How to Read the Torah[1]

By

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Let me begin with an important admission: my training is in philosophy, not Bible scholarship. To some this will mean that I am trespassing on other people's territory. I want to argue otherwise – not by claiming that I have uncovered the philosophy of the Torah or of the Hebrew Bible generally but that to understand the Torah, you have to do justice to the philosophic questions it raises. How, after all, can a book a book that talks about God, puts forth standards of right and wrong behavior, and holds out the promise of redemption not raise questions about our place in the cosmos, the limits of human knowledge, the meaning of human life, and the nature of divine or human love?

Sometimes I imagine that if the Torah were to speak to us directly, it would say something like this: "You cannot read me in the way you read any other book. It is not just that I am the product of a divine revelation but that my meaning is too rich for any one person or age to exhaust. So if you want to understand me, you will have to see the art and architecture that I inspired, hear the music, study the religious and political movements, and reflect on the philosophy. If all you do is read the stories and study the laws in isolation, you will be selling me – and yourself – short."

This is not a book that anyone should sell short. 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 narrative, parable, poetry, moral guidance, 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 of the Torah can fail to be struck by the compressed form in which the narration occurs. The creation of the universe is covered in 31 verses, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden in 24, and the near sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham in just 19. 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? 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.

Because the details it gives are so few, reading the Torah always raises the question of whether we have uncovered its true meaning or projected our own opinions into a text that knows nothing about them. The problem is particularly acute if one wants to read the Torah philosophically. When the Hellenistic philosopher Philo Judaeus read the Torah, he found the principles of Platonic philosophy, 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, 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. The problem with having an axe to grind is that it is almost impossible <u>not</u> to find whatever you are looking for.

From a Jewish perspective, it was Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) who tried to put a stop to this. His idea was that in reading the Bible, we have to be careful to distinguish what it means from whether we think it is true. Put otherwise, the fact that <u>we</u> are convinced of something does not justify us in saying that the authors of the Bible were convinced of it too. By what right can we assume that a semi-nomadic people living in the ancient Near East were familiar with philosophic ideas that were not articulated for hundreds even thousands of years after they lived?

The answer is that in a text with the depth and subtlety of the Torah, meaning is rarely cut and dried. Consider a secular example. What did the authors of the Bill of Rights mean when they said that Congress could not abridge freedom of speech? Did they intend this to apply only to verbal communication or to include such things as dance,

sculpture, music, or photography? In other words, did they understand speech or broadly as a synonym for expression. Even if we could resurrect the people who drafted the original document, we would still face the question of how it should be interpreted. By the same token, even if we could resurrect the culture of the ancient Near East – or assure ourselves that we knew exactly what the people of that culture thought – we would still face question of how we should read the Torah.

The Bill of Rights is written in simple declarative prose. As we saw, the Torah combines a number of literary genres, several of which do much more than declare this or that to be true. Is Jacob's Ladder a statement of fact or a parable designed to shed light on the relation between heaven and earth? When God says that no mortal can see his face and live at Exodus 33, does this mean that they will be consumed by fire or that the nature of divinity will always be something of a mystery?

To take another example, let us consider the Iliad. Where the Torah covers the activities of several generations, the 24 books of the Iliad cover only the anger of Achilles and the events leading up to the end of the Trojan War. It is a story about 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 image Homer's audience cheering and shouting, much as modern audiences cheer and shout at football games or action movies.

In the last book, though, the picture changes as Achilles, who has lost Patroclus, his best friend in the world, and Priam, who has lost all of his 50 sons, confront each other. The scene opens when Priam comes to beg for the body of Hector, the greatest of his dead sons (The Iliad, Book 24, 588-97):

"Revere the gods, Achilles! Pity me in my own right,
remember your own father! I deserve more pity . . .
I have endured what no one 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.

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

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. I submit 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' greatest moment – when he slays Hector or when he breaks bread with Hector's grieving father?

In time Western culture would came to recognize the value of compassion and the need for everyone to respect the dignity of their 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 never one-dimensional. In addition to shared values, there are people who question those values and try to introduce new or different values. Along these lines, Deuteronomy 23:7 tells us that an Israelite should not abhor an Egyptian – even though the Egyptians enslaved them and mistreated them.

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 he 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 (11:6) could still look beyond the prevailing beliefs of his time to a day when the lion would lie down with the lamb. As the Talmud (Chagigah

3a) tells us: "Just as what is planted is fruitful and multiplies, so are the words of the Torah fruitful and multiplying."

Needless to say, if a text puts us on a trajectory to something new, it does not necessarily follow 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 an organization where the great leaders of the world sit down to talk. My claim is simply that looking at where a text leads helps us to gain a perspective from which to appreciate the significance of it was trying to say.

The moment we ask about the direction to which a text points, we have begun to read it philosophically. To understand the opening verses of Genesis, we have to invoke categories like contingency and necessity that have no correlates in biblical Hebrew. To understand the full important 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 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 get the last word on everything, only that they get a word.

I would be less than honest if I did not say that my approach also runs the risk of projection. But it is a risk that anyone writing on the Torah must be prepared to take. The alternative – tying meaning exclusively to historical accuracy – gives us not just the risk of failure but the near certainty of it by insisting that it is impossible for an author to escape the limitations of the culture that produced her.

To repeat: I am not saying that there is such a thing as the philosophy of the Torah. If some passages open a window that points in one direction, others open windows that point in other directions. The story of the binding of Isaac may point in several directions. My claim comes to this: that reduced to simplest terms, the Torah is a book about how a finite being should relate to an infinite one, which is to say a being unaffected by wind, rain, change of seasons, or any other natural force, a being who answers to no one and is capable of creating the entire universe out of nothing.

It is by directing our attention to such a being that we are able to appreciate the vastness, depth, and majesty of the universe in all its dimensions. By contrast, it is by directing our attention to such a being that we are able to recognize the folly, vanity, and triviality that occupy so much of everyday life. Without such a being, everything that life has to offer would be of limited value. Each day would bring a new set of problems but none so weighty that it would force you to examine everything you stand for. To be sure, such a life is livable, but it is not the life that the Torah asks us to live.

Once we introduce the idea of an infinite being, questions arise immediately. Does such a being have the right to command a ritual murder? If no person can see the face of this being and live, what can we know about it and how closely can we approach it? Does it want to be worshipped, as Moses did, on a mountaintop with no special clothes or implements, or does it want to be worshipped in a luxurious tabernacle with elaborately constructed vestments? Is it possible for a finite being like us to imitate an infinite one? If so, how? Finally, why does such a being want our love and what would it mean for us to love it?

I wrote Thinking About the Torah to examine these questions – not with a goal to proposing simple, straightforward answers but with a goal to getting people to think about them in an informed and responsible way, which is another way of saying to become active rather than passive in their outlook on life. "The surest way to suppress our ability to understand the meaning of God and the importance of worship," wrote the twentieth century theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel (Heschel, 1955, p. 42), "is to take things for granted." Let us therefore take nothing for granted. Let us read the Torah as an open book intended to stimulate the human mind to ever-higher levels of understanding and appreciation.

[1] The following is adapted from Thinking About the Torah by Kenneth Seeskin, forthcoming from the Jewish Publication Society in November 2016.

References

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