

The Unavoidable and Disturbing Text

TORAH STUDY HAS become nearly impossible, and the problem lies not with the Torah but with the reader. Reading the text requires courage — courage not to open the Book and start reading, but courage to confront *oneself*. Learning Torah requires human authenticity; it means standing in front of a mirror and asking yourself the daunting question of who you *really* are, without masks and artificialities. Unfortunately, that is one of the qualities we, in modern times, have lost. We have convinced ourselves that we must be intellectuals, removed from subjectivity and bowing only to scientific investigation. Consequently, we have disconnected from our true selves. Because we humans are a bundle of emotions, passions and subjectivities, we cannot escape our inner world, much as we would like to.

Still, we formulate ideas. We may proclaim the rights of the spirit, but our ideas enter only our books and discussions, not our lives. They float around in our heads, rather than walking with us into the inner chambers of our daily existence. They don't enter our trivial moments, but rather stand as monuments — impressive, but far removed.

People are no longer able to struggle with this inner Self, and therefore cannot deal with the biblical text. It stares them in the face, and they are terrified by the confrontation. All they can do is deny it, so that they may escape from themselves. Since they know that they must come to terms with themselves before they come to terms with the Book, they cannot negate it or disagree with it, as this requires them to deny something that they don't even know exists.

Does that mean that these people are not religious? Not at all. Even religious people are detached from the spirit. They have elevated religion to such a level that its influence on their everyday life, in the here and now, has been lost. It is found on the top floor of their spiritual house, with its own very special atmosphere. It has become compartmentalized. But the intention of Torah is exactly the reverse. Its words, events and commandments are placed in the *midst* of the people, enveloped in history and worldly matters. What happens there does not take place in a vacuum, but in the harshness of human reality. Most of the Torah deals with the natural course of a person's life. Only sporadic miracles allow us to hear the murmurs from another world that exists beyond. These moments remind us that God is, after all, the only real entity in all of existence. But the Torah is the story of how God exists among mortal human beings, with their ordinary troubles and joys. It is not the story of God in heaven, but of God in human history and personal encounter.

THE TEXT IS THE AUTHOR OF THE PEOPLE

The art of biblical interpretation is far more than just knowing how to give expression to the deeper meaning of the text. It is, after all, impossible to treat the biblical text as one would any other classical work. This is because the people of Israel, according to Jewish tradition, are not the authors of this text. Rather, the text is the author of the people. As a covenant between God and humankind, the text is what brought the people into being. Moreover, despite the fact that the people have often violated the commanding voice of this text, it created the specific and unique identity of the Jewish nation.

That is precisely why reading the text is not like reading a conventional literary work. It requires a reading-art, which unveils the unfolding of the essence and nature of a living people struggling

with life and God's commandments.

This reading calls for a totally different kind of comprehension, one that must reflect a particular thought process and attitude on the part of the student. George Steiner expressed this well when he wrote:

The script... is a contract with the inevitable. God has, in the dual sense of utterance and of binding affirmation, "given His word," His *Logos* and His bond, to Israel. It cannot be broken or refuted.¹

The text, then, must be approached in a way that reflects a human commitment to ensure that it indeed will not be broken or refuted. This has become a great challenge to modern biblical interpretation. Many scholars and thinkers have been asking whether the unparalleled calamity of the Holocaust did not create a serious existential crisis in which the text, by definition, has been invalidated. Can we still speak about a working covenant by which God promised to protect His people, after six million Jews — including 1.5 million children — lost their lives within a span of five years, under the cruelest of circumstances?

The reason for raising this question is not just because the covenant appears to have been broken, but also because history — and specifically Jewish history — was always seen as a *living commentary* on the biblical text. The text gave significance to history and simultaneously took on its religious meaning.

Can the text still be used in that sense, or has it lost its significance because history violated the criteria for its proper and covenantal elucidation?

Not for nothing have modern scholars suggested that there is a need, post-Holocaust, to liberate ourselves from this covenantal text in favor of shaping our destiny and history in totally secular

1. George Steiner, "Our Homeland, the Text," in *The New Salmagundi Reader*, eds. Robert Boyers and Peggy Boyers (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 107.

terms. The Holocaust proved, they believe, that we have only ourselves to rely on, and even the return to Israel is to be understood as a secular liberation of the *galut* experience.

NEW COMMENTARY

It is in this context that “commentary” needs to take on a new challenge: to show not only how the covenant, as articulated in the text, has not been broken or refuted, but how in fact it is fully capable of dealing with the new post-Holocaust conditions of secularity.

Without falling victim to apologetics, biblical interpretation will have to offer a novel approach to dealing with the Holocaust experience in a full religious setting, based on the text and taking it beyond its limits. It will have to respond to the fact that God is the most tragic figure in all of history, making our lives sometimes sublime and other times disastrous. The biblical text is there to tell us how to live with this God and try to see meaning behind the absurdity of the situation.

But above all, modern commentary must make sure that the Torah speaks to the atheist and the agnostic, for they need to realize that the text is replete with examples of sincere deniers and doubters who struggled all their lives with great existential questions. The purpose is not to bring the atheists and agnostics back to the faith, but to show that *one can be religious while being an agnostic and perhaps even an atheist*; to make people aware that it is impossible to live without embarking on a search for meaning, whether one finds it or not. It is the search that is important; the end result much less so. Throughout the ages, the art has been to refrain from throwing such a pursuit on the dunghill of history. The struggle of *homo religiosus* is of the greatest importance to the atheist.

That many secular people no longer read the Torah is an enormous tragedy. The Torah is too important to be left to the believer.

The beauty of day-to-day life takes on a different and higher meaning through the Torah, and that can evoke in atheists a faintly mystical anticipation, which they can experience when they are alone or when they watch a sunset at the beach. A voice is born, and it speaks to them; they feel a melancholy that calls forth something far away and beyond. They happen upon a situation that suddenly throws them over the edge, and they get taken in by the experience of a loftier existence. They realize that the god they were told to believe in is not the God of the Torah. The latter is a God with Whom one argues; a God Who is criticized and Who wants human beings to search, even if it results in their denial of Him.

This issue is related to other crucial problems. Surveying Jewish history, we see drastic changes in how the biblical text was encountered. In the beginning, it was *heard* and not written. At first, Moshe received the Torah through the spoken Word: “The *Word* is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, for you to carry out.”² God may be unimaginably far away, but His voice is heard nearby and it is the only way to encounter Him.

At a later stage, the Word evolved into a written form. Once this happened, there was a process by which the spoken Word was slowly silenced and gradually replaced by the written Word. With the eclipse of prophecy, God’s Word was completely silenced and could then only be *read*. The Word, therefore, became frozen and ran the risk of becoming stagnant. At that stage, it was necessary to unfreeze the Word, which became the great task of the Sages and commentaries throughout the following centuries.

RELEVANCE AND ETERNITY

Subsequently, a third element gained dominance. The text must be relevant to the generations that study it, while at the same time

2. *Devarim* 30:14.

remaining eternal. Commentators throughout the ages have struggled with this problem. How does one preserve the eternity of the Word and simultaneously make it relevant to a specific moment in time? Many commentators were children of their time and clearly read the text through the prism of the period in which they lived. The perspective of eternity thus became critical. It was often pushed to the background so as to emphasize the great message for the present. Much of the aspect of eternity was thereby compromised, causing a few to wonder how eternal this text really is.

Other commentators wrote as if nothing had happened in Jewish history. This reflected the remarkable situation of the Jewish people in *galut*: its a-historicity. After the destruction of the Temple, Jewish history came to a standstill. While much happened, with dire consequences for the Jews, they essentially lived their lives outside the historical framework of natural progress. It became a period of existential waiting, with the Jewish people anticipating the moment when they would once again enter history. This eventually came about with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

Inevitably, then, some commentators wrote their exegeses in a historical vacuum. They hardly emphasized the relevance of biblical texts to a particular generation. Therefore, students were often confronted with a dual sentiment. While dazzled by a commentator's brilliant insight, they were forced to ask: So what? What is the implication of the interpretation for me, at this moment in time? Here we encounter a situation in which relevance is sacrificed for the sake of eternity.

With the return of the Jewish people to their ancestral homeland, Jews are confronted with an unprecedented situation, which has serious consequences for biblical commentary. Due to a very strong trend toward secularism, caused by the Holocaust, as well as other factors, the issue of relevance versus eternity has become greatly magnified.

Today, more than ever before, there exists a greater and more

pressing need to show the relevance of the text. The radical changes in Jewish history call for a bold and novel way of understanding the text as a living covenant. At the same time, the drastic secularization of world Jewry and Israeli thinking requires a completely new approach to presenting the reader with the possibility of the Torah's eternity. With minor exceptions, the religious world has not come forward with an adequate response.

INNOVATION IN RECEPTIVITY

Most worrisome is the fact that the majority of Jewish commentaries published today in Orthodox circles are compilations and anthologies of earlier authorities, and do not open new vistas. It is as if original interpretations are no longer possible. The words of God are treated as if they have been exhausted. This clearly reflects either a fear of anything new, or an inability to come up with fresh and far-reaching ideas. This phenomenon has overtaken a good part of the Orthodox scholarly world. Jewish commentary is becoming more and more about writing glosses upon glosses, instead of creating new insights into the living covenant with God.

No doubt, not every person is equipped with the knowledge and creativity needed to undertake the task. Years of learning are an absolute requirement before one can make a genuine contribution in this field. Still, one must be aware of the danger of "over-knowledge." When students are overwhelmed by the interpretations of others, they may quite well become imprisoned by them and lose the art of thinking independently. Instead of becoming a vehicle to look for new ideas, their knowledge becomes detrimental.

What is required is *innovation in receptivity*, where fresh ideas can grow in the minds of those willing to think creatively about the classical sources, without being hampered by preconceived notions. Only then will we see novel approaches to our biblical tradition that will stand up to the challenges of our time.



QUESTIONS TO PONDER from the DCA Think Tank

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the suggestion “one can be religious while being an agnostic and perhaps even an atheist”? How might one define “religious” in the context of atheism — meaning, what actions, beliefs, thoughts, *weltanschauung*, etc. would characterize an atheist as “religious”?
2. The essay emphasizes the need for “innovation in receptivity, where fresh ideas can grow in the minds of those willing to think creatively about the classical sources, without being hampered by preconceived notions.” What cultural, societal, educational, and political changes must occur in the secular Israeli community for that need to be met? What changes must occur in the religious Israeli community? Where are you personally in this picture?
3. What factors, beyond the Holocaust, played a role in the loss of creativity with regard to the traditional sources? To what extent did the broad phenomenon of secularization in the modern era play a role? Did the rise of the non-Orthodox movements contribute to this phenomenon? If so, how?

4. Can you think of practical steps that can be taken in advancing this creativity that will help generate relevance on the one hand, while preserving the sense of eternity on the other? To what extent can the dramatic (albeit gradual) transformations that led from biblical to rabbinic Judaism during the second temple period be repeated today? Might the rapid pace of technological developments where transformational processes are, perhaps, more transparent influence the development of religion too?