person of spirituality, ambition and drive and energy encounters obstacles, missteps or stumbles he imagines himself removed from being “planted in the house of the Lord.”<sup>48</sup>

Finally, a sense of proportion is critical to educational success. If one’s perspective of King David is taken up wholly by his encounter with Bat-Sheva and eighty percent of class time is devoted to discussion of that episode alone, one has misread the plain sense of the Bible. Without engaging with the King David of the rest of the Biblical corpus, including the rest of the book of Samuel, the book of Chronicles, the book of Psalms, the latter books of Kings and the prophetic books, the teacher will fail in conveying the Bible’s truth in its complexity, scope and depth.

#### 6. Biblical Criticism and Mordechai Breuer’s Theory of Aspects

Two of the more contentious issues in Modern Orthodox *Tanakh* study is exposure to higher Biblical Criticism and the adoption of any method that mimics its literary approach. It is clear that adoption of the theological underpinning of Higher Biblical Criticism, i.e. that the Torah is a composite work written by multiple authors in different times and in locales without divine inspiration, is obviously beyond the pale of any Orthodox notion of the Torah as divinely revealed, and therefore the adoption

of this world-view has no place in an Orthodox religious framework. The adherents of such a position, their personal commitment to observance of *mitsvot* notwithstanding, cannot honestly lay claim to any mantle of traditional justification.<sup>49</sup>

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*Any serious study of Tanakh cannot ignore the problems highlighted by critical scholarship*

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Given a solid commitment to *torah min hashamayim*, however, there is a legitimate question about the use of materials or methods that are rooted in those the literary techniques of Biblical Criticism. Unfortunately, there have been illegitimate attacks on teachers using this material, and specifically, the method of R. Mordechai Breuer. These attacks dishonestly accuse the teachers of adopting Biblical Criticism and its theological assumptions.

Any serious study of *Tanakh* cannot long ignore the real problems highlighted by the world of historical–critical scholarship in the last 200 years. What does an honest student of *Tanakh* do with the myriad of contradictions that exist between various books of the Torah, within a book itself, or those interwoven into one chapter? Should he simply turn a blind eye to these problems and denounce any question emanating from those quarters as “higher anti-Semitism” as Prof. Solomon Schechter termed the critical enterprise?

<sup>48</sup> *Igrot u-kejavim*, Letter #128 (Brooklyn, 5758).

<sup>49</sup> The more complex issue relates to persons who maintain that the Torah is a composite work from the hand of various human authors in different historical settings, but that these authors were divinely inspired. That is, people who see the Torah as equivalent to the writings of the Prophets. This perspective, while arguably not technically rendering one as “denying the divine origin of the Torah” as articulated in the *misbnah* in *Sanhedrin* (90a) undermines the uniqueness of the Torah in contrast to the rest of the Bible, as well as the uniqueness of Mosaic prophecy which for some of Sages and some of the *risbonim* is an article of faith, potentially shattering the foundation of the whole structure of the binding nature of Torah. While there clearly were *risbonim* who maintained that an isolated section of the Torah here or there was post-Mosaic, a gloss from the pen of a subsequent prophet, the notion of the wholly composite makeup of the entirety of the Torah is one that has no precedent in classical Jewish sources. Thus it is impossible to term such a theological understanding as Orthodox in any meaningful sense. On this see M. Breuer, “The Study of Bible and the Fear of Heaven” in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah* (New Jersey, 1997) pg. 163-170 and *Megadim* 30, pp. 97-107.

Benno Jacob, Umberto Cassuto and R. David Zvi Hoffman engaged the critics on their own terms and attempted to show that their literary assumptions and conclusions were incorrect. They tried to demonstrate that an ultimate unity emerges from a careful reading of the stories and recognition of the immediate reasons for any distinctions or repetitions. In many instances these heroic efforts were productive and their results can be used positively by teachers of *Tanakh*. (In

some instances, such as the case of the two sacrifice sections, Lev. 1-5 and Lev. 6-7, many in the source-critical have abandoned the “traditional” documentary explanation of the repetition for a more integrated reading). Using these insights, which are regularly noted in commentaries like *Da'at Miqra* on the Torah and the workbooks of Michlelet Herzog, can enhance an Orthodox understanding of Torah. They provide insight to the text and produce powerful defenses of traditional assumptions, thus potentially strengthening commitment and faith.

There are times when the suggestions offered by the scholars listed above do not yield satisfactory solutions and the questions remain unanswered. It is here that the revolutionary approach of R. Mordechai Breuer has much to contribute in our understanding of God's word. R. Breuer has skillfully argued that the various contradictions, redundancies and anomalies noted by the critics are indeed real, and there are multiple perspectives and voices—one can even say “documents”—that comprise the corpus of the Torah. However, each of these documents is the handiwork of God himself who bequeathed them all to Moses

and commanded him to fashion the unique book that we know as the Torah. The classic documents termed by the critics J, P, E and D are in effect *divine* documents emanating directly from God to Moses. Prof. Shalom Rosenberg's pithily explained R. Breuer's method as, "For the critics, R stands for redactor, for Franz Rosensweig it stands for *Moshe Rabbeinu*, while for Breuer it stands for *the Ribbono Shel Olam* (Master of the World) himself!"<sup>50</sup>

I would add that R. Breuer's method often yields profound insights into the hermeneutics of *midrash halakhab* regarding conflicting passages and how the resolution of those passages makes its way into normative *halakhab*. This is no small feat, since the creative and sometimes bewildering hermeneutical moves of *Hazal* often trouble thoughtful students and have the potential to undermine faith in the Sages and commitment to their teachings. Yet R. Breuer's method is open to challenge. Many of the substantive critiques of his method and conclusions have force. Critics have noted the weakness of his literary assumptions about how a “human” author would write, his uncritical adoption of the divisions of various portions of the *Humash* posited by the source-critical world, his lack of engagement with historical, archeological or anthropological elements raised by modern Bible scholarship, and his exclusive concentration on literary issues.<sup>51</sup>

Notwithstanding these criticisms, R. Breuer's methods and work have added immeasurably to our appreciation of the Bible as revelation and constitute invaluable tools in reading *Tanakh* honestly while retaining the age-old commitment to the divine authorship of the

<sup>50</sup> Carmy summarized the method as follows: “The Torah must speak in the language of men. But the wisdom that God would bestow upon us cannot be disclosed in a straightforward manner. The Torah therefore resorts to a technique of multi-vocal communication. Each strand in the text, standing on its own, reveals one aspect of the truth, and each aspect of the truth appears to contradict the other accounts. An insensitive reader, noticing the tension between the versions, imagines himself assaulted by a cacophony of conflicting voices. The perceptive student, however, experiences the magnificent counter-point in all its power.” “Introducing R. Breuer” in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*, pp. 148-9.

<sup>51</sup> See Carmy, pg. 153-155; S. Leiman, “Response to Rabbi Breuer” in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*, pg. 181, M. Lichtenstein, *Ahat dibber eloqim shetayim zu shama ti?* in *Alon Shvut Bogrim*, #17, pg. 32-35.

text. As part of the panoply of strategies and exegetical materials brought to bear in the classroom, they can be a significant element in enhancing our students' *yir'at shamayim* and love of Torah.<sup>52</sup>

#### 7. Archeological, Geographic, Ethnographic and Linguistic Data of the Ancient Near East

The last area of contention revolves around the use of the complex of disciplines and findings unearthed and refined by the academic world in its study of the ancient Near East. These fields include comparative Semitics, archeology, and other disciplines. In the last three decades, many in the advanced Modern Orthodox educational world studying *Tanakh* study have moved to make selective but sustained use of this material.

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*Using linguistic, philological and  
archeological studies continues methods used  
by Rambam, Ramban, Ibn Ezra and  
Radaq*

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The pioneering commentary of *Da`at Migra* and the groundbreaking essays of R. Yoel Bin

Nun are two seminal examples of this phenomenon. Moreover, the use of these linguistic, philological and archeological studies simply continues the use of methods used by *rishonim* such as Rambam, Ramban, Ibn Ezra and Radaq, albeit with a much greater wealth of material available to contemporary scholars and students.<sup>53</sup> There are a myriad of examples where our understanding of the biblical text has been enriched by these disciplines or where entire enigmatic portions of *Tanakh* have been illuminated by the use of these more modern methods. Scholars have already provided the interested reader with numerous case studies that could be easily multiplied exponentially.<sup>54</sup> In some instances these insights are no less important than the halakhic insights emerging from R. Hayyim Soloveitchik's writing on contracts or his fine distinctions between consciousness (*da`at*) and intent (*kavvanah*) in breaking open a problematic halakhic issue and resolving it with brilliance and simplicity.<sup>55</sup>

Today such insights and methods can be systematically employed rather than accessed only on the rare occasion. The assumption behind the use of such disciplines and data is the notion that *Tanakh* is a tome that reflects

<sup>52</sup> On an educational note, it is important that irrespective of the use that may be made of R. Breuer's method in responding to questions of Bible Criticism in the context of a *shi'ur*, it is crucial that older high school students and young adults be made aware of the phenomenon of Bible Criticism. The basic contours of this field and its suppositions and beliefs are necessary preparation for engagement with the non-Orthodox world. Students graduating a Modern Orthodox yeshiva high school should at least take a short seminar (two to three periods) that exposes them to the rudimentary aspects of what Bible Criticism is, its history and genesis, some examples of the phenomenon and traditional responses to its claims. Bible Criticism remains the regnant theory in all secular higher academic settings and it is simply irresponsible to have students walk into a class on the first day of their Lit-Hum course at Columbia or SUNY-Binghamton and be shocked that intelligent, thoughtful people actually believe that the Torah is not a divine document. One certainly does not want a student overwhelmed by such an experience or feel that serious issues or information was hidden from her during her yeshiva high school educational experience. I am happy to note that a good number of yeshiva high schools in the New York area already do this and there are a small number of yeshiva programs in Israel that feel that this is part of their educational mandate as well.

<sup>53</sup> "Furthermore, even where the exegesis is thick on the ground, each generation has its own questions. Sometimes we benefit from new data about the historical and linguistic background of *Tanakh*. What truth-seeking person would close his, or her, eyes to a newly discovered inscription clarifying the geography or vocabulary of a pasuk that baffled the *Rishonim*? The Ramban's delight when, upon his arrival in *Eretz Israel*, he was able to revise some of his *perushim* in the light of the *realia*, should put to shame the kind of piety that disdains such knowledge." S. Carmy, *Hamevasser* interview cited above.

<sup>54</sup> See for example B. Eichler, "The Study of Bible in Light of Our Knowledge of the Ancient Near East" in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*, L. Schiffman, "Making the Bible Come to Life: Biblical Archeology and the Teaching of *Tanakh* in Jewish Schools", *TRADITION* 37:4, pg. 38-49.

the concrete historical and sociological reality into which God chose to reveal His eternal will to mankind. R. Yuval Cherlow articulates this when describing the methodology of his mentor, R. Yoel Bin Nun:

The *Tanakh* took place in a concrete reality. The position of “accursed philosophy” that events described in *Tanakh* did not occur, and that it is entirely a symbolic work were entirely rejected by *gedolei yisra’el*. The *Tanakh* is not only ensconced in the heavens but is rather a ladder rooted in the ground whose top reaches the firmament. Therefore, understanding the reality in which the events of *Tanakh* took place enables one to understand the Torah itself. The concrete reality is an indispensable part of the Torah and it is not for naught that the sages stated that *dibber ha-katuv be-hoveh*—“the text speaks in the present reality”...This is all done with a clear distinction between the holy and secular, and a profound understanding that the Torah is not chained to a specific [historical] reality. The purpose of understanding the concrete reality of the biblical stories is not to transform the Patriarchs into simple merchants or to see the divine laws as parallel to human legislation, but to serve as comparative soil upon which to uncover the foundation of God’s word and His Torah and understand the divine revelation in its profundity.<sup>56</sup>

If this idyllic picture were the entire story, there would be little opposition to the use of these disciplines in the *beit midrash*. But the broader picture is more complicated. There is the matter of conflicts between the academic or scientific evidence/theories and the history laid out in the biblical narrative. This is a subset, of course, of the millennia-old tension between scientific truth and revealed truth, which has agitated thinkers and theologians from many faiths.

In general terms, the same strategies we use when approaching conflicts between the physical sciences and the truths of tradition should be utilized here as well. In some instances we will have to explore whether what we consider a “revealed” truth is really no more than an interpretation to be reevaluated in light of compelling scientific evidence, i.e. have we truly understood what God is saying, and is the conflict indeed direct?

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*Understanding the reality in which the events of Tanakh took place enables one to understand the Torah itself*

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A primary example of this is Nahmanides’ reevaluation of his understanding of the location of Rachel’s tomb after he reached the Land of Israel and saw for himself the geography of the biblical sites. In other instances, we can note the distinction between empirical facts and the scientific hypotheses purporting to explain the meaning of those facts. While confirmed facts must always be assimilated and interpreted, interpretation of archeological data may be different. Often it is, “more art than science...and that new discoveries and new perceptions are constantly forcing reevaluations of currently held positions. It is this state of flux which helps alleviate such tensions to a certain degree by allowing discrepancies and contradictions to stand while awaiting further clarification.”<sup>57</sup>

We should also highlight the distinction between positive evidence and negative arguments from silence, i.e. the absence of historical or archeological finds to buttress a particular biblical narrative. Given the fact that so much about the Ancient Near East is not yet known, that many important sites

<sup>55</sup> A good example is R. Yoel Bin Nun’s brilliant reading of the beginning of *Parashat Beshalakh* in light of the Tel-Amarna letters and other historical finds of that era.

<sup>56</sup> Introduction to Yoel Bin Nun, *Pirkei Ha-Avot* (Alon Shvut, 2003) pg. 17-18.

have not been excavated, that important finds have been discovered by chance, and that some scholars estimate that less than 10% of the material and documentary culture of the ancient Near East has been discovered, these arguments from silence (e.g. no material evidence of the conquest of the Land of Israel by Joshua) are logically weak in establishing the lack of historicity of most biblical episodes.

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*If two possible theories exist, we privilege the one that fits the plain understanding of the text*

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In more extreme situations we may be able to follow in the footsteps of Rambam. In *The Guide of the Perplexed* (II:25) he maintains that if a scientific theory that conflicts with the plain sense of the biblical text is indeed unassailable, and there exists no other tenable scientific theory to conform to biblical account, we are obligated to accept the scientific theory and reinterpret the biblical passage under question. Yet Rambam factors in the theological cost of metaphorizing a significant part of *Tanakh*, and if two equally possible theories exist, we are entitled to privilege the one that fits in with the plain understanding of the biblical text. Applying this to our context, Uriel Simon has noted that:

Metaphorizing large sections of Biblical historiography [as would emerge from the conclusions of certain radical Israeli archeologists] would demand of us a high theological cost...and one cannot ignore that factual truth has a unique persuasive power... In the dilemma we confront, it is appropriate, in my opinion that we struggle for the maximum historicity of the Bible, with a careful watch on maintaining our

intellectual and scientific honesty, as if indeed the historicity [of a particular episode] is debunked, we have a sort of safety net [in the use]of legitimate metaphorization...<sup>58</sup>

When push comes to shove, there may be times when even this method will not yield a satisfactory resolution. In those cases, we should take our cue from the Patriarch Abraham and the message of the *Aqedah*, and recognize the limits of human comprehension by accepting the divine call that emerges from the text, though it flies in the face of the purportedly scientific data before us. We should accept with faith the divine imperative, but continue to seek resolution with sustained investigation.

For many, the challenge relates primarily to the “undeniable commonality of cultural and literary motifs that the Bible shares with the civilizations and literatures of the ancient Near East.”<sup>59</sup> This tension is predicated on the expansive assumption of the uniqueness of the divine norms as *sui generis*, not only in content but also in form, language and structure. This formulation assumes that, as a divine text, *Tanakh* is removed from the category of the canons of literary and historical categories of other texts.

However, the notion that is so dominant in the writings of medieval commentators, namely that “*dibberah torah ki-leshon benei adam*,” yields a different conception of the uniqueness of the divine nature of the biblical text, one that leaves the Bible within the literary and historical categories of human texts. In addition, the reality that God revealed his Torah in the empirical world of frail and flawed human beings embedded in specific cultures, social structures, theological assumptions and ways of experiencing the world, directs us toward the “need to define the uniqueness of the Torah in more subtle yet possibly more profound ways.”<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Study of the Bible, pg. 89.

<sup>58</sup> “*Archeologiyah post-miqrait u-post-tsiyyonit*” in *Ha-polmus al ha-emet ba-miqra*, ed. Y. Levin, A. Mazar (Jerusalem, 2001), pp. 136-37.

<sup>59</sup> Study of the Bible, p. 89.

The uniqueness of the Torah lies ultimately not in the form, but primarily in the content, the essence of its theological, spiritual and normative message. To take but one example, whatever similarities exist in language and form between the laws of *Mishpatim* and the Hittite or Eshnuna codes pale in comparison to the deeper theological differences that emerge from careful study. The profound differences between our monotheistic theology of an omnipotent, free-willed Creator versus the pagan, mechanistic world-view yield sharp differences that are reflected in the content of the respective codes of civil law. These include the invaluable worth of every human life created in the image of God, whether rich or poor, the issue of ransom for life, and a whole host of issues touching on the very core of our religious sensibility.<sup>61</sup>

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*The uniqueness of the Torah lies not in the form, but in the essence of its theological, spiritual and normative message*

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The same holds true in studying the biblical conceptions of tabernacle and sacrifices. Archeological and historical research has found significant parallels between the temple architecture, sacrificial nomenclature and rites, and sacred liturgies of ancient Near Eastern societies and those depicted in Exodus and Leviticus. Careful study of those two books and the entire corpus of *Tanakh*, however, teaches us that external parallels of form and language are often overshadowed by the radically differing conceptions of the meaning, function and purpose of the “cult.” In sharp contrast to the pagan view of sacrifices as magical machinations to appease the gods or to access the meta-divine realm,

in the Torah the entire corpus of Leviticus plays a fundamentally different role, one where the demonic and mythological has been eradicated in line with the ethos of monotheism. The magisterial works of Jacob Milgrom on Leviticus that explore and meticulously document this line of thought in great detail, are a wonderful example of the kind of contribution that ancient Near Eastern scholarship can contribute to our understanding of the Bible as God’s word.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, there may be some laws or institutions found in the Torah that are not only parallel in form or nomenclature but whose very content seems to be undistinguishable from those of its surrounding societies. Here too, it is hard to understand the “horror” that this should cause in a thinking Torah student. In a number of places, the Sages asserted that there are civil and ethical laws in the Torah that, had they not been revealed, could have been derived independently from observation of the natural order, i.e. some conception of natural law. Moreover, the concept of seven Noahide laws revealed to mankind, especially as understood expansively by Nahmanides (Commentary to Genesis 34:13) or R. Sa’adyah Ga’on’s insistence in *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (*Sefer emunot ve-de’ot*) that many of the rational laws of the Torah can be derived through reason, given time and effort, should certainly attenuate the seriousness of challenges arising from the discovery of ancient Near Eastern laws that are explicitly parallel to those in the Torah.

### Conclusion

This paper was predicated on a broad definition of *yir’at shamayim*, rooted at the same time in passionate commitment to observance of *mitsvot* and adherence to

<sup>60</sup> Study of the Bible, p. 98.

<sup>61</sup> See for example Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus* (Berhman House, 1969; reprinted, Ben Yehuda Press, 2005) and *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (JPS, 2005); Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (Schoken Books, 1972); *Exploring Exodus* (Schoken Books, 1996), and the various essays on Bible in, *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*, S. Carmy ed. (Jason Aronson, 1996), pp. 1-188.

<sup>62</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus*, vols. 1-3 (Anchor Bible, 1998, 2000, 2001).

traditional Jewish beliefs. It has defended the legitimacy of integrating modern methods with classical modes of Torah study, often noting classical precedents for these methodologies in traditional rabbinic sources. It pointed to the benefits that can be accrued from using modern scholarship in Modern Orthodox educational contexts, including a more sophisticated understanding of the Torah as the revealed word of God, the inculcation of greater love of Torah study, and strengthening the motivation of our students to arrive at truth, the seal of the Creator. The existence of these elements in our educational settings can all contribute to fostering greater *yir'at shamayim* in Modern Orthodox students, who are heavily involved in many aspects of secular culture. These elements that help enhance Torah study, and

help students see the beauty and glory of Torah should be embraced.

Of course the key is ensuring that Torah study occurs in an atmosphere where the experiential and affective elements in their schools, homes and synagogues contribute to heightening their individual spirituality, God-consciousness and commitment to halakhic observance. Finally, we should remember that perhaps the central element in Modern Orthodox education is choosing the right role models as educators and rabbinic teachers. These “text-people” rather than textbooks (as Abraham Heschel termed them) and the fire, enthusiasm, devotion to God and His Torah that they convey to our students are ultimately far more important than whether an idea from Cassuto crosses their lips.

## Afterword: A Personal Reflection

Throughout history, the charge of insufficient *yir'at shamayim* has often been hurled at Orthodox thinkers who have applied new techniques to canonical texts, rendered halakhic decisions that differed from prevailing consensus or who had a positive attitude toward contemporary knowledge and high culture. Of course, this accusation was directed at Maimonides and his followers, producing a ferocious controversy in the Middle Ages. The phenomenon became especially pronounced following the onset of the Enlightenment, which both challenged and transformed Jewish self-identity. During this critical time a self-conscious Orthodox community emerged that saw its mission to be a defense of rabbinic tradition that was being buffeted by the hostile winds of change. In this atmosphere, tensions between different leaders of the Orthodox community were an inevitable byproduct of the different perspectives of rabbinic leaders brought to the question of engaging the modern world and modern scientific studies. The proto-

Haredi camps associated with some of the extreme students of the *Hatam Sofer* often saw their more modern Orthodox colleagues as the real threat to tradition and viciously attacked them, denigrating their approach as lacking in *yir'at shamayim*. R. Hillel Lichtenstein<sup>63</sup> in a “responsum” wrote of R. Esriel Hildesheimer, the rabbi of Halberstadt, Hungary and *de-facto* leader of Hungarian Neo-Orthodoxy that: “[Hildesheimer] is a man of deceit, a liar, out only for monetary gain, wrapped, so to speak in a garb of righteousness that outwardly justifies his deed, like a pig that stretches forth its hoofs...so that many are caught in his net...His every tendency is to uproot Torah and the fear of God and plants in their stead apostasy and heresy in Israel.”<sup>64</sup>

These types of attacks have continued into the twentieth century and were directed at Torah giants such as Rav Avraham Yitzhak ha-Kohen Kook, R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik,<sup>65</sup> R. Shlomo Goren. In recent decades, they have targeted prominent contemporary Orthodox rabbis and educators such as Rabbis Samuel Belkin, Saul Berman, Simcha

<sup>63</sup> Lichtenstein was born in 1814 in Vesht, Hungary and studied under the *Hatam Sofer* in Pressburg from 1832-1837. He later served as rabbi of a number of towns including Klausenberg and Szikszó. He was the prime mover behind the “*pesaq din*” of Michlavitch (1866) that forbade, without any halakhic documentation, the use of the vernacular in synagogue sermons, the participation of a choir in the service, or the wearing of clerical robes by rabbis, among other strictures. The late Prof Jacob Katz argued in a number of essays and in his book *A House Divided: Orthodoxy and Schism in Nineteenth-Century European Jewry* that this is the first formal instance of the use of the modern tool of “*da'as torah*” in the sense of ex-cathedra pronouncements that do not see the need to justify their arguments with halakhic citations or arguments.

<sup>64</sup> D. Ellenson, *Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer and the Creation of A Modern Jewish Orthodoxy* (Tuscaloosa and London, 1990) p. 43. Similar examples of such language and attitudes directed towards R. Hildesheimer abound in R. Lichtenstein’s responsa collection *Shut Beit hillel* (Satmar, 1908).

<sup>65</sup> In November 2005, R. Shlomo Riskin spoke to a conclave of educators gathered at Manhattan Day School. He mentioned that in 1982 he traveled to Boston to personally deliver a copy of his first published work, a *haggadah* with a commentary and to inform his teacher, Rav Soloveitchik, of his decision to move to Israel. The Rav attempted to dissuade him from making *aliyah* by telling him: “Riskin you have your own ideas about things and the religious establishment will not like them, *zei velen dikh tzukeyyan und dernuch velen zeï dikh os'shpeyan*, (literally, “they will chew you up and spit you out”).” At that point the Rav proceeded to take out a file folder with yellowed press clippings from 1935 reporting on his trip to the Land of Israel to vie for the Chief Rabbinate of Tel-Aviv. The Rav showed R. Riskin many of the printed attacks on his personal *yir'at shamayim* as a result of the fact that he had earned a doctorate, as well as the fact that his wife had ridden on horses and did not cover her hair. It was clear that these attacks had hurt the Rav and affected his view on the desirability of moving to Israel.

<sup>66</sup> See for example the pamphlet, *Tsaddiq be-emunato yizhyeh* (Eli, 2003), by R. Tzvi Tau of Yeshivat Har ha-Mor. In it he states that teachers and administrators in institutions such Herzog Teachers’ College are “poisoned and poison others” and that they are “lacking in *yir'at shamayim* and their knowledge is dry, outside of the soul, as they are studied in the university.” See Amnon Bazak, “*Yesharim darkei hashem ve-tsadikim yeilekhu bam*” *Alon Shvut Bogrim* #17, pp. 9-21 for a response to these charges.

Krauss, Norman Lamm, Shlomo Riskin, Adin Steinsaltz, Avraham (Avi) Weiss, and other communal leaders who toil in the vineyard of the Lord for the cause of Torah and the Jewish people. More recently still, we have also been witness to broad-brush attacks on Modern Orthodox organizations, institutions and seminaries in America and Israel such as Yeshivat Har Etsion and Herzog Teacher's College,<sup>66</sup> and the banning of the books authored by devout Orthodox educators and yeshiva heads such as Rabbis Natan Slifkin, Yoel Bin Nun, Natan Kaminetsky and Yuval Cherlow.

The phenomenon of using *yir'at shamayim* as a blunt instrument to beat one's more modern Orthodox competitor continues to the great detriment of the Orthodox community. In the process, many of the real challenges we confront as a community and the deep questions that Orthodox youth and adults face as they struggle to understand God and His revealed Torah are pushed aside. In the process, *yir'at shamayim* and the striving to achieve it have been devalued.

It is long past time to redeem this central religious category from its continued abuse as a weapon of attack. It was R. Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv) who most eloquently expressed this aspiration and the destructive consequences of religious intolerance. In his introduction to Genesis found in his work, *Ha'ameq davar*, he explained that the book of Genesis merited the rabbinic appellation of *Sefer ha-yashar* ("the Book of Righteousness") because the Patriarchs were tolerant individuals who extended respect even to their pagan neighbors. Not so the religious leaders who lived in the era of the destruction of the Second Temple:

They were righteous, pious and diligent Torah scholars, but they were not upright in the ways of the world. Therefore because of the baseless hatred in their hearts towards one another they suspected whoever did not behave in accordance with their view of *yir'at hashem* of being a heretic and sectarian. This led them to murder...And God does not tolerate *tsaddiqim* such as these.