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How to Read the Torah

Because much of what I have to say in this chapter is controversial, let me begin with something that is not: the Torah is no ordinary book. It starts with creation and goes on to claim that it is a divinely revealed guide to human behavior valid for all time. It is written from the standpoint of a third-person omniscient narrator who takes in everything, from the thoughts of God to conflicts that emerge between human beings. It contains a number of genres, including epic narrative, parable, poetry, religious legislation, and historical reflection. Although it purports to be about the actions of a single God, that God is known by different names and relates to people in different ways.

Above all, no reader can fail to be struck by the compressed form in which the narration of the early books occurs. The creation of the universe is covered in thirty-one verses, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden in twenty-four, and the near sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham in just nineteen. The latter episode is particularly instructive. When God tells Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering in the land of Moriah, it takes Abraham and his party three days to reach the desired location. What happened in that period? What was Abraham thinking? Did he entertain doubts about what he was asked to do? Did he talk to Isaac, and if so, what about? Did Isaac ever suspect that he was going to be the sacrificial victim? What did Abraham tell Sarah? How and when did Sarah hear what happened? Why did Abraham not return to Sarah but set out for Beer-Sheba at the end? We are never told.

The result of not being given critical information about so important an event is that it seems as if the Torah is begging us to supply the missing information on our own. It is hardly surprising, then, that the story of Abraham and Isaac stimulated everything from midrashim telling us what the characters were thinking, to Christian theologians arguing that the near sacrifice of the son by the father foreshadows the actual sacrifice of Jesus by God, to unforgettable paintings by Caravaggio and Rembrandt, to philosophic speculation by Kant and Kierkegaard. Like so many other stories in the Torah, this one has provided an ongoing source of inspiration for the human mind.

If another example is needed, consider the Exodus from Egypt. In addition to being depicted in art, music, and poetry, it has furnished any number of political leaders, from the American colonists to Martin Luther King, Jr., with powerful rhetoric and has encouraged philosophers to speculate about what it means to be a free people.

Because the details are so few, reading the Torah always raises the question of whether we have uncovered its true meaning or projected our own opinions onto a text that was written thousands of years ago. The problem is particularly acute if one wants to read the Torah philosophically. From a historical perspective, philosophy emerged in ancient Greece in the sixth century BCE. Although scholars disagree on when the written text of the Torah was completed, there is no reason to suppose that philosophic speculation in Greece played a role in its production. There are no arguments for the existence of God in the Torah, and there is no one like Socrates who goes about asking people what they mean by love, fear, or holiness.

We can grant all of this and still maintain that to read the Torah properly, *we* have to ask what is meant by love, fear, and holiness. To do so, we have to be wary of two pitfalls: anachronism and historicism. The first involves what I referred to earlier as projection, the second to the belief that whatever meaning we find in the text must have been available to the audience for which it was written. From my perspective, both are objectionable.

The Danger of Anachronism

The danger of anachronism is easy to spot. When the Hellenistic philosopher Philo Judaeus read the Torah, he found the principles of Platonic philosophy, while the sages of the Talmud found the principles of Rabbinic Judaism, Christians found the groundwork for the coming of Jesus, Maimonides found the principles of Aristotelian philosophy, and plantation owners in the American South found a defense of slavery, while liberals and abolitionists found an assertion of universal human dignity. All had axes to grind. And given the length and complexity of the Bible, it is almost impossible *not* to find whatever you are looking for in it.

The tendency to find whatever you are looking for was abetted by two assumptions that the modern scholar James Kugel ascribed to the early biblical interpreters. The first is that the text is inherently cryptic, so that when it says *A*, it might really mean *B*. Maimonides explains this by arguing that even though the Torah describes God as having arms, legs, and feet, these passages should not be taken literally but understood as parables or metaphors intended to drive home other points. For example, when the Torah (Exodus 24:9–11) says that the elders of Israel saw God, the meaning cannot be that they saw him with their eyes but that they apprehended him with their minds. In a similar way, we might say “I see the solution to the problem” not to mean that we are looking at the solution written out on a blackboard but that we understand how the problem should be resolved.

When Exodus 17:16 refers to God’s throne in heaven, according to Maimonides, the meaning cannot be that there is a physical object supporting God but that God reigns supreme over everything. All this was part of Maimonides’s attempt to show that if we read the Torah correctly, we will see that literal interpretation of every passage is a serious mistake. Does the Second Commandment not warn us against making *any* image of God? From Maimonides’s perspective a mental image of God is just as objectionable as one carved in wood or stone. In the terms that I have introduced, both treat the infinite as if it were finite.

Why, then, does the Torah say that God has arms, legs, and feet? Why does it not simply say what, in Maimonides's opinion, it really means? Maimonides's answer is that the Torah is trying to reach the largest possible audience. To do this it must speak in language that everyone understands. Just as a mathematics teacher may begin by showing the class tangible examples of numbers or functions, the Torah begins by speaking of God in physical terms. To continue the analogy, just as a mathematics teacher wants the students to go beyond tangible examples and think of numbers more abstractly, the Torah wants us to do the same thing with God. So when the Second Commandment tells us that we *should not* make an image of God, Maimonides takes it to mean that we *cannot* make such an image of God, because God has no size or shape.

The second assumption that Kugel refers to is that while the text may seem to talk about the past, it is really giving us a lesson applicable to us in our own day.¹ At Genesis 18:2–6, Abraham sees three strangers outside his tent and asks them to join him for a meal. The Rabbis interpreted this as underscoring the need to show hospitality to strangers even to the point of arguing that it is more important to welcome strangers into one's home than to welcome the presence of God.² To this day, Jews are supposed to open their doors on Passover and invite in all who are hungry.

Underlying both of Kugel's assumptions is the idea that because we are dealing with a divinely revealed text, either everything it contains is true in the sense of showing us something important about the world, or it offers us correct guidance for how to live in it. That is why later generations searched high and low to find biblical sources for their own opinions—as if to say that the guidance they were giving was in perfect agreement with that given by God.

From a Jewish perspective, it was Baruch Spinoza who tried to put a stop to this.³ His idea was that in reading the Bible, we have to be careful to distinguish the question of what it means from the question of whether it is true. Put otherwise, the fact that we are convinced of something does not justify our saying that the authors of the Bible were

convinced of the same thing. In his words, “In seeking the meaning of Scripture we should take every precaution against the undue influence, not only of our own prejudices, but of our faculty of reason insofar as that is based on the principles of natural cognition. In order to avoid confusion between true meaning and truth of fact, the former must be sought simply from linguistic usage, or from a process of reasoning that looks to no other basis than Scripture.”⁴

If it should happen that the literal meaning of a passage conflicts with our understanding of things, the literal meaning cannot be ruled out unless the reason for doing so is internal to the text. In short, the burden of proof rests not with those who read the text literally but with those who try to project their own ideas onto it.

By what right did Maimonides assume that a seminomadic people living in the ancient Near East were familiar with the Aristotelian philosophy that he inherited over a thousand years later? Spinoza’s point is that if we want to understand what a passage means, we have no choice but to approach it the same way we would approach a passage from the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, or any other ancient text: by studying the language in which it is written and the history of the culture that produced it.

Some will object that by comparing the Bible with other works of ancient literature, Spinoza is mixing apples and oranges. Whatever the culture that produced the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* may have believed, that culture died out a long time ago. Although the literature that it produced still has things to teach us, no one regards that literature as the foundational text for a religion practiced today. To read the Bible as one would read any other ancient text, in the eyes of these critics, is to deprive it of its status as sacred.

While Spinoza goes to great lengths to argue that the Bible *is* the word of God, what he means by this is not that it is based on revelation in the traditional sense of the term but that God’s word is “divinely inscribed in men’s hearts—that is, in men’s minds.”⁵ This means that the life it promotes, a life devoted to justice and mercy for all people, is universally valid. While true, this message says nothing about God’s love of Israel or the divinity of Jesus; in fact, one could derive this

message from any number of secular sources as well, including Spinoza's own writings.

The Danger of Historicism

Even if one is not an adherent of Judaism or Christianity, there is no getting around the fact that, like any method of interpretation, Spinoza's is also subject to abuse. The more we see an ancient text as the product of the culture that produced it, the less it will have to say to a modern culture like ours. Unless we are careful, the Torah will begin to seem like an ancient relic gathering dust in the corner of a museum.

In one respect, Spinoza was right: the ancient Near East knew nothing about the science and philosophy that played so important a role for Maimonides and continue to play a role for us. Nor did the ancient Near East know anything about many of the religious practices that we take for granted. There were no synagogues, no tradition of lighting candles on Friday night, no rabbis, and no standardized prayer books. Wealthy people owned servants. Marriages were often prearranged. Religious rituals typically involved the blood of sacrificial animals. Like kingship, the priesthood was an inherited office.

Worse, if one reads through the entire Bible, one will find passages where God either condones or raises no objection to wars of conquest, including the massacre of whole towns, gang rape, human sacrifice, and a host of other atrocities. For example, at Deuteronomy 7:1-2, Moses tells the people: "When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and possess, and He dislodges many nations before you . . . and when the Lord your God delivers them to you and you defeat them, you must doom them to destruction: grant them no terms and give them no quarter." It is only because later readers saw the Bible as a source of enduring truth that they were able to say that it is a story that promotes mercy, humility, and forgiveness of sin rather than war, rape, and the shedding of human blood. Would the original audience have agreed, or would they have relished the passages dealing with violence as much as Homer's audience relished the battles of the Trojan War?

I opt for the latter. Although it may help us to understand how the original audience for a work of literature would have understood it, there is no reason to think that their understanding is necessarily better than ours. To take a secular example, the First Amendment to the US Constitution prohibits Congress from abridging freedom of speech, but it does not tell us whether “speech” should be construed narrowly to include only verbal communication or broadly to include such things as dance, sculpture, music, or photography. The result is that even if we could resurrect the people who drafted the amendment and ask them what they meant by it, we would still face the question of how *we* should understand it.⁶

By the same token, even if we could resurrect the culture of the ancient Near East—or assure ourselves that we know exactly what the people of that culture thought—we would still face questions of how we should read the Torah. First, there is the obvious fact that people do not always say what they mean or mean what they say. In some cases, it may take extensive questioning to get from one to the other. So even if historical methods allowed us to get clear on what our ancestors *said*, as Kugel indicates, the question of what they *meant* is another story.

Then there is the question of what the editors and redactors who put the various sayings together meant. Their intentions may be just as important as those of the original authors. This is all a way of saying that when dealing with a text as rich and varied as the Torah, meaning is rarely a simple matter. While there is a tendency to think that the closer we are to the literal sense of a Torah passage, the more accurately we understand it, in many instances, the opposite is true.

Consider Exodus 21:23, which demands “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” A person might well ask whether this passage was ever meant to legitimate mutilation of the human body as compensation for an injury or whether it is simply saying that the degree of compensation should match the severity of the offense: *the value of an eye* for an eye, *the value of a tooth* for a tooth, and so on.⁷

Beyond this example, there are any number of occasions when it does not take a person of the status of Maimonides to see that the To-

rah employs metaphors. “Noah walked with God” need not be taken to mean that the two of them strolled down a path together. A better interpretation would be that Noah was an honorable, loving man and therefore close to God. “God took Israel out of Egypt with a mighty hand” does not mean that God flexed his muscles in a literal sense. A better interpretation would be that God’s infinite power was plainly visible during the Exodus. “God spoke to Moses face to face” need not mean that they looked into each other’s eyes. A better interpretation would be that God communicated to Moses without an intermediary or that Moses’s prophecy was superior to that of all others.

What is true of the Torah is also true of modern discourse. Jurists speak of a wall of separation between church and state without referring to anything made of bricks and mortar. Astrophysicists talk about the Big Bang even though the similarity between the origin of the universe and the explosion of a firecracker is tenuous at best. And everyone knows that a computer virus has nothing to do with coughing or sneezing. Whether it is the Torah or a modern news magazine, people often ask us to think of one thing in terms normally suited for another. Not only is there nothing wrong with this, there is everything right with it as a tool to promote effective communication.

In short, meaning is rarely cut and dried. When discussing how people living in the ancient Near East would have understood the Torah, we must also take into consideration that they knew nothing about Greek science or philosophy, the Roman occupation of Judea, the rise of Christianity, Copernicus, the Zohar, or the creation of the modern state of Israel. To the degree that these things bear on how we view religion, their opinions, though obviously relevant, are hardly the last word on the subject.

Not that our opinions are the last word either. In time our understanding of religion may seem just as limited as theirs sometimes does to us. This is not to deny that a culture can identify features of the human condition that are timeless in their application, such as love, hope, and the relation between the divine and the human. It is to deny that when it comes to such matters, an ancient culture speaks

with greater authority merely because it is ancient or a modern culture merely because it is modern. The authority of a text depends on the wisdom it has to impart. What constitutes wisdom is and will always be subject to debate.

Opening a Window to Something New

As part of this discussion, I want to follow Spinoza's advice by looking at another ancient text: Homer's *Iliad*. Where the Torah covers the activities of several generations of characters, the twenty-four books of the *Iliad* cover only the anger of Achilles and the events leading up to the end of the Trojan War. Open up to any page and you will find a story of some of the boldest and most fearsome warriors who ever lived. In scene after scene, we hear about their exploits on the battlefield, often with clinical accuracy. As Greek slays Trojan or Trojan Greek, it is hard not to imagine Homer's audience cheering and shouting, much as modern audiences cheer and shout at football games or action movies.

In the *Iliad*'s last book, the picture changes as Achilles, who has lost his best friend, Patroclus, and Priam, who has lost all of his fifty sons, confront each other. The scene opens when Priam comes to beg for the body of Hector, the greatest of his dead sons:

“Revere the gods, Achilles! Pity me in my own right,
remember your own father! I deserve more pity . . .
I have endured what no one on earth has ever known before—
I put to my lips the hands of the man who killed my son.”

Those words stirred within Achilles a deep desire
to grieve for his own father. Taking the old man's hand
he gently moved him back. And overpowered by memory
both men gave way to grief. Priam wept freely
for man-killing Hector, throbbing, crouching
before Achilles' feet as Achilles wept himself.⁸

Although they are enemies, Achilles and Priam come to recognize their common humanity and the tragic nature of their respective cir-

cumstances. After sharing a meal, they even come to appreciate each other's physical appearance:

They reached out for the good things that lay at hand
and when they had put aside desire for food and drink,
Priam the son of Dardanus gazed at Achilles, marveling
now at the man's beauty, his magnificent build—
face-to-face he seemed a deathless god . . .
and Achilles gazed and marveled at Dardan Priam,
beholding his noble looks, listening to his words.⁹

The scene does not last very long, and the narrator does not stop to comment on its implications. But the meaning of what has happened can hardly be lost: if sworn enemies can treat each other as people even for a brief moment, then maybe victory on the battlefield is not the ultimate expression of human excellence.

Seen in this light, the passage offers us a vision of something not found in the *Iliad's* previous twenty-three books: compassion. Few people would argue that compassion was the centerpiece of Bronze Age heroic culture. We may conclude, therefore, that so far from expressing the values of that culture, the passage questions those values and points the way to something different. What is Achilles's greatest moment—when he slays Hector, or when he breaks bread with Hector's grieving father?

In time Western culture would come to recognize the value of compassion and the need for everyone to respect the dignity of his or her fellow human beings. Prophets would preach it, and philosophers would write about it. All this passage does is give us a momentary glimpse of it. If there is a lesson to be learned, it is that a culture capable of producing great art, literature, or philosophy is rarely one-dimensional. People share values, but they also question what others believe and try to introduce new or different values. Along these lines, Deuteronomy 23:7 tells us that we should not abhor an Egyptian—even though the Egyptians enslaved us and mistreated us.

My point is that if part of the meaning of a text is contained in what it says, another part is contained in the direction to which it points. It is as if in addition to giving us a picture of the society in which she lived, an author can put us on a trajectory that leads to something beyond it. With respect to the Bible, it is hard to read the Prophets without taking the idea of trajectory seriously. Although there are passages that glorify war as much as Homer did, Isaiah could still look beyond the prevailing beliefs of his time to a day when the lion would lie down with the lamb (see Isaiah 11:6).

Needless to say, if a text puts us on a trajectory to something new, it is not necessarily true that the author knows exactly where that trajectory will lead. Homer could hardly have imagined a day when warring nations would confront each other as Achilles and Priam did, nor could Isaiah have imagined a time when the great leaders of the world would sit down to talk. My claim is simply that looking at where an author's thought leads helps us to gain a perspective from which to appreciate the full significance of what he said.

The moment we ask about the direction to which a passage points, we have begun to read it philosophically. As we will see in the next chapter, to understand the opening verses of Genesis, we have to invoke terms like *contingency* and *necessity* that have no correlates in biblical Hebrew. To understand the full importance of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, we have to skip two millennia and look at the thought of Kant and Kierkegaard. To understand what it means for a modern people to be holy, we have to take into account ideas that were not fully expressed until the twentieth century. This does not mean that philosophers always get the last word. No thinker can know all the questions her thought will raise, all the movements it will spawn, or all the challenges it will be asked to confront.

The modern biblical scholar Jon Levenson has introduced a helpful distinction between projection and appropriation.¹⁰ In the former case, the interpreter tries to rewrite history in order to validate his own opinions. This is the strategy that leads people to think that their

views are the same as God's. In the latter case, the interpreter brings the lessons of the past to bear on the present.

I take this to mean that the goal of appropriation is not to validate the present as much as it is to show how a better understanding of one age can lead to a better understanding of the other. I would be less than honest if I did not say that what begins as appropriation often runs the risk of becoming projection. Still, it is a risk that anyone writing on the Torah must be prepared to take. The alternative—tying meaning to historical accuracy—gives us not just the risk of failure but the certainty of it by insisting that no author can escape the limitations of the culture that produced him.

A Mountain Hanging by a Thread

As one might suspect, the problems posed by anachronism and historicism have been around for a long time. The Rabbis of the Talmud realized that although the Torah prohibits work on the Sabbath, it does not have much to say about what sort of activities count as work. As a result, they attempted to fill in the gaps by writing a tractate on Sabbath observance, which turned out to be the longest one in the entire Talmud. Reflecting on the irony of this situation, they compared the laws of Sabbath observance to a mountain hanging by a thread.¹¹ If the Torah supplied the thread, later commentary supplied the mountain. As the Talmud tells us: "Just as what is planted is fruitful and multiplies, so are the words of the Torah fruitful and multiplying."¹²

My procedure in this book will be to start with the thread and proceed to the mountain—or, rather, mountains. I make no claim that there is such a thing as *the* philosophy of the Torah or of the Hebrew Bible taken as a whole.¹³ If some passages open a window that points in one direction, others open windows that point in other directions. In the case of Genesis 22 and the binding of Isaac, we will see that the same passage points in several directions. My claim is only that the passages I discuss are all ways of dealing with the question of how a finite being should relate to an infinite one.

It should be understood that Jews are not the only ones who have

thought about this question. In fact, much of Jewish philosophy is a response to or elaboration of themes taken up by thinkers outside the tradition. If you are suffering from a serious illness, it would be foolish to ignore the advice of a leading physician simply because she is not Jewish. By the same token, if you want to come to grips with big ideas, it would be foolish to ignore the likes of Plato, Augustine, Kant, or Kierkegaard. At this point the only way to test my claim about how to read the Torah is to turn to the passages themselves and consider the wisdom they have to offer.