



Editor's Note: HOMER AND THE BIBLE

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EDITOR'S NOTE

HOMER AND THE BIBLE

Why is it, muses a close friend, that whenever he alludes to Hegel or some other icon of Western culture, at the weekly Talmud class he teaches at an Ivy League university, everyone's ears prick up? Well, I counter, if you cited the *Ketsot* in the middle of a class on Hegel, the same thing would happen.

Unexpected juxtapositions are often aesthetically pleasing. The pilpul industry that flourished in the 19th century frequently gloried in baroque constructions connecting halakhic and aggadic concepts that seemed to have no common denominator, offering the pleasures of “bringing her bread from afar” (a play on Proverbs 31:14). One standard sermonic formula in classical rabbinic literature (turn the pages of *Leviticus Rabba* for examples) was to begin with a verse, seemingly unrelated to the *Parasha*, the link with which becomes evident at the end.

Such innocent enjoyment is all to the good. When R. Kook, who combined extraordinary earnestness with undisguised appreciation for the beautiful, eulogized his father-in-law, a master, in his youth, of the elaborate *derasha* and the ornate *hadran* (delivered upon concluding the study of a Talmudic tractate), he gestured towards the history of halakhic pilpul up to its incarnation in his time, deeming it a delightful aesthetic belletristic discipline, attractive to its sophisticated audience “when it is performed capably.” Because the subject matter is holy and beloved, R. Kook continues, the pilpulistic production has a handsome moral effect: “to endear the Torah and those who study it.”

Currently popular methods of provoking interest or grabbing attention (the two are not the same) by introducing unexpected or extraneous references do not boast pilpul's hoary pedigree. Yet these methods too, properly employed, can “endear the Torah and those who study it.” At the same time, they are not exempt from the deficiencies of pilpul badly performed and inappropriately deployed.

Having praised pilpul, R. Kook cannot avoid adding the following caveat: “It is well known that while in practical matters one who has capability, whether great or small, his work causes benefit—by contrast

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when it comes to creation of beauty, just as the truly great reaches the sublime in his work, and augments good taste, so in the absence of original greatness beauty becomes impoverished and charmless.”

Defining aesthetic excellence in a purely literary context is an almost impossible task. Examining the link between aesthetic enjoyment and religious study and devotion does require us to grade individual practitioners of the art of the unexpected in the service of the sacred, or to separate the truly great from the hacks. Torah education is served not only by creative and inspired artistry but also by disciplined craftsmanship well executed. But when Torah educators or individual students aim to excite ourselves, or others, by techniques that, by design or accident, distract or deflect us from the primary goal of Torah study and comprehension, are they advancing the cause of Torah? The study of Tanakh merits special attention because it is a crucial arena for the inculcation of *yir'at Shamayim* and because, in the absence of a traditional approach like the *derekh ha-limmud* well established in the yeshivot, it has been easier for novelty to catch on and become entrenched.

II

To the naked eye, the closest thing to old style pilpul is modern pilpul. Even in relatively self-enclosed Haredi enclaves the contemporary attention span has shrunk, so much so that complicated homiletic structures, presupposing an audience steeped in the sources and happy to wait patiently on an art whose full gratifications are deferred to the climax of a long digressive development, are not in fashion. But the cute quick *wort*, the outlandish seeming midrash and the far-fetched *gematria*, when merrily harnessed to agreeable communal topics, have not lost the power to please. Likewise, speakers and audiences at home in halakhic discourse, who feel obligated to spend time studying Tanakh, but find themselves at sea in the unfamiliar world of Biblical prose and poetry, with its relentless entanglement in moral complexity and religious crisis, often find a welcome escape from the human condition by fastening upon some halakhic question to which the text may be made pertinent. Elsewhere I have relied upon, and lauded, distinguished representatives of this genre, and so it should be clear that I do not decry the effort to integrate halakhic categories and *peshat*, except to the extent that it renders us insensible and insensitive to the distinctive existential dimensions of Biblical study.

In recent Haredi commentaries on Bible one meets an apparently newer trend—the method of eclectic quotation. Contrast this approach with the kind associated with our master teacher Dr. Nechama Leibovitz. Here the student of traditional exegesis might focus a *shiur* on the painstaking reading of one or a few major sources: Rashi and Ramban among the medievals, or Netsiv and Malbim among later authors. Or he or she might introduce a problem and examine it through the prism of a broad array of major interpreters. The goal is precise understanding of the commentators and the Biblical text itself and the appropriation of the ideas therein. Citation of out of the way sources, when it happens, is a prelude to analysis rather than an end in itself. Such study has proven capable of sustaining prolonged interest and providing intellectual and religious substance to many.

Analysis, alas, demands sustained attention and intensity. It might be more interesting, in the short run, if writers on Bible cited a more colorful palette of authors not that well known or that much studied. It would be more flattering to our appetite for novelty if instead of undertaking the labor of clarifying how a small number of *meforshim* struggled with the Biblical text, with the literal meaning of the verses, or with literary problems, or with the religious implications thereof, one were to trot out passages by authors not found in the average Jewish bookshelf, citing a phrase here, an interpretation there, almost at random, from volumes that before the current publication explosion, were examined only by scholars with access to specialized libraries. The reader of such a production would not learn how to learn, how to grapple with Tanakh or with the towering figures in our tradition who accompany our struggle to understand. In place of this the reader would graze on a veritable kaleidoscope of names flitting in and out of view. One would feel as if one had consumed a rich intellectual feast without in fact having exercised one's mind at all.

This style has become a feature of many devout commentaries. On reflection, though, the technique is not as original as it appears at first blush. In the Hertz Humash and the Soncino Bible, whose passing from popularity is much lamented by modernists, reverent references to various once celebrated Anglo-Saxon luminaries like Moulton and Cheyne, for the most part testifying to the Bible's beauty and wisdom, though contributing little substantial insight, grace the text. Where Hertz's appendices tackled the great intellectual religious challenges of the day and contain incisive formulations whose value has not been

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eclipsed by the passage of time, these names are perhaps most familiar now to aging Jews who remember their appearance in Hertz's pages, where they still keep company with Rashi and Ibn Ezra and LXX and Gunkel. No doubt an early 20th century audience found reassurance in these testimonials; many probably felt they were getting significant intellectual nourishment as well. As do their self-consciously authentic Orthodox descendants a century later with their own eclectic fare.

II

Hertz's eclecticism gave comfort to an immigrant generation that looked to the Gentile world for affirmation. Contemporary Orthodoxy, immigrating into its own imagined past, probably gains a similar validation (often called *hizzuk*) from its own brand of eclectic Torah commentary. Some 21st century Modern Orthodox seek their own niche in a hipper, post-modern spiritual culture.

One manifestation of this "new irreverence" is the proliferation of interpretations, presented in the lingo of pop psychology, purporting to take the *Avot* and other sanctified Biblical personalities down from their pedestal, and bring them down to earth. In Israel this is called *Tanakh be-govah einayim*. "Bible at eye level" sees the *Avot* as dysfunctional guys very much like the ones in our society. For people like me, precisely because we want psychological insight to animate our religious life and do not want to treat Biblical characters as "petrified statues of ossified *tsidkut*" (R. Lichtenstein's phrase), the results are disappointing. The tragedy is not only that they shrink the *Avot* to our size, but that, failing to recognize the shaping religious personalities of our tradition in their magnificence we lose the aspiration to live religiously passionate lives ourselves. We subject ourselves to the casual deterministic assumptions, clichéd depictions of emotion, typical of the therapeutic outlook at its dreariest, and adopt a philosophy that cannot grasp the dramatic, absolute, momentous solemnity of the moral-religious life.

Practitioners of the new irreverence claim that they are doing nothing that was not done by the classical commentators before them. With wearying repetitiveness they deploy Ramban's two statements critical of Abraham and Sarah, and R. Hirsch's critique of Isaac's failure to understand that his sons needed differentiated education. Had they wished for stronger backing for the "right" to identify deficiencies of the *Avot*, indeed other sources—a wealth of midrashic statements and analyses

emanating from the circles of the *ba'alei musar*—would be available. However, these traditional resources are not truly supportive of the new irreverence. To the contrary, they hold the great Biblical personalities to the highest standards even while regarding them as larger than life spiritual figures whose stature and destinies are incomparable to ours. To judge Ramban and R. Hirsch's entire work, rather than a few gerrymandered passages, as precursors of the new irreverence, is laughable.

Much of the motivation for the new irreverence reflects the passive, unwitting acceptance of popular psychological constructs, and much of the energy impelling it comes from the conviction, often reinforced by religious traditionalists, that reverence for the human being as a religious being, and awe before the saintly persons portrayed in Tanakh, is incompatible with realistic psychological insight, so that judging the *Avot* by the standards of middle brow psychotherapy is the only way to redeem them from pious unreality. Yet I would submit that part of the desire *l'òpater les fidòles*, to shock the devout, is nothing less than the feeling that in translating the word of God into the vocabulary and ethos of the social worker one is making it relevant and interesting to sophisticated contemporary people.

I can't help being reminded of an episode in the life of that earthy everyman of the late 20th century, Homer Simpson. Everyone Homer knows is offering an adult education course. Why not Homer? What can he lecture on? Marriage, he decides. So off he drives to the local college, proudly ordering an extra strong container of designer coffee to stay alert in class. Chalk in hand, he ventures some suitably bland remarks: predictable unresponsiveness quickly turns to visible disenchantment. Bewildered and hurt at the exodus from his room, a desperate Homer wins them back by sharing intimate details from his own marriage. Now he is king of the classroom, but only until his wife Marge learns that their private life has become public, and lays down the law. At the next class, Homer retreats to safe platitudes about marriage, and again, rather than flop he reverts to personal anecdotes.

Homer is lucky to have a forbearing wife and fortunate that his academic career lasted for only one episode. God, though long-suffering, seems often remote, and for the professional teacher or amateur talker the need for audience approval or at least attention is constant and urgent. When Shem and Japheth witnessed their father's distressing discomfiture, they dealt with it as circumspectly as they could. When callow would-be writers and teachers of Tanakh come upon an incident potentially to the detriment of our *Avot* and *Immahot*, they are tempted

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to seize upon it as an opportunity to grab their listeners' attention, at least for a little while. If we learned from "The Simpsons" instead of embracing the *weltanschauung* of the talk show couch, perhaps we would be less pessimistic about the chances for *yir'at Shamayim* in our educational system.

III

Lately we are informed that jazzing up the Modern Orthodox study of Bible requires a stronger brew. Minds unmoved by the intellectual encounter with the word of God, dulled by the study of Ramban and Abarbanel, even apathetic towards the minutia of philological cruxes, can only be brought to life, as if by magic, through exposure to the heresies of Biblical criticism. We are told that the very mention of the theories and terminology of the Documentary Hypothesis, for example, is enough to make jaded students prick up their ears, stop surfing the Internet, and hang on every word coming from their instructor's lips. Advocates of this new pedagogy are unclear as to whether heresy attracts merely because of the novelty factor, because public notoriety sets our agenda, or more ominously, due to the frisson of "drinking stolen waters" that enlivens dabbling in what is forbidden.

This is not the place to debate how much attention should be paid to Biblical criticism in the Orthodox study of Tanakh. My own position is not secret: Though the crucial insights of the great *aharonim* in the last two centuries—Malbim, R. David Zvi Hoffmann, R. Mordekhai Breuer *inter alia* can usually be communicated reasonably well without referring to presuppositions of the critics, that creative work will not be transparent to those unaware of that background. In learning together with, and writing for, university students, many of whom will become rabbis and educators and active participants in our creative discussion, I do not avoid these matters when they come up and when doing so can enhance understanding.

Yes, I have noticed that many students indeed "prick up their ears" the moment such subjects are mentioned. I don't mind the momentary spike in attention that goes with a change of pace. Yet when marginal pursuits become invested with heightened significance and interest, simply as a result of their novelty or shock value, this is a cause for suspicion rather than self-satisfaction. If anything, those in whom consideration of the most intimate and most fundamental elements of religious

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life induces giddiness, rather than sobriety, are the least qualified to take part in and influence these discussions.

An educational mission dependent on the fleeting morbid pleasures of debunking, relying on the desperate stimulation of reflexive skepticism cannot stand. It cannot “endear the Torah and those who study it.” Let us not deliberately, coldly, indifferently, cheapen the characters of the *Avot* or the integrity of the Torah as Homer Simpson, in his amiable, amusing and exasperating stupidity, risked his marriage.

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