Ken's Reply

Whatever else one may think about the attempt to find philosophical meaning in the Torah, this much is clear: any author would be flattered to have three such talented and well-meaning scholars comment on his work. I found all of their remarks thought-provoking and hope that everyone will come away from this exchange with a better understanding of the issues. I will take up their comments in the order in which I received them: Michael fist, then Jim, then Shira.

Let me begin by saying that allegorical interpretation is not a surefire way of uncovering the meaning of an ancient text. Like any other method of interpretation, it has successes and failures. To take examples of the latter, few people today would agree with Maimonides that the opening verses of Genesis constitute an early version of Aristotelian physics or that Song of Song is about unity with the Agent Intellect. On the other hand, some people (myself included) would agree with Maimonides that when God says at Exodus 33 that no mortal can see his face and live, what the text really means is that no one can know God as he is in himself.

If I gave the impression that the direction to which a text points is more important than what it says in its historical context, then I plead guilty. My only claim is that the direction to which a text points is part of what of it means and that if we don't take that into account, we run the risk of selling the text short. Absent the Rabbis, Maimonides, Mendelssohn, Cohen, Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas, the Torah would not be as rich as it now is. This is true despite the fact that these people were not engaged in historical scholarship as we now understand it.

I don't think that what I am saying is all that new. As James Kugel pointed out, the authors of the Torah thought of themselves as giving lessons valid for all time. That is certainly the impression one gets after reading Deuteronomy. So while no serious scholar would deny that there are important things to learn by situating the text it in its time, we also have to ask whether there are equally important things to learn by looking at it from a vantage point that is centuries later. Which concepts proved fruitful, which did not? What do we learn from this?

I emphatically reject any suggestion that philosophy is in a privileged position when it comes to interpreting the Torah. Early in the book, I say philosophy does not have the last word when it comes to interpreting the Torah, only that it has a word. The purpose of the book was not to dictate truth but to stimulate thought by presenting a

range of possible interpretations. Most chapters end by saying that each interpretation has something to offer, though none is obviously right or obviously wrong. In Chapter 3, I argue that the philosophic tradition (including Maimonides!) took a wrong turn and that we would be better off trying to see what the plain sense of the Torah is.

Michael asks: What would be lost of the wisdom that the Torah imparts if one were to forego the arduous work of interpreting it and just devoted oneself directly to the wisdom? In answer: (1) the wisdom would be cut off from its source, which is always dangerous, and (2) because it is the Torah, the text, however one interprets it, is sacred and for that reason supersedes any interpretation we make of it. Much as I love them, I don't say a prayer before reading the philosophers mentioned above.

Clearly there are passages in the Torah that imply that God occupies space and can be physically present here rather than there. It would be wrong however to conclude that every passage in the Torah or the Bible more generally assumes this. Let us not forget that neither Solomon's Temple nor the high heavens above it can contain God.

One point on which Michael CAN criticize me has to do with God's presence. I agree with Cohen that God is never present in anything but always to someone. I don't say that all of the Torah supports this reading. On the other hand, Exodus 25:8 says "Let them make me a Tabernacle that I may dwell among them" not in it. The question of what it means for someone to be in the presence of God remains open even today.

What about morality? To me it is one way that finite beings attempt to deal with an infinite one. Much of the Torah is an attempt to set down moral principles that put us in touch with the idea of the infinite: loving the stranger, not taking advantage of the handicapped, setting up a fair and humane judicial system, atoning for sins. Yet important as these things are, they do not exhaust the Torah's message. Other parts include poetry, the design of a Tabernacle, epic narrative, and historical reflection. Give me morality alone and my sense of the infinite would be greatly impoverished as a result. Ditto for philosophy alone, rabbinics alone, history alone, philology alone, or anything else alone. The Torah is too rich for any one mode of interpretation to give us the whole picture. That is why the idea of isolating its wisdom and leaving everything else out does not work.

It seems to me that one of the major problems of our time is that we try to approach great work of art or literature from the standpoint of the modern, academic disciplines in which we all have been placed. All too often what results are one-sided interpretations of things that were never produced for the purpose of taking up space in scholarly journals. If this is true for art and literature, I submit that it is even truer for the Torah.

Michael is right to say that I cannot give hard and fast criteria on what counts as a correct interpretation and what does not – or what constitutes the wisdom that the Torah is trying to teach us. Since all three of my respondents have mentioned the lack of explicit criteria, I'll take up that issue next.

Warning: What I'm about to say will disappoint a lot of people. How do we know when something should be interpreted literally and when metaphorically? My answer: there is no hard and fast criterion, nothing that is both reliable and context neutral. To take examples I use in the book, tell me where the line of literalism ends and that of metaphor begins with cell wall, big bang, atom, wall of separation between church and state. Or to take more examples: God's presence, God speech, what the people saw of God, or the light that shone at the dawn of creation. Any response we give depends on who is reading and what questions they are asking.

Does Maimonides go too far in finding allegories and metaphors in passages that seem to be speaking literally? As I indicated above, the answer is clearly yes. Does that mean that we should abandon the attempt to see some passages as extended metaphors? Absolutely not. Needless to say, there are risks involved whether you think a passage is literal or allegorical. But there are risks involved in every interpretation.

Maimonides did not have to take into account the findings of modern historical scholarship, nor did the Rabbis who preceded him, or the editors and redactors who put the text together. As a result, we cannot be as free in our interpretations as they were in theirs. If however we insist on nothing but historical scholarship, or give it veto power over everything else, the text will suffer as a result.

In response to Jim, Maimonides goes well beyond anything the text says or implies about the difference between Abraham's religion and Moses'. The reason I am sympathetic to him is that he gives us the wherewithal to answer what is otherwise a difficult question. If Abraham was beloved of God with only one commandment that

marked him out as a Jew, why do we need all the others? If Abraham didn't follow dietary laws, observe Shabbat, or wear a kippah, why should we?

In our day and age, there are a lot of people asking these questions. Maimonides gives us the foundation of a reasonable answer – though Abraham's religion worked for him, history gives us ample reason to believe that it would not work for us. If other answers are available, by all means, let's hear them. I just wonder whether, in the last analysis, they will amount to much the same thing.

I repeat: The purpose of this book was not to delegitimize Bible scholarship or to question its importance. It would have been impossible to write it without the help of Sarna, Kugel, Friedman, and Levenson, just to name a few. Shira is certainly right to say that the original audience may well have understood things quite differently from the way we understand them.

Perhaps we can get at what I'm trying to say by imaging a table at which a group of scholars try to make sense of a difficult or important passage. Whom should we invite? To my way of thinking, we should have a Bible scholar and possibly an archeologist depending on the passage. Surely we will want an expert in midrash. Beyond that I suggest a literary scholar, a theologian, and, last but not least, a philosopher. Let no one act as an intellectual police officer by excluding someone else from the conversation. Let no one enter the conversation thinking that only their discipline has anything important to say. Although our participants might achieve unanimity, it is doubtful that they will and therefore unrealistic to uphold unanimity as the standard of success.

That takes us back to the issue of criteria. How will we know when they have succeeded? I submit that there is no way to decide this in advance and that all we can do is take up each interpretation and ask whether we are convinced. Put otherwise, any set of criteria we might propose would either be (a) question begging by privileging one discipline over another, (b) vacuous, or (c) stultifying.

In conclusion, Thinking about the Torah is my way of getting a seat at the table, and in so doing, reserving seats for Michael, Jim, and Shira on future occasions.

Again, thanks to Michael, Jim, and Shira for their responses, and thanks to Dani for making this exchange possible.