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A ROOM WITH A VIEW, BUT A ROOM OF OUR OWN

The unblemished saints do not complain about evil, but increase righteousness; do not complain about heresy, but increase faith; do not complain about ignorance, but increase wisdom. (R. Abraham I. Kook)¹

I think that trying to restrain an entire contemporary age is like a passenger in a carriage holding on to the seat in front of him in order to stop the carriage: he determines himself in continuity with the age, and yet he wishes to hold it in check. No, the only thing to do is to get out of the carriage, and so hold oneself in check. (Søren Kierkegaard)²

It is today possible that an Orthodox Jew who wishes to devote his professional life to the study of *Torah she-biKtav* (the Written Torah) will seek to develop an orientation to the world of academic Bible scholarship. The Orthodox intellectual world is divided among those who welcome this situation and those who deplore it. The stakes in the struggle are greater than the small number of men and women involved in academic activities would lead one to believe.

This is, first of all, because the study of Bible occupies a more delicate position in the Orthodox curriculum than the study of Talmud. When it comes to Talmud the Yeshivot are already in possession of a *derekh ha-limmud*, a set of well-established approaches to analyze and organize systematically our learning. The academic Talmud scholar cannot hope to supplant the regnant approaches; realistically he can only aspire to augment the accepted canons with his own particular knowledge and methodology.³ Bible, however, has not received the same attention in our schools. Any new trend is therefore likely to have far-reaching effects on the study of Bible by non-specialists.

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Torah she-biKtav and *Torah she-b'al Peh* (Oral Torah) also differ with respect to the characteristic interaction between piety and intellect. The fervor with which the traditional student of Talmud applies himself to the text is relatively independent of the content of the passage being studied: an outsider, observing *benei Torah* in action, cannot determine whether the topic under discussion carries immediate practical or existential implications or not. But with respect to other branches of Torah, perhaps due to their secondary status, one expects the connection between the subject matter and the religious experience of the student to be more direct and explicit. Consequently, a shift in the mode of Biblical study that detaches the reader from the exigency of the text, that cools the ardor of confrontation, undermines the very *raison d'être* of learning.

Because so much is at stake, the dispute is often carried on in terms that are more heated than enlightened, more defensive than constructive, clouded by arbitrary assumptions, marred by bad logic and inhabited by straw men. The position I take in this introductory essay does not conform to that of either side in the debate. Long-standing opponents of my position will no doubt find points to quarrel with. By stating my general position at the outset, however, I hope to forestall the more blatant misunderstandings, so that those who disagree with my approach will at least know what it is that they object to.

1) Knowledge is a good thing. Specifically, reliable information about the historical, geographic and linguistic background of the Bible can enhance our understanding of *Tanakh*. Authoritative control of such information requires a good deal of specialized training; even the preparation necessary to form an intelligent judgment about the work of experts in these fields presupposes an investment of time beyond that expected of most literate Jews. Nonetheless it is good that certain individuals master these disciplines and interpret them for the benefit of non-experts. The potential value of such knowledge seems so evident as to need no argument: the example of preeminent Rishonim and Aharonim who availed themselves of Semitic philology, books on ancient religious practice, and historical-geographic data, speaks for itself.

2) Most academic scholarship in Bible is conducted as if the fundamental tenets of Orthodox Judaism were false. At best, one affects methodological neutrality about the truth of these propositions. Sharp, irreconcilable conflict over fundamental presuppositions with wide-ranging implications—the authorship of the Torah, the reliability of the biblical canon, the authenticity and authority of the Oral Law—must, of necessity, preclude the development of consensus between Orthodox Jews and the academic establishment. Methodological agnosticism renders the Orthodox Jew an intellectual Marrano: compelled to feign neutrality in discussing matters on which he or

she holds firm, unshakable convictions. To acquiesce outwardly, out of hunger for professional toleration, in a scholarly consensus the presuppositions and conclusions of which one judges false and pernicious, is an offense against intellectual honesty and a betrayal of human dignity.⁴

3) Jewish biblical study cannot be separated from the framework of Torah study and Jewish theological reflection as a whole. Even when the Orthodox student finds himself in agreement with secularist, Christian or non-Orthodox writers about some particular issue, the context of interpretation differs considerably. Situating our own analysis within the continuum of Jewish biblical exegesis is more than a nostalgic exercise in historical piety: it defines an essential dimension of our study.⁵ Style of presentation and choice of terms are not merely conventional, but trail clouds of theological significance.⁶ This barrier to collaboration between Orthodox Jews and the academic establishment seems less absolute than the flat-out conflict mentioned in the previous paragraph: the Orthodox Jew is not asked to deny or suppress her beliefs, but merely to isolate one aspect of academic activity from the larger context of religious-intellectual existence and to desist from "parochial" vocabulary. Yet the threat is just as great, albeit more subtle: we lose contact with connections that we are constrained from expressing; when we are deterred from forming our insights in our own authentic words, their roots tend to wither away.

The principles I have spelled out invite further elaboration. I call my own *derekh ha-limmud* a *literary-theological approach*. Both terms carry a double meaning. By *theological*, we assert the conviction that Bible is to be encountered as the word of God, rather than primarily as the object of academic investigation; we also refer to the authoritative presence of the interpretive tradition. The adjective *literary* comes to stress that understanding the word of God is not only a matter of apprehending propositions, but also of hearing them in their literary and historical context; secondarily, we are reminded that the language we use to articulate our insight is also an integral aspect of our study.

In this essay we will first comment on the necessity to make our Bible study a true *derekh ha-limmud*, integrated within an overall program of *Mahashevet Yisrael*, Torah study and theological reflection, faithful to the Rav's conception of the *homo religiosus* who "calmly but persistently seeks his own path to full cognition of the world."⁷ Next we will address the contentions of those who seek intellectual salvation in the greater integration of Orthodox Bible study within the academic world. Finally, I suggest that some tasks facing contemporary Orthodox Bible study, despite my general insistence on autonomy, can most honestly and most effectively be done, at present, within the walls of the secular university.

THE SPECTER OF APOLOGETIC

How we are to study *Tanakh* is equivalent to the task of finding a way of learning (*derekh ha-limmud*). To have a *derekh* of learning means that we have created a unified, integrated way of studying and teaching. When we are preoccupied with the novelty or strangeness of a certain methodology, when the novelty or strangeness interfere with the primary vocation of elucidating *devar ha-Shem* (the word of God) and hearing its message for our lives, we have not yet successfully incorporated that methodology as an integral part of our *derekh*. In particular, we cannot pursue the goals of Torah study when the truth of fundamental principles is rejected or doubted. If this is the case, then we surely cannot cultivate a *derekh* of Bible study in the hostile shadow of the academic establishment, an environment in which the bulk of our energy must be expended on defense rather than construction.

At this point an example may be useful. It is not a crucial or an especially exciting one, but it will serve our purpose precisely by illustrating the atmosphere in which we do our everyday work. In the speech that includes the opening of *Parashat Nitsavim* (Deut. 29), Moses consistently addresses Israel in the second person plural. He shifts to the second person singular in only one passage (vv. 11-12) which speaks of initiating the individual into the covenant to be instituted that day. Why the switch?⁸ The Rabbis, commenting on v. 28, define a transition between two periods, marked by an expanded notion of responsibility on the part of Jews for the sins of their fellows; this idea is derived from the fact that several letters in the text are dotted, implying, according to midrashic principles, that the acceptance of responsibility is somehow "suspended" during the intermediate stage.⁹ Whether this comment can be adopted as a satisfactory explication of v.28 (at the level of *peshat*), is, of course, highly debatable.¹⁰ It occurred to me, however, that the idea underlying the midrashic interpretation of v.28 might supply a key to the variation of persons in vv. 11-12. I thought that the second person singular might refer to the undertaking of expanded responsibility connected to the covenant.

Having offered this modest suggestion in public,¹¹ I had nobody to blame when I got a scholarly rap on the knuckles. Naturally my critic was mildly annoyed by the infiltration of Rabbinic tradition into a discussion of Biblical text. This was not, however, my most serious offense: my proposal lacked merit because it did not explain the second person singular/plural changes throughout Deuteronomy. Thus I could not challenge the scholarly opinion that these alternations in Deuteronomy betray the presence of different authors.¹²

Now this criticism could be countered simply by noting that the scholar who thirty years ago had erected his theory of authorship on the singu-

lar/plural criterion, had not applied it to the entire book either: in fact, he had explicitly omitted the section that I had examined! But let us say, for the sake of argument, that Minette had extended his hypothesis to *Nitsavim*; and let us also imagine that his theory is plausible (so long as one has no initial objection to the multiplication of authors on the basis of stylistic variation). How does this affect me? If it is incumbent upon us to refute the contending position, then we must either produce the comprehensive refutation or fall silent. If, however, our task is to forward our own interpretation, in accordance with the fundamental beliefs to which we are firmly committed, then I am free to advance my reading, either as a local explication of *Nitsavim*, without any aim to explain other sections of the book, or as a provisional thesis, one that may, or may not, be successfully broadened to cover the other sections.¹³

To adopt the implicit outlook of my critic means that every thesis, every reading, every insight, to the degree that it deviates from the received position, must be pitted against the entire edifice of academic Biblical scholarship. An idea that has not triumphed against the entrenched theories must be withdrawn from circulation. Autonomous Bible study by Orthodox Jews is thus frozen until the established views are decisively melted down. The alternative is to go our way, “calmly but persistently” seeking our own path to knowledge. Whether those outside our religious-intellectual community are curious, impressed or dismayed by work firmly rooted in the fundamental beliefs to which we are firmly committed, whether they sit at our feet or relegate us to the outer darkness or pick up something from us even while keeping a safe distance—all this is, and should remain, their business.

Please don't get me wrong. I am not oblivious to the fact that many individuals who were taught Orthodox beliefs, and many more who were not, have learnt something about conventional academic objections to those basic tenets, and consequently harbor doubts, or reject outright, the fundamental doctrines of Orthodox Judaism. In my youth I tried very hard, though fruitlessly, to become such an individual myself, and my subsequent career as student and educator has brought me in contact with others similarly motivated. Clearly such individuals need to be supplied with some adequate warrant for Orthodox Judaism (which may, or may not, focus on the problems directly posed by Biblical scholarship) before they devote themselves wholeheartedly to the *derekh ha-limmud* we propose. Surely it is desirable that there be advocates of Orthodox Judaism who can incline the disaffected in the direction of belief. But the justification of Orthodox doctrines pertinent to the study of Bible, though it sometimes draws attention to important questions previously neglected, is not necessarily a contribution to that study. A *derekh ha-limmud* must build, it must provide positive content and insight; a purely apologetic stance, however sophisticated and persuasive, is not the same thing.

Let me add that the constructive endeavor, independent of apologetic

motives, is, in the final analysis, the most satisfactory defensive posture as well. After all, the considerations that lead an individual to offer, or withhold, his assent to Orthodox Jewish doctrine regarding the Bible, are both complex and mysterious. What Ramban said about Talmudic dialectic,¹⁴ is true of the reasoning that comes into play here: it does not aspire to mathematical precision, and therefore does not allow of knockdown arguments. In these circumstances, something will almost always beat nothing. If Orthodox writers limit themselves to parrying attacks, however competently, and exposing weak points in their opponents' theories, they will never seize the initiative; the ball, so to speak, will forever remain in the other team's possession. When R. Kook extols the unblemished saints who, instead of carping about heresy and ignorance, increase faith and wisdom, he is not only commending an irenic disposition, but affirming the radical primacy of construction over defensive tactics.¹⁵

THE INDIVISIBLE MANSION OF JEWISH THOUGHT

No discipline is an island. Every facet of Torah is intimately related to the others. If we think of Torah as a mansion, each discipline within Torah can be compared to one of the rooms. The Orthodox explorer in the realm of *Tanakh*, whether he or she is a "producer" of original work or an active "user" of insights and research worked out by others, cannot be a mere tourist in the adjoining estates. Each student of Torah has his own interests and orientation; every attempt to do justice to all aspects of a sugya will fall short; the hermeneutical horizon will ever recede. Nevertheless the development of a *derekh ha-limmud* in Bible, for the individual and for the community, is inextricably bound up with our ambition and achievement as students of Torah. The briefest overview must distinguish, with respect to Bible, three areas of activity.

1) *Torah she-b'al Peh* has always been the "meat and potatoes" of Torah study. We believe that the Oral Torah transmits authoritative traditions with respect to Halakha and, to a lesser extent, Aggada; it thus constitutes an authoritative source for the study of Bible. To resume the image we introduced in the preceding paragraph, *Torah she-b'al Peh* is a central chamber in the house of Torah: it communicates with all the other rooms. If the study of *Torah she-biKtav* is not to become (or remain) marginal to our religious-intellectual enterprise, the comings and goings between the two neighboring and allied domains must reinforce their close cognitive and experiential proximity.

There are more specific reasons for intensifying the ties between Bible study and the traditional Talmud-oriented curriculum. In theory one may,

following the great medieval and modern commentators, distinguish between the two levels of *peshat* and *derash*, and by asserting the autonomy of the former, free it of its dependence on the *derash* level (identified with the Oral Torah). In practice, however, the connection between the two dimensions of study is so intimate that one cannot hope to contribute to *peshat* in the legal portions of the Torah without observing and reflecting on the close interaction between the two. It is not accidental that those Rishonim and Aharonim who most magnificently explored the *peshat* level of the legal sections were equally renowned as Talmudists: Rashi, Rashbam, Ramban, among the medievals; the Vilna Gaon, Netziv, *Meshekh Hokhma* and R. David Zvi Hoffmann, to name but a few of their modern heirs.¹⁶

Nor is it fortuitous that one of the most influential strategies in contemporary Orthodox Biblical analysis originates in the techniques of halakhic analysis. The idea closely associated with R. Mordechai Breuer¹⁷, that different sections of the Biblical text provide contrasting but complementary "aspects" of the divine message, corresponds to the *lomdish* analytic phrase "two *dinim*" popularized by R. Hayyim Brisker to discriminate the multiple meanings of superficially uniform concepts.

Finally, the halakhic corpus occupies a position of primacy in Jewish theology. If the basic concepts, institutions and imperatives taught in the Bible are to be viewed in the context of a complex, comprehensive Jewish synthesis, the Halakha has a great deal to say about the nature of that synthesis¹⁸. Therefore an approach to Biblical study that exploits the resources of Halakha is boundlessly richer than one that ignores these vital dimensions.

2) The relevance of traditional Jewish Biblical exegesis, especially those trends identified with the method of *peshat*, is widely recognized today. Thanks in part to the remarkable lifework of Dr. Nechama Leibowitz, the giants of Jewish exegesis are routinely cited by Israeli Bible scholars, with no rigid correlation to their own presuppositions, and research on classical *Parshanut* has become a respectable sub-specialty at the universities.

Current fashions in the study of literature have moderated the ingrained academic distaste for *derash* and for *peshat* approaches not easily distinguishable from *derash*. This broadening of perspective has helped legitimate a more generous selection from the traditional exegesis. When the quasi-traditionalist M.Z. Segal, half a century ago, included a small monograph on the history of exegesis in his *Mavo haMikra*, he saw that history in terms of the conservative Critical orientation that was his own, and ended his story, for all intents and purposes, with Abarbanel, after whom Jewish commentary retreats into the ghetto, leaving the banner of *peshat* in the hands of the Gentiles. The fairly recent articles on exegesis in the *Encyclopedia Mikrait*, assigned to several authors, pursue the subject into

the modern era, and do not repine from treating such characteristic “ghetto” figures as the Vilna Gaon, the Netziv et al.¹⁹

3) Most people, when allusion is made to Jewish thought, think of what is customarily called Jewish philosophy, and/or ethical literature (Musar) and/or mystical works (including Hasidism). Much of the medieval literature has enjoyed the same renewal of academic interest among Bible scholars that promoted the exegetical compositions discussed above: thus, to take a straightforward example, it’s a good bet that whoever would devote attention to Ibn Ezra or Radak will likewise spend time on the Biblical exegesis of Maimonides’ *Guide*. The literature of the modern period has not been so favored, whether because of *Wissenschaft des Judentum’s* built-in antiquarian bias or because the scholars knew too much about Hasidic Jews, Musar preachers, and their attitude towards the scholars, making it impossible to take comfort in visions of imagined affinity.

From a contemporary vantage point, it is unfortunate that classic Hasidic and Musar literature are banished from the framework in which *Tanakh* is studied. Their indefatigable, almost palpable, striving to come to grips, through vigorous reflection on Biblical and Rabbinic texts, with the ultimate religious realities of suffering and sanctity and the yearning for spiritual and worldly redemption, though sometimes arbitrary from a textual point of view, can illuminate our perception of those texts no less dramatically (and I daresay more accurately) than the Rambam’s efforts to elucidate Genesis 1 in the light of medieval physics and metaphysics. The essays by David Berger (in the forthcoming *Modern Scholarship . . .*) amply demonstrates the relevance of the questions raised by this literature and the importance of confronting the answers it furnishes.

There is a feeling abroad, and it is not an unwarranted one, that the indivisibility of Torah builds more bridges than barriers between Orthodox scholars and proponents of the regnant theories in Biblical scholarship. Sharing an interest in Rabbinic exegesis and a respectful regard for the legacy of the medieval *pashtanim* may happily conceal the bottomless conflicts that defy collegial rapprochement. At a practical level, involvement in *Parshanut* or Rabbinic interpretation can become an agreeable “city of refuge” enabling the Orthodox scholar to participate in the academic field without affronting the ancestral pieties.²⁰

The elaboration of common ground between the Orthodox and some segments of the scholarly establishment is, in my opinion, beneficial to both sides, and not only because of the pragmatic calculations noted above. Yet quite apart from the crucial, ineradicable, unabated conflict over essential beliefs, it is easy to overestimate the significance of this ostensible meeting of the minds. For the underlying motives and orientations of the two partners in intellectual dialogue remain different in kind. To the academic Bible

scholar, the history of Biblical study supplements the elaboration of the academic methodology: valued as a tool, even appreciated as an object of scholarship in its own right, in the larger context of Biblical learning it is dispensable. The Orthodox thinker, by contrast, even one who values the reading of the Biblical text in its ancient context, encounters the Rabbinic literature and “what the veteran disciple is destined to innovate” as an integral part of Biblical study.

One component in our commitment to the exegetical tradition is the awareness that, willy nilly, the passage of millennia and the accumulated burden of hermeneutics thwarts any ambition to isolate the primitive, uninterpreted meaning of the Biblical text. This awareness is not necessarily limited to Orthodox thinkers. But our response to the tradition’s constitutive contribution is also dogmatic and normative: we read the Bible in the light of the exegetical literature not only because such reading is unavoidable, but because we believe it to be the right way to read. It is this deeper commitment, this radical at-homeness in the indivisible mansion of Torah, that sets us apart from those we superficially resemble.²¹

I have emphasized that our *derekh ha-limmud* is firmly rooted in a commitment to the intrinsic relationship between the study of *Tanakh* and the spheres of Torah that border upon it. But this should not be taken to obliterate any distinction between the spheres. It is one thing to insist that the doors in a house be unlocked, that they ought to link the rooms rather than segregate them; it is another thing to overlook the existence of separate rooms altogether, in order to postulate an undifferentiated one-room mansion.

In principle, this should be perfectly plain to anyone exposed to our *Parshanut*, anyone (to take one of numberless examples) who has come across Rashi’s programmatic assertion (on Genesis 3:8) that his commentary on the Torah expounds peshat rather than *derash*. Frequently, however, it is easier for Orthodox readers and writers to know this principle than to practice it creatively. There is a natural tendency to blur the boundaries, so that other areas of Torah effectively substitute for and supplant the study of *Tanakh* itself.

In working towards our own *derekh ha-limmud*, there is little profit in lamenting the manifestations of this phenomenon in popular Orthodox culture. It is more enlightening to examine critically a justly admired example of contemporary Orthodox exegesis. The direct encounter with *Tanakh*, we shall discover, can take an interesting analysis based on later authorities, and endow it with even more significant implications.

R. Moshe Eisemann’s thorough, painstaking commentary on Chronicles, that most neglected of Biblical books, is one of the high points of Orthodox Bible study in America. The “Overview” advances the remarkable thesis that *Divrei ha-Yamim* is an eschatological book.²² Argument for this position runs as follows: According to the Gemara (*Megilla* 3a) Yonatan b.

Uzziel was forbidden by a heavenly voice from composing an authoritative translation of the Hagiographa (*Ketuvim*) because "the end of days" is hidden there. Rashi identifies the "end of days" with the visions in the book of Daniel. Maharal of Prague, however, infers that all the *Ketuvim* are included in the prohibition, and that therefore all *Ketuvim* contain eschatological material. Since Chronicles is part of *Ketuvim*, adopting Maharal's view (as opposed to Rashi's) entails that Chronicles contains eschatological material. This is a short step from the conclusion that the eschatological theme defines the unique character of Chronicles. Having secured this conclusion, the author appeals to it in explaining some salient features of the book. Where the portrait of King David in Samuel differs in emphasis from that of Chronicles, for example, it is because the former depicts David as a man, while Chronicles treats him as the messianic figure.

To be sure I am pleased to see Maharal's comments brought to bear on the issue at hand. But is the logic indeed compelling that would put so much weight on an inferred generalization from a comment by Maharal that is itself an inconclusive inference from a Talmudic statement? Would it not be more responsible to submit this line of reasoning as no more than one possible overture to the book? By the same token, one might propose alternative explanations of the variations between Chronicles and Samuel. It might be suggested (and I am merely sketching the possibility) that Chronicles devotes more attention to David the King (and, incidentally, to the Levitical genealogies and Temple cult) in order to reestablish, for the generation returning to Jerusalem, a sense of institutional continuity with the pre-Exile period.

The conventional academic critique of R. Eisemann would stop here: taking him to task for over-exploiting his Maharal-text, one could, with a sniff of scholarly superiority and a sigh of relieved dismay, dismiss his work from further consideration. But the curious individual who continues to think along with R. Eisemann's theory might eventually stumble across an obvious literary-historical question implicit in his approach. If Chronicles contains eschatological themes, why were these brought to the fore by an author living in the early Second Temple period, writing for an immediate audience of his contemporaries? Are we to judge the coincidence of historical situation and revelation as an accident without import for the theological message?

Let us add another problem to the last one, in the hope that the two difficulties will resolve each other. A famous conundrum, not addressed by ArtScroll: why doesn't Chronicles narrate the exodus from Egypt?²³ The question is too important to be shrugged off, and yet, to the best of my knowledge, it is not discussed by traditional commentators. It troubled me for many years.

Why should the story of our redemption from Egypt be omitted from a review of Biblical history? The answer, I submit, is found in a prophecy of

Jeremiah (16:14-15): the days will come, when people no longer swear by "God who brought up the children of Israel from the land of Egypt," but by "God who brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north, and from all the other lands where He had driven them. . ." ²⁴ The redemption from the Babylonian captivity will become more memorable than that of the first redemption from Egypt. Ramban, among others, picked up on this passage: he justified thereby the substitution of Babylonian names of months for the ordinal numbers of the First Temple era. ²⁵ Jeremiah's prophecy thus articulates the consciousness of the returning exiles so strongly that it explains their adoption of a new vocabulary. Is it not reasonable that Chronicles would paint a picture of Jewish history expressing the same keen awareness of redemption?

I hold no particular brief for R. Eisemann's thesis about the eschatological content of Chronicles. But if one is inclined to endorse that position, then my proposed solution to the problem of the missing exodus offers it support. By bringing to bear the eschatological prediction from Jeremiah one can at least suggest why Chronicles, written in the aftermath of the return from the Babylonian exile, might place special emphasis on the messianic theme.

What general lessons can we derive from this case? One result is to be dissatisfied with a methodology that relies exclusively on the exegetical and homiletical literature, at the expense of direct, unmediated encounter with the Biblical text. But in the course of thinking through the example, paying attention not only to the results but also to the process by which we earn those results, we arrived at an insight that appears, at least superficially, to run in the opposite direction. For my own attempt to get to the bottom of the silent exodus problem was nurtured not only by the unadorned Biblical text; it was fueled by my study of Ramban and other Rishonim, and my thinking was brought to a head by my critical encounter with R. Eisemann's discussion.

Thus we draw a paradoxical moral: on the one hand, to beware of interpretation that substitutes for the primary source; on the other hand, to recognize the benefits that accrue from thinking along with our partners in the search for Torah understanding. You could put the fundamental question of this essay as follows: Who are the interlocutors with whom we can best develop our authentic *derekh ha-limmud*? Who are the *havrutot* in whose company we may best fulfill our goals? With the academic world we recognize the potential value of new historical and geographical information, something that many Orthodox writers tend to ignore or downplay. Like the academicians we are wary of approaches that blur the borderlines between different facets of Torah. With our Orthodox colleagues we share a firm belief in the fundamental teachings of Judaism, with all their comprehensive implications for the study of *Tanakh*. And it is with our Orthodox brethren that we can unfold our understanding of *Tanakh* as part of the

indivisible empire of Torah. In our quest for a unified, integrated way of studying and teaching, it seems to me that we will do best to cast our intellectual lot in this world with those colleagues with whom we hope to share our spiritual portion in the next. Despite divergence about method and procedure, substance and style, the place for thinking religious individuals is with each other, to learn and to teach, to question and to answer, to challenge and to refine.

THE CONFRONTATION OF CULTURES

Theological reflection and textual analysis do not happen in a cultural vacuum. To our study of Torah we bring ourselves, our presuppositions and prejudices, our experience of life, our hopes and fears. To be honest in our work, and honest with ourselves, we dare not shirk the duty of self-examination, the ruthless scrutiny of our cultural baggage, the careful inventory of its virtues and deficiencies, both moral and intellectual. The imperative of self-understanding and the collateral impulse to articulate and criticize our outlook, and that of our society, as precisely as possible ("to get the better of words") constitutes the major justification for liberal arts education, quite apart from any possible relevance to the study of Bible.²⁶ There is no alternative to serious, disciplined reflection on the language we make ours and the ideas embodied in that language. Failure to do so will impoverish and vitiate our intellectual-religious life. Yet nowhere is this more true than in the study of Bible. This is due to the enormous philosophical and psychological sensitivity of the texts and ideas, as well as the direct and indirect infiltration of concepts and habits of thinking of secularist and Christian origin.

We may get better purchase on this critical activity by exploring an instance from the literature. We shall examine a recent article on the binding of Isaac by Phyllis Trible, a highly respected feminist Bible scholar.²⁷ My choice is deliberate: unlike many feminist authors, Trible is unfailingly stimulating, relatively plausible and responsible in her use of sources; many of the observations here presented, while open to question, are not unlike the ideas that might occur to us too. Thus we shall be able to evaluate both her approach and our possible responses to it.

According to Trible, the story of the *Akeda* "purports to be . . . a narrative of nonattachment." "To attach one's self to another is to negate love through entrapment. In surrounding Isaac, Abraham binds himself and his son. To attach is to know the anxiety of separation. In clinging to Isaac, Abraham incurs the risk of losing him—and Isaac suspects it. To attach is to practice idolatry." The use of the term *na'ar* (young man) shows that Abraham "distanced himself from Isaac²⁸ while affirming their unity. . . . Fear of God severs the link between detachment and attachment to save both Abraham and Isaac."

Trible goes on to argue that if Abraham requires the test of the *Akeda* in order to transcend the “entrapment of attachment,” Sarah is even more in need of such purification. It was Sarah, after all, who insisted that Abraham expel Hagar and Ishmael because they threatened Isaac’s position and destiny.

[S]he, not Abraham, ought to have been tested . . . that she learn the meaning of obedience to God, that she find liberation from possessiveness, that she free Isaac from maternal ties, and that she emerge a solitary individual, non-attached, the model of faithfulness.

Because Sarah was not called upon to sacrifice her son, she was denied the opportunity for a final reconciliation with Hagar, which presumably would have come about once she had attained the heights of nonattachment.

These intriguing remarks proceed to an unfortunate and unacceptable conclusion. Trible decides that something has gone wrong with the narrative, and that Sarah has been replaced by the “ill-fitted” Abraham. This supposed deficiency of the Biblical text is attributed to the “patriarchal” partiality of the author, fostering “a bias for father-son bonding” that overcomes “the logic of the argument.”

We meet this kind of analysis, and this kind of conclusion, not only in academic journals, but in common educated discourse.²⁹ Some of the observations formulated by Trible are not alien to us: if reject them we must, then we must stand ready to criticize and refine our own conceptions and interpretations. And some of her insights may even be true, in which case they may still want unpacking, improvement and distillation before they can become part of our intellectual property.

A full assessment of Trible’s article cannot be undertaken short of a comprehensive study of the *Akeda*. My purpose here is to show how we must proceed with our work if we intend to be equal to the task. My precis of Trible’s article highlights three elements: (1) a thesis about the purport of Genesis 22; (2) an ethical-psychological judgment about the situation described in the chapter; (3) an answer to the question “why Abraham rather than Sarah?” Let me comment on them in turn:

1) Trible takes it for granted that the section purports to be a “narrative of nonattachment.” Abraham is indeed required to transcend normal human reactions for the sake of his exclusive commitment to God. Are these normal human reactions identical with the feelings of a father for a son, a father who gained that son only in his old age, after many tribulations? The Rambam³⁰ thought so, and God’s speech at the beginning of the chapter, with its fourfold repetition “your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac” lends his view support. But many readers have located part of the drama of the test elsewhere, not in the overcoming of Abraham’s attachment to

Isaac, but in the surmounting of Abraham's deep-seated allegiance to a Kantian conception of universal moral law (a central theme in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*), or in the demonstration of Abraham's unshakable certitude in the authenticity of his prophetic encounter (Rambam's second explanation) or even in the testing of Abraham's faith in life after death, since, according to this argument, Abraham would not have offered Isaac up had he not been assured that Isaac would return to life (Abarbanel following Saadia, both preceded by Paul's *Epistle to the Hebrews*). Despite my sympathy with this thesis of Tribble's, her single-minded concentration on the interpersonal dimension runs the risk of oversimplification.

2) Tribble states that her "interpretation plays with three concepts: attachment, detachment, and nonattachment. . . . In addition to scriptural foundations, this interpretation builds on Zen Buddhism and Metapsychiatry."³¹ Whatever might be said of the ideas in her paper, the terminology certainly does not derive from the Bible. I don't mean this as a reproach. As noted above, we cannot avoid bringing ourselves to the act of study, and the only way we can eschew our own vocabulary would be to parrot a vocabulary that is not ours, and that consequently cannot express whatever it is that we want to say. If Tribble finds that the categories of Zen Buddhism and Metapsychiatry illuminate the subject and permit her to say what she wishes to say, then she should, by all means, play with that terminology.

What about us, trying to bring our *derekh ha-limmud* to bear on the *Akeda*, or on any other *sugya* in *Tanakh*? Do we consider the categories of Zen Buddhism and Metapsychiatry adequate to our apprehension of the multifaceted *devar haShem*? If we do not, it is not Professor Tribble's fault. It is our responsibility to discover our own voice, and in the process to unfold our own unique insight.

Where shall we seek our own authentic voice? To begin with, in the careful, disciplined, alert, but emphatically not slavish, emulation of our predecessors and role models, keeping in mind what we have already seen regarding the interaction of different branches of Torah. Second, by plundering the ideas and language of culture, tirelessly trying them out, struggling against all odds "to get the better of words" for the task at hand. Last, but not least, by examining critically the ideas and language of culture, holding them at arm's length, making them recite their story like a lesson, till we put our finger on the point where things went wrong, and resolve, undeceived and enlightened, to go our own way and try to do better.

I know that many studious readers will balk at the suggestion that defective language, or the uncritical borrowing of categories from various fashionable academic modes of discourse, can undermine our efforts to study *Tanakh* as thinking religious individuals. They would regard style as a matter of taste rather than substance; in any event, as something that

