

TRADITION: SOURCES AND RESOURCES

EDITOR'S NOTE

With this issue we inaugurate a new occasional feature in *Tradition—Sources and Resources*.

Our generation has experienced a vigorous renewal of the serious and creative study of Tanakh among Orthodox Jews. The most noticeable elements of this renaissance are the development of literary approaches and the deployment of newly available information about the historical background of the biblical period. Under literary analysis I put sensitivity to the form and presentation of the biblical text, the kind of study that is analogous to the close reading once popular in English literature.¹ I also include attempts to examine the way different biblical texts offer a variety of perspectives on the same issues, systematically noticing the common features and distinctions between different texts, how and why, for example, the story of the *meraggelim* (the spies) is presented differently in Numbers and in Deuteronomy, prior to the synoptic work of integrating the two chapters, or how one would understand the institution of Hebrew servitude (*eved ivri*) reading the presentation in Exodus 21, Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15 on its own, appreciating the unique flavor of each section before synthesizing them as done via *Torah she-be'Al Peh*. I include the careful study of Hazal with the goal of ascertaining why certain facets of our understanding of the Torah and other biblical books are manifest “on the surface,” so to speak, while other knowledge must be inferred between the lines and with the benefit of the oral tradition. Historical, geographical, and linguistic information likewise encourage new perspectives and new questions about the meaning and significance of Tanakh.

These new approaches join and build on the great corpus of traditional Jewish exegesis, to mention a few exemplary high points among many, from Hazal through the medievals like Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak and Ramban, down through the early modern period when Abarbanel and Seforno flourished and culminating in the last two hundred years in the

¹ For a theological perspective see R. Lichtenstein's “Criticism and *Kitve ha-Kodesh*” in *Rav Shalom Banayikh*, edited Hayyim Angel and Yitzchak Blau, (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2012), 15-32.

work of the major Aharonim, figures like the Gaon of Vilna, Malbim, R. Hirsch, Netziv, and R. Meir Simha of Dvinsk.

Recent years have been marked by controversy among educators and theological writers over the comparative place of the new approaches and canonical *parshanut*. There can be no doubt that the great commentators are important resources of Jewish thought in addition to their direct contribution to reading Tanakh, nor that it is important for us to engage them as role models even—especially—when pursuing new questions and approaches. And with respect to the *sugyot* that are most fruitful for a serious religious reading of Tanakh, our predecessors have usually been there before us. So that our creative work is usually more about expanding their ideas, investigating more systematically and asking the new questions that come up when one addresses old interpretations from a fresh perspective.

Another aspect of the debate over Orthodox Bible study is the recognition that not everything said in the name of novelty is worth saying. The initial application of new methods is exciting because they are put forward by teachers who have something important to say. The new methods quickly become mechanical routine: embracing them may become a way of avoiding strenuous creative work, providing for indulgence of one's subjectivity, rather than offering an additional tool in the service of *Talmud Torah*.

Moreover, much of the spadework that goes into the new methods, when they are carefully applied, does not inherently contribute to the religious edification that is our goal in studying *devar Hashem*: philology, archaeology, poetics, and so on, are “neutral” disciplines that become relevant to religious reading only when utilized for that purpose. It is one thing when an individual has mastered these disciplines to the point where he or she can collect the Torah “dividend,” as it were, and transmit it. It is another when those who lack the time or commitment for thorough inquiry dabble in these areas and thus risk frittering away the few hours set aside for the study of Tanakh. By contrast, *parshanut* commands our attention by virtue of its authors, who have met the religious test of time, and whose contribution, if only for that reason, but not only for that reason, irrigates more directly the God-seeking soul.

In a word, the continued study of canonical Jewish reflection on Tanakh remains the bedrock on which our approach to Tanakh must rest, both for its own sake, as a resource for contemporary creative analysis and interpretation, and as the core experience of Tanakh for those who are not full-time contributors to that work.

The study of *parshanut* has benefited from the renewal of interest in Tanakh. More than anyone, Nehama Leibowitz made the careful and

passionate analysis of the great commentators an intellectually challenging and religiously exciting pursuit. As is the nature of the academy, this interest has led to an explosion of papers and theses on various aspects of the Jewish exegetical legacy, many of which have genuine value for the broader public. Nonetheless, for many professional educators and lay people the rigorous study of *parshanut* is a closed book, whether for lack of familiarity or due to rote, unmotivated exposure or because *parshanut* is treated as, and comes to be identified with, random flights of homiletical fancy.²

Against this background, we will periodically present *Sources and Resources*, brief examples of traditional *parshanut*. Our hope is that these illustrations will help educators and other serious students to better engage in the study of the exegetical literature and better appreciate the manner in which these sources set the stage for contemporary creative work.

² For a broader version of my prefatory remarks, see Shalom Carmy, “Always Connect,” in *Where the Yeshiva Meets the University: Traditional and Academic Approaches to Tanakh Study*, ed. Hayyim Angel, *Conversations* 15 (Winter 2013), 1-12.