

Comments by Michael Fagenblat:

This is an important book that I hope will reach a wide readership. The perplexities of the medieval elites have become roadblocks for mainstream modern Jews, whatever denomination they belong to. For a time, in the post-Holocaust and post-secular climate that was, it seemed as though one could forgo “Jewish theology” by deferring to “praxis” and “community” (or “forms of life”). This strategy has exhausted itself. Without *thinking about the Torah* the shibboleths of “praxis” and “community” will increasingly ring hollow and fail to motivate all but sentimental, dogmatic or behaviourist forms of Jewish faith. Flanked by Maimonides on one side and Hermann Cohen on the other, Seeskin endeavors to overcome the immense gulf between the prima facie (historical or literal) meaning of the biblical text and a metaphysical conception of God (infinite, perfect, abstract) or a liberal conception of religion (voluntary, civic, communal, ethical). I have much more admiration for, than doubts about this project, especially its erudite and engaging style, but I’ll say more about the doubts.

The first chapter, “How to Read the Torah,” defends an interpretative approach that Seeskin calls anachronism, which looks to me a lot like allegory, a way of making the text speak otherwise than what it says. I put it this way because I find the core problems associated with allegory resurfacing in this account of anachronism. Seeskin is interested less in what the Torah “said” than what it “meant”; he seeks “the direction to which it points,” its “trajectory to something new”. What determines this direction or trajectory? Seeskin invokes the notion of a “better” understanding of the Torah. But what counts for a better understanding? The question is only lightly thematized, though it determines the entire course of Seeskin’s interpretations. “The authority of a text depends on the wisdom it has to impart.” A better and therefore authoritative understanding, then, is one that imparts more wisdom. But what is wisdom? Ever reasonable, Seeskin admits that “What constitutes wisdom is and will always be subject to debate.” But this is just a way of saying that *philosophy* is an interminable quest. The table has already been turned: whatever philosophy determines as wisdom will be what the Torah will have meant. Does this not render

the Torah into the proverbial ladder that can be kicked away once it has been climbed? Once philosophy has understood its allegorical or anachronistic trajectory, what wisdom does the Torah retain? And, more crucially, does the Torah retain any authority that is distinct from the philosophical wisdom which it imparts? Moreover, wisdom runs its own course and stands independently of the Torah: Aristotle and Kant did not need the Torah, so why does any philosopher need it? Seeskin's answer comes in Chapter 6, "The Need for Community". The need for community, however, can be satisfied in any number of ways that are compatible with the philosophical "trajectory" of the Torah but have nothing to do with centering one's life on it or even taking a passing interest in it. Even if we grant that anachronistic appropriation of the Torah can be responsibly practiced, we need an account of why one would be motivated to do so. 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? It is not "*How to Read the Torah*" that left me wanting but the lack of discussion of "*Why Read the Torah*". The Maimonidean answer—the political expediency of Torah—is unavailable to Seeskin and thus the *philosophical* commitment to Torah goes unexplained, though everything depends on it.

Chapter Six illustrates this dilemma. It interprets the account of God's dwelling in the sanctuary as "a symbol of God's ongoing commitment to the Israelite people and their willingness to honor and serve him." Seeskin dismisses as "pagan" the thought of God inhabiting an actual locale, which he ascribes to "the tendency to concretize God" that "runs deep in the human psyche." In his view the verse—"Let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them"—is only a symbol of God's dwelling which points to the true (Kantian) *usefulness* of "religion," for "we need the encouragement, talent, and fellowship of other people if we are to have any chance of accomplishing *the goals that morality assigns us* (my emphasis)." It seems that for Seeskin authority and wisdom are entirely on the side of morality, which alone has the power to assign itself to us, while *the Torah's descriptions of the manifest presence of God serves only to symbolize* the wisdom and authority of morality. The chapter concludes with a reiteration of the purely symbolic (allegorical, anachronistic, metaphorical) meaning of God's dwelling: "In time, the Rabbis came to see that God does not need gold, silver, or priestly vestments to dwell somewhere: his presence can be felt whenever two people sit together to discuss words of Torah." But I see no reason why Seeskin should

think that discussing words of Torah will bring about the dwelling of God. Does he not think, rather, that accomplishing the goals of morality brings about the symbolic “presence” of God? And if so, why bother discussing words of Torah, especially as they so often seem to belie the dictates of morality?

I would also note how Seeskin’s way of reading the Torah isolates one key verse, encapsulated as the epigraph to each chapter, and then shows how this verse opens a trajectory for understanding the wisdom of the world. “Let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them” is interpreted as orienting our thinking toward community, which turns out, after an absorbing philosophical excurses, to be a voluntary association of moral agents. There is here a verse-to-world correlation which governs the interpretative trajectory. Two crucial things seem to me lost in this. First, as mentioned, it is as if the verse is exhausted by its philosophical interpretation, as if nothing is left once it has been conceptually elucidated. Second, and related, it is as if the verse aims to *refer* to the world, in this case to the community or voluntary association at which it anachronistically aims, as if the verse were allegorically *about* that. One feature of midrashic and kabbalistic hermeneutics, which philosophical allegory often eschews, is that scriptural verses ultimately refer to other verses and never reach their final destination in some state of the world. In thinking *about* the Torah, Seeskin constantly assumes that the Torah is *about* something important in the world, precisely that which concepts can also refer to. I am not convinced, however, that this is the best way to read Torah. I wonder if the Torah is *about* anything, or about anything that a philosophical concept could just as readily refer to. Or if it is not rather more like that cat about the house, a wandering about rather than a referring of the verse to some state in the world that is outside the Torah. For the Torah to be the infinite source of wisdom we assume it to be, something more like this has to be at work than a way of reading which refers the text to some worldly or ideal state of affairs.

Alternatively, cannot the filling of the sanctuary with God’s *kavod*—glory or presence—be understood *philosophically* without rendering it as a mere symbol of morality? I think it could. Seeskin takes the indwelling of divine presence as a pagan or psychologically primitive relic, a shortfall or anticipation of a *particular conception of wisdom* whose trajectory can only be drawn out by a *rationalizing* philosophical

interpretation. I would rather argue that the notion of divine presence presages an excess to reason, a manifestation that is not exhausted by the powers of cognition, and in that respect a wisdom attentive to the manifesting, i.e. revealing, of more than we can rationally construct or represent. Phenomenology would be the obvious candidate for a philosophy that attempts to understand the non-symbolic validity of manifest modes of presence, for its “objects” of investigation include manifest (i.e. revealed) forms of meaning ‘irreducible’ to cognition. A philosophy of revelation, a phenomenological approach to the Torah, need not begin with a dogmatic conception of Sinai. It is enough that revelation be thought as a possibility rather than a determined historical given for the revelatory record of the Torah to prove instructive. To think revelation as concrete possibility of manifest forms of God’s appearing would provide an alternative philosophical approach to that which thinks it merely as symbol. This approach would, I think, get closer to the Torah’s sense of a God who *dwells* and *manifests concretely*. Seeskin provides an exceptionally lucid and coherent way of extending the Maimonidean-Cohenian tradition of rendering Judaism as a religion of reason that accords with notions of metaphysical and political rationality dear to many modern Jews. But whatever Judaism will be, and whatever criteria of rationality modern Jews will adopt, I would wager that a philosophical approach to *the Torah* must address the revealed, manifest forms of divine presence. Instead of reading the Torah as anachronistically directed toward modern criteria of metaphysical and political reason, we might then defer to the Torah for indications of a philosophy of revelation that is still to come. On this other version of anachronism, the Torah would still have what to teach and reveal, thus to be Torah, and not only symbolize what a certain conception of modern wisdom already knows.

Comments by James Diamond

I wish to preface the following comments and questions with my profound appreciation for Kenneth Seeskin’s philosophical approach to the Bible. If, as Seeskin states, “the authority of a text depends on the wisdom it has to impart” (p.9) then his excavations of the Bible’s wisdom go a long way to shore up its authority. I pose

questions only to inspire a dialogue in the spirit of the rabbinic tradition Seeskin himself cites, which considers God's presence to inhere whenever "two people sit together to discuss the words of Torah." (p.100)

Seeskin offers a sorely needed corrective to the critical world of biblical scholarship. An exclusively critical-historical approach to the Bible runs the risk of reductionism. Rampant in the scholarly world of biblical studies is the interminable exercise of determining the precise historical development of the Bible while rigorously avoiding questions of the text's substantive value or meaning. Seeskin opens the text to those questions. However, biblical scholars respond, as Jon Levenson has recently in another symposium on Seeskin's book in *Mosaic*, by arguing that reading the Bible philosophically runs the risk of imposing a foreign mode of discourse on an ancient Near Eastern text. It therefore does not read the Bible "on its own terms".

One of the crucial methods of extracting philosophical meaning from the Bible is the use of metaphor. It is no surprise then that Maimonides devotes a substantial amount of his *Guide of the Perplexed* to biblical language showing its elasticity because it is absolutely critical to his enterprise. A literal understanding of the text ends up in a false metaphysics. Worse, literal understandings of anthropocentric depictions of God that pervade the entire Bible ends in idolatry. What Maimonides did then was to build a lexicon of biblical terms that provided the semantic building blocks for transforming the bible into philosophical language.

The question remains though as to what precisely are the criteria by which one determines when to take a certain verse literally and when metaphorically. And, are those criteria alien to the biblical mode of discourse? Maimonides for example tests biblical language against his own philosophically demonstrated truths. If it offends then it must be read metaphorically to conform to those truths. Seeskin himself admits that reading it this way is just as anachronistic as rabbinic or Christological readings (p.3). Yet, often, as one would expect, Seeskin resorts to Maimonides to flesh out his philosophical reactions to the text, sometimes prefacing them by "Maimonides to the rescue". What is the principle that distinguishes between a metaphorical and a literal passage? The very language used of "rescue" implies that the text, left to its own devices, would have expired long ago.

Seeskin cites a number of examples such as "Noah walked with God," God's "mighty hand," and God speaking "face to face" as bearing "better interpretations" than the literal (p.8). Seeskin reveals his Maimonidean colours here. What makes the literal understanding inferior to some ethical or metaphysical one for Seeskin is that it

offends a philosophical conception of God that rules out all anthropomorphisms. If, as Seeskin admits, the biblical authors “knew nothing about Greek science or philosophy” then how is the judgment made that a metaphorical interpretation coloured by more advanced philosophical notions of God a “better” one? For another example, what notion of divine being transforms God’s first question addressed to Adam in Eden of “Where are you?” from a literal spatial inquiry to an existential philosophical one?

In his chapter on “The Need for Community,” Seeskin suggestively traces the evolution along the biblically recorded historical chronology from Abrahamic religion to a Mosaic one. He does so along a trajectory from an abstract intellectual religion mostly free of ritual and commandments practiced by Abraham to a more concrete one rooted in rituals, cultic spaces like the Tabernacle and later the Temple, and ordinances. After the failure of the Abrahamic experiment, the Mosaic one recovers and preserves the truths expounded by Abraham, by forging a community that coalesce through shared modes of worship. Performance, law, and sanctions are the glue of any community or polis, and so ensures the survival of a faith and ideological community as well.

Yet, Seeskin relies heavily on Maimonides’ historical reconstruction of biblical history. Here we confront another problem with drawing philosophical conclusions from the Bible in addition to the issue of metaphor. It is the extent to which we can supply details on which the text itself is completely silent. The Bible provides us with virtually nothing to support Maimonides’ intellectual biography of Abraham’s life. It does not inform us as to why God chose Abraham. The text indicates that it is patently an arbitrary choice. Furthermore, we are not apprised of what his beliefs regarding God consisted of, or how he taught those beliefs to others, galvanizing, as Maimonides’ described it, a “nation that knows God.” Indeed we don’t even know whether he was a monotheist in the sense that we now understand that belief. What are the rules which constrain us in filling in the gaps we encounter with every line of the Bible before we slip into anachronism?

Comments by Shira Weiss

In the first chapter of his new work, Kenneth Seeskin appropriately identifies how the omission of details, intentions and reactions from many biblical episodes elicits

speculation from contemporary readers, as it did from rabbinic, exegetic and philosophical interpreters through the ages. The ambiguity that results from the brevity with which some biblical stories are recounted can leave the reader unclear about what the Bible is trying to teach and, thus, multiple interpretations can be advanced. Much of the guidance embedded within the Bible is not formulated in explicit imperative form, but can be gleaned from more subtle narratives. The reader neither needs to simplify or stereotype ambiguous identities and situations in the Bible, nor attempt to fill in gaps and resolve the narrative ambiguities if that means reducing the text to a definitive lesson. Rather, multiple competing reasonable and defensible interpretations may be possible.

However, Seeskin raises an interesting question- to what extent ought one's own philosophical views influence one's reading of the Bible? Throughout history, many philosophical exegetes imposed their own philosophical opinions on their reading of biblical texts. For example, Seeskin questions Maimonides' use of Aristotelian philosophy in his biblical interpretation. "By what right did Maimonides assume that a seminomadic people living in ancient Near East were familiar with the Aristotelian philosophy that he inherited over a thousand years later?" (p.5) Spinoza refutes such an influence on biblical interpretation by arguing that the only way to understand what a passage means is by studying the language in which it is written and the history of the culture that produced it. However, Seeskin subjects Spinoza's method of interpretation to objection as well and describes the danger of historicism. "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." (p.6) Seeskin claims that even if the ancient Near Eastern cultural thought could be uncovered, the question of how the contemporary reader should interpret the Torah would remain.

Perhaps Seeskin underestimates the value of historical analysis in biblical interpretation. The exploration of ancient biblical texts in their historical and cultural terms can enhance a contemporary understanding of biblical concepts that may no longer be familiar or applicable in modern times. Even those concepts that retain contemporary meaning, may refer in the Bible to something different than how they are perceived today. Exploring Scriptures in light of ancient history and culture does not diminish its relevance for the contemporary reader. Rather, biblical concepts and narratives can be understood in their historical and cultural context, while their larger lessons that can transcend historical contexts and speak with insight to any age can be deciphered, extracted and internalized by the modern reader. Seeskin instructively

cites Jon Levenson's distinction between projection, in which the interpreter tries to rewrite history in order to validate his own opinions, and appropriation, in which the interpreter brings the lessons of the past to bear on the present. (p.11) A better understanding of the biblical age can contribute to an enhanced understanding of modernity. Humanity can continue to engage with the history of ideas, as concepts described in the Bible can be illuminating for the modern reader, leading him to challenge his own assumptions and reevaluate his perspective.

Seeskin concludes, "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." (p.11) Seeskin identifies the reader's interest in the direction to which a passage points as reading the text philosophically. For instance, he cites Gen. 22 and the binding of Isaac passage as pointing in several directions. However, Seeskin does not clarify whether or not such a trajectory is left open to the interpretation of each reader? Are there parameters by which the passage focuses the reader in a particular direction? To what extent should contemporary questions, tools and methods be used to decipher biblical teachings in an effort to discover its abiding significance and find value and guidance regarding modern issues?

Finally, I would suggest that there is a need for caution when the reader attempts to universalize a lesson extracted from a biblical text. Even though the Bible continues to be a resource for theological and moral thinking, and significant ideas and messages can be learned from the Scriptural texts that can transcend their ancient source, it is difficult to derive all-encompassing rules in a simple codified form. The Bible *illustrates* important philosophical questions through its ambiguous episodes and inspires reflection, but does not promulgate unequivocal dogmas. Instead through the biblical literary framework, readers are invited to grapple with these complex questions and internalize such considerations into their own thinking. Readers can learn from the biblical teachings and bring them to bear as they encounter their own issues in modern life, with sensitivity to the diverse particulars of each circumstance.