What Religious Zionists Taught Me About Reading Tanach as a Living Story



As an educator, I tend to pay attention to (and maybe overanalyze) the educational messages that my children are receiving. For the past eight years, my children have been matriculating through the formal and informal education ecosystem of the Religious Zionist community in Israel. While I am by no means an expert, this front row seat has provided me an opportunity to identify several continuously reinforced messages that seem to me to be unique to this community.

One such theme is the Religious Zionist community's relationship with Tanach. The Book of Books is very much alive in this education ecosystem. Tanach is used as a frame through which to understand the contemporary moment in Jewish history. And it is also used as a guide for the future.

This dual approach to Tanach can be seen in one of my favorite literary discoveries since making aliyah: the children's comic book series *Higi'a Hazeman* (*The Time Has Come*). This 10-book series features an Israeli Religious Zionist family that attains sporadic time travel capabilities and meanders between the present and various periods of Jewish history. The stories begin with a religious, social or national problem that exists in the present. The family members, together with the heroes and villains of Jewish history, struggle through these issues and ultimately reach a resolution.

For example, Sarai, a teenage girl, becomes enamored with Western culture and begins to dress and act like American cultural celebrities. Eventually, she meets Queen Esther who, as the Queen of Persia, helps her understand a Jewish perspective on how to engage the broader world without being swept away by it. In another book, a secular Israeli is skeptical about the chosenness of the Jewish People. He travels with members of the family to the past and participates in a debate between Queen Izevel and Elijah the prophet regarding this issue.

The message of these episodes is that we can find ourselves in the stories of Tanach. Our issues, both personal and national, are their issues. Accordingly, we can learn from the examples of the heroes of Tanach about how to best navigate our pressing problems in the present.

But there is another aspect to these books. The stories emphasize that in addition to continuity with the past, in many ways our present situation surpasses the past. Chagai, the father, interacts with Rav Hillel of Shklov, a student of the Vilna Gaon who immigrated to the Land of Israel. In their joint activities and conversations, Chagai realizes that despite Rav Hillel's greatness, it is he in the 21st century who is farther along the process of redemption. Similarly, Chovav, a teenage boy, is transported back to a 19th century *shtetl* where the Jews are oppressed and ridiculed. Through this experience he begins to appreciate the curse of exile and the value of living in the semi-redeemed reality of a Jewish state.

The characters learn lessons from the righteous of the Jewish past. But they are also made to realize the advantages of the present due to its relative proximity to the ultimate redemption. The message here is that we learn from the past, are indebted to the past, and are certainly not as righteous as many of the Jews of the past. Yet, we are closer to redemption than they were.

To put this in the framework of Tanach, we are not just reliving the times of Shaul and Dovid. Rather, we are beyond them in the storyline. We are living through the partial fulfillment of the messianic prophecies of Yeshayahu and Zecharya. As we will see, this leads to a clear understanding of our current national mission: to try to see the biblical story to its ultimate redemptive conclusion.

Cyclical Time and Linear Time

One can understand the significance of this perspective through a dichotomy developed by Rabbi Sacks regarding the Jewish concept of time. He argues that halachic and biblical sources express two very different approaches to the passage of time.

Halachic sources emphasize the continuity between past, present and future. Divine laws do not change from generation to generation. On a fundamental level, questions such as the kashrut of pots and pans or certain food compounds are entirely ahistorical. As Rabbi Sacks says: "To ask a question of whether something is kosher or treif is, I think, more or less guaranteed to be fairly similar whether you ask the question in 2001, 1001 or 3001."

The only changes that occur over time are cyclical in nature. Each part of the day is accompanied with its own obligations. Each season has its own laws and holidays. These are recurring cycles, repeating themselves again and again over the course of one's life and over the centuries of our national existence. Other than these cycles, Jewish law is timeless. God's eternal will is not impacted by the passage of time or the events of this world.

Rabbi Sacks argues that this notion of time as constant and cyclical should be contrasted with the perspective one gleans from Tanach. Biblical time is not cyclical; it is linear. Tanach tells a story and as with any good story, there is a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The beginning of Tanach's story is told in the opening books of the Torah: the creation of the world, the choice of Avraham, the formation of the Jewish People with the Exodus, and the giving of the Torah. The rest of Tanach tells the story of the relationship between God and His people over the course of the next 1,000 years. The episodes include good times, break-ups, and reunions.

In this era, prophecy exists, and God is in regular contact with His people. This allows the Jewish People to have a sense of where they are in the story and what God is planning for the immediate future. At a certain point, though, prophecy ends and this level of clarity is no longer possible. Nonetheless, Tanach provides an outline for the next stages of the story.

Numerous prophecies predict that the Jewish People will sin and will be harshly exiled from their land for a seemingly endless period of time. Redemption, though, will eventually come. At some point, the story sketched by Tanach will reach its climactic culmination. The Jewish People will return to their ancestral homeland, regain sovereignty, rebuild the Beit HaMikdash and usher in a time of material and spiritual abundance. On that day, God's glory will be revealed and a global spiritual revolution will ensue.

Religious Zionism and Biblical Time

Growing up in America, my education emphasized Rabbi Sacks' notion of halachic time. I was taught that the unchanging mitzvot were the eternal basis for our relationship with God. These mitzvot were equally applicable in America as they were back in Europe or Babylonia. In this sense, we have the same basic self-definition as Jews of the past as well as Jews of the future. God's mitzvot are an unchanging rock, not impacted by the vicissitudes of history.

The Religious Zionist community in Israel, though, to a much greater degree, lives with Tanach and its linear time. In this perspective, each generation experiences its own chapter in the great story of the Jewish People described in Tanach. Each generation builds on the past but is not meant to repeat it.

More specifically, rabbis, thought leaders, teachers, and even children's authors are explicit about where we are situated in the storyline of Tanach. We are living through Tanach's final chapters. Of course, there is much that is unredeemed about our world, and we have not yet reached the end of the story. Yet, the constant message is that we are relatively closer to the climax than earlier generations.

Living at the End of the Story

Seeing oneself as towards the end of an unfolding story has immense ramifications for one's basic religious outlook. This historical perspective impacts the way that one experiences Judaism in the present, as well as chart out a plan for the future.

One telling example of this perspective shift was a Tu Bishvat program run by a school that a child of mine attends. I attended the program expecting to hear a lot about the importance of the Land of Israel and its fruits. Interestingly, while this was a theme, it was all couched in a history lesson.

The speeches and activities began with the Arizal's return to the Land of Israel and then traced the Jewish People's slow migration back to the land until the present. This return of the people to the land was accompanied by a miraculous growth of agriculture in the land. Both the return of the people and the rise of agriculture were fulfillments of various ancient prophecies. In this sense, Tu Bishvat was not only a celebration of the eternal significance of the Land of Israel, but also of the story of Jewish history.

This certainly changes the way Judaism is experienced. If stories create meaning, then constantly situating oneself towards the end of the greatest story ever told can help create a meaningful and spiritual life. In this framework, nothing is ever a standalone event, but part of the great unfolding of God's plan.

In addition to creating a context for one's religious-spiritual life, the message that we are getting close to the end of Tanach's story is coupled with a clear mission-statement: It is our responsibility to move the ball forward. Wherever we see a partial fulfillment of a messianic prophecy, it is up to us to partner with God to actualize it even more.

This is no mere vague catchphrase. Rather, the multifaceted prophecies about redemption create specific and concrete missions. If the ingathering of the exiles is a feature of the messianic era, then it is up to us to actively encourage aliyah. If Jewish unity is predicted by Yechezkel, and a palpable sense of spirituality is part of Yoel's utopian vision, then we are charged to advance these causes. If security and a strong economy are part of the Torah's vision for the messianic era, then contributing to these is holy work. If Yeshayahu foresees that the Jewish People will lead a global spiritual revival, then it is upon us to start spreading the light of Torah to the nations of the world.

Once again, this message is often explicated in school. Last year, I attended a back-to-school night at one of my children's high schools. The principal of the school spoke precisely about this form of mission-focused Judaism. He articulated that the school wants to imbue its students with a passion to help the Jewish People develop into the ideal version of itself so that we can partner with God to redeem the world.

Even actual academic studies were placed into this framework. The principal said that academic excellence is necessary for the sake of helping the Jewish People advance. The Jewish People need doctors, soldiers, accountants, rabbis, teachers, plumbers, as well as stay-at-home parents. Whatever path one chooses, it is incumbent to pursue it in as optimal a way as possible for the sake of helping advance the Jewish People. Each person can help the Jewish People move one step closer to redemption.

This ethos should perhaps be contrasted with the messaging of Jewish schools in America. Rabbi Dovid Bashevkin has wondered aloud several times on the *18Forty Podcast* about the mission of the current generation of American Jewry. Our grandparents and parents built and sustained the institutions that comprise the structure for Jewish life in America. But what is next? Have we reached a plateau and our goal is simply to perpetuate the present?

I do not think that such a question would be asked in much of the Religious Zionist community in Israel. The answer is repeated so incessantly that it can be taken for granted. Our national mission is to work with God to redeem the world by trying to actualize all of the messianic prophecies. As Rav Kook wrote, the State of Israel can become the foundation of God's kingdom in this world. It is up to us to learn these prophecies, study reality and figure out what we need to do to bridge the gap between the real and the ideal.

The latest book in the *Higi'a Hazeman* series relates to the October 7 tragedy. Tamah and Bulmus, two of the protagonists, explicate the future-focused perspective outlined above:

The Torah and the prophets give us the tools to live in the present with a broad, divine perspective … it does not matter how much the present seems horrible and difficult—we know that this is part of the process that the eternal nation [must undergo] … this gives us the strength to know that what occurs is not "stam," [rather] it will lead to a great leap towards our redemption. The future here will become better and better…

May God make it so.