



Devarim

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Rereading the Akedah Story (Genesis 22)

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Good literature always yields new readings—even contradictory ones—because it reflects the complexity and paradoxes of life itself, which is rarely straightforward. This is especially true of biblical narratives, which are rich in symbolism, depth, and emotional nuance. These passages invite continual rereadings, often suggesting diverse meanings that remain anchored in the text. Indeed, this is the goal of *midrash*—the Jewish tradition of exploring scripture through imaginative, multifaceted commentary.

Midrash does not seek to resolve contradictions but to probe them, uncovering spiritual and ethical insights that speak anew to each generation. While this approach may diverge from literal or traditional readings, such tension is not a weakness—it is the mark of a living tradition. These interpretations do not reject the past but expand it, showing that sacred texts continue to reveal new truths as we return to them with fresh eyes and changing lives.

Two *midrashim* can seem contradictory while actually supplementing each other, together exploring the emotional landscape of human experience that is full of contradiction—coexisting feelings that defy logical categories. Emotions are

non-binary. One can love and hate, grieve and rejoice, trust and doubt—all at once. Feelings are not logical propositions; they live in the gray areas that logic denies. It is not surprising, then, that different readers find different emotions in the same text.

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, late co-*rosh yeshivah* of Yeshivat Har Etzion, wrote:

Surely, recognition of the human and emotional dimension of even our greatest—so amply, vigorously, and imaginatively portrayed by *midrashim*—is critical for a proper understanding of their lives and their meaning.¹

Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein, the current co-*rosh yeshivah*, echoes that approach:

Human events as well as metaphysics are woven into the text [of *Bereshit*]. This is true of Noah, Avraham and Sarah, Yitzhak and Rivka, Yaakov and his family, and many others. ... The characters are living people with real emotions, coping with the whole range of situations with which human existence challenges them.²

Even the greatest characters of the Bible are to be seen not as distant icons but as flesh-and-blood people, noble yet vulnerable, shaped by triumphs and shadowed by their own imperfections. The Torah does not veil their struggles; it lets us witness their hesitations and even their misjudgments. In this spirit, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, nineteenth-century foundational figure of *Torah im Derekh Eretz*, illuminates the idea with a voice that feels both timeless and alive:

The Torah never presents our great men as being perfect; it deifies no man, says of none “here you have the ideal, in this man the Divine became human.” Altogether it puts the life of no man before us as the pattern out of which we are to learn what is right and good, what we have to do, what refrain [sic] from doing. Where the Word of God would set a pattern before us for us to imitate, it places no man born of dust [sic], there God says, “Look at Me, imitate Me, wander in My Ways.” We are never to say: “This must be right for did not so-and-so do it!” The Torah is no “collection of examples of saints.” It relates what occurred, not because it was exemplary but because it did

¹ R. Aharon Lichtenstein, “Introduction,” in Francis Nataf, [*Redeeming Relevance in the Book of Genesis: Explorations in Text and Meaning*](#) (The Genesis Institute, 2006), 11.

² R. Mosheh Lichtenstein, [*Moses: Envoy of God, Envoy of His People*](#) (Ktav, 2008), 250, 244f.

occur.

The Torah never hides from us the faults, errors and weaknesses of our great men. Just by that it gives the stamp of veracity to what it relates. But in truth, by the knowledge which is given us [sic] of their faults and weaknesses, our great men are in no wise [sic] made lesser but actually greater and more instructive. If they stood before us as the purest models of perfection we should attribute them as having a different nature, which has been denied to us. Were they without passion, without internal struggles, their virtues would seem to us the outcome of some higher nature, hardly a merit and certainly no model that we could hope to emulate.³

Of course, this is not to say that our biblical heroes were “just” ordinary living people. They were unmistakably towering spiritual figures, achieving levels far beyond our reach. If the Torah portrays them in human terms, it is to tell us: Don’t think you are above doing or feeling anything in

particular. *Even* our giants did the same.

In reading the *Akedah*—the Binding of Isaac in [Genesis 22](#)—we should keep in mind that the narrative tells us how Abraham acted in response to God’s command to sacrifice his son, but it leaves us to discern his emotions and thoughts.⁴ Abraham’s only recorded response in the *peshat* is silence: He “rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey” ([22:3](#)). This silence leaves room for various midrashic interpretations of Abraham’s experience.

[Midrash Tehillim \(112\)](#) portrays Abraham’s obedience as joyful: “His delight is greatly in His commandments”—he delights in fulfilling them with willingness. Rabbi Avraham Saba comments that Abraham “rushed to fulfill his Creator’s command.”⁵

Meanwhile, *Midrash Aggadah Bereishit (Vayera 22)* suggests a very different mindset:

When they were travelling, the Satan came to Abraham. He said to him, “Old man, what are you thinking? Are you going to slaughter the son who was granted to you by God when you were one

³ R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch: Translated and Explained by Samson Raphael Hirsch*. *Genesis*, trans. Isaac Levy, 2nd ed. (Judaica Press, 1963), on Gen. 12:10.

⁴ I have elsewhere read the *Akedah* story as a staged drama in which Abraham and Isaac knew that there was no request

for child sacrifice. See Joel B. Wolowelsky, “The Akedah Drama,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2026): 49–52.

⁵ R. Avraham Saba, *Tzror Ha-Mor*, [commentary on Genesis 22:3](#).

hundred years old? I am the one who has deceived you and instructed you saying, 'Take your son....'"

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg suggests that the Satan can be read as a projection of Abraham's inner turmoil and worst fear. "The Satan who blocks Abraham's way is not simply a metaphysical adversary; he is the voice of Abraham's own inner resistance, the voice of sanity that whispers, 'What are you doing? Will you destroy your son?'"⁶ According to this reading, this is not a joyful moment!

Zornberg hears Abraham's resistance in the Midrash. Jonathan Jacobs, through his close literary reading of the biblical text, detects moments when Abraham loiters at the edge of action, hardly rushing to fulfill his Creator's command. Abraham's silence masks turmoil rather than serenity, his inner world exposed.

The text [in verses 9–10] expresses this delay with another list of six successive verbs: "And he built—and he arranged—and he bound—and he placed—and he put forth—and he took." This long list of actions, recalling the series of six

verbs that appeared in Scene 2 (verse 3), conveys to the reader a sense of busyness, a lingering activity.⁷

Jacobs concludes his discussion with an observation that Abraham's apprehensiveness does not detract in any way from his stature and from his complete desire to fulfill God's will:

Abraham is presented as a complex, human figure who is torn between his personal and family needs and wants and the desire to fulfill God's command. His decision to fulfill God's word although it conflicts so painfully with his own needs, illuminates the patriarch of the Israelite nation not as someone who fulfills God's command in a mechanical fashion, devoid of thought or independent will, but rather as a great figure who chooses to fulfill God's word even where this entails waging a difficult inner battle.⁸

These insights into Abraham's personal turmoil should actually be reassuring to the religious individuals striving to fulfill God's will while

⁶ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, [*The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis*](#) (Doubleday, 1995), 137.

⁷ Jonathan Jacobs, "[Willing Obedience with Doubts: Abraham at the Binding of Isaac](#)," *Vetus Testamentum* 60, no. 4 (2010): 556.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 559.

encountering inner conflict and resistance of their own. If *even* Abraham, our Knight of Faith, can wrestle with such tensions and remain close to God, then our own conflicts need not be destabilizing. That is part of the gain in seeing our biblical heroes in human terms.

Interestingly, [*Midrash Tanhuma \(Vayera 23\)*](#) offers a strikingly powerful portrait of Abraham allowing himself to reveal his thoughts once it has been settled that Isaac is not to be sacrificed:

“It was in my heart, yesterday, to remind You that You told me that Isaac was my seed, when You said to me: *Take him for a burnt-offering*. But I restrained myself and did not challenge You. Therefore, when Isaac’s descendants sin and are being oppressed, recall the binding of Isaac, reckon it as if his ashes were piled upon the altar, and pardon them and release them from their anguish.” The Holy One, blessed be He, answered: “You have spoken what was in your heart, now I will say what I wish to say. In the future Isaac’s descendants will sin against Me, and I will judge them on Rosh Hashanah. If they want Me to discover something to their credit, and to recall for their advantage the binding of Isaac, let them blow upon this shofar.” Abraham asked: “What shofar?” The Holy One,

blessed be He, said: “Turn around. Then it was that *Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold, behind a ram caught in the thicket by his horns* (Gen. 22:13). This was one of the ten things that were created at twilight.

This *midrash* reframes Abraham not as a serene believer but as one angered at being tested, one who dares to make demands of God in return. God does not protest but quickly agrees—with a puzzling counter-demand that they must blow the shofar. God’s answer introduces the shofar as the symbol of the ram that had always been waiting to replace Isaac. God insists that there be no misunderstanding: the ram was there from the beginning, and there was never an intention to sacrifice Isaac. The shofar symbolizes God’s rejection of child sacrifice, making unmistakable the true meaning of the *Akedah*.

With all this in mind, let us reread the *Akedah* story and consider some basic questions: Why would God find it necessary to test Abraham? And why would Abraham follow God’s instructions with equanimity? Indeed, given the reticence of Abraham in comparison to the defiance that he exhibited in the preceding story of the rescue of Sodom, the reader is surely thirsty to understand what transpires in the patriarch’s mind.

The *Akedah* story opens with the phrase “After these things.” This is not merely a chronological marker; it calls the reader to recall prior events in order to understand the *Akedah*. We propose that

the key to appreciating God's motive here is to return to Abraham's debate with God regarding the destruction of Sodom ([18](#)). God explains that He reveals His plan to destroy Sodom precisely because He has chosen Abraham "to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just" ([18:19](#)). God gives Abraham the opportunity to express his doubts, and endorses his challenge: "Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" ([18:23](#)). God encourages the exchange by debating the issue with him, agreeing in the end that innocents will not be killed.

In our unconventional reading, the *Akedah* is a continuation of this understanding of God's educational process. Abraham is presented with what should be an obviously unethical demand. It is an opportunity for him to protest: Could the Judge of all the earth demand what is morally indefensible? God would then concede the point, thereby not only encouraging His people to protest what they see as unethical but also making a statement agreeing that child sacrifice is unacceptable, contrasting Jewish ethics with those of Abraham's world, where child sacrifice was a familiar expression of devotion. Indeed, Scripture itself records that King Mesha of Moab offered his firstborn son as a burnt offering ([2 Kings 3:27](#)).

In this rereading, God is not testing Abraham. He would surely assume that Abraham sees killing innocent children as murder, not divine devotion.

He is giving him an opportunity to model God's ethics. Indeed, the medieval commentator Don Isaac Abarbanel challenges the conventional translation of the Hebrew word *nissah* ([Gen. 22:1](#))—typically understood as tested—and instead links it to *nes*, meaning "banner" or "sign."⁹ God was elevating Abraham, making him a moral banner for a new kind of faith, not suggesting that he submit to the twisted then-contemporary logic of child sacrifice.

But how, then, are we to understand Abraham's response? He does not protest this time. Instead, he rises early and departs in silence. How can we understand his state of mind?

Let us try to picture Abraham when he hears the request to sacrifice Isaac. He knows that this could not possibly be what he is actually supposed to do. But suppose he hears it not as an opportunity but as the test it seems to be. He mistakenly thinks that God is actually testing whether he understood that his God is different from the pagan deities. After years of devotion and painful trials, Abraham might well have felt wounded—or even angry—at this new demand, as though his understanding of his faith was still unproven. His silence becomes its own language: not submission, but quiet defiance. It is obedience tinged with protest, a performance of faith that exposes the tension between command and conscience. Abraham seems to say: If You must test me, then see how I obey—but know that such

⁹ Cf. [Bereshit Rabbah 55](#).

obedience rebukes the very notion of the test.

Still, Abraham has not lost faith. He tells the servants, “We will both return to you” ([22:5](#)). Yet when Isaac asks where the lamb is, Abraham’s answer—“God will provide”—carries a tone that may blend faith with bitterness.

Each step heightens the tension. Will God make clear that He has been misunderstood? When Abraham raises the knife, the angels watching from on high have had enough. One finally calls out, “Abraham! ... Do not stretch out your hand against the boy!”—adding, “and do not do anything (*me’umah*) to him” ([22:12](#)). Rashi, following alternate manuscripts, reads *me’umah* as *mum*—a blemish. Perhaps Abraham was planning to declare Isaac improper as a sacrifice by creating a small blemish, but the angel insists that even that would be too much. Even the smallest wound would be too much.

The angel, speaking for God, continues: *ki atah yada’ti*. This is commonly translated as “now I know.” But *ki* can also mean “indeed,” and Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (*Keli Yakar*) notes that *atah* need not exclude what came before, and *yada’ti* may be read as *hoda’ti*, “I have made known.” [Rashi \(22:12\)](#) follows this line: “Now I can respond to the accusers”—those who doubted Abraham’s devotion. In other words, God admits: “Indeed, I already knew that you fear God.” Truly, Abraham had already demonstrated this when he had sent away Ishmael, his firstborn, at God’s command despite the matter distressing him greatly ([21:11](#)). That was a profound act of

faith and surrender. The *Akedah* does not prove Abraham’s obedience anew; it clarifies that such obedience does not entail the blood of the innocent.

When Abraham lifts his eyes, he sees a ram caught in the thicket. According to [Pirkei Avot \(5:6\)](#) and [Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer \(ch. 31\)](#), this ram had been prepared for this purpose since the beginning of creation. Having a substitute was no coincidence but rather part of the original divine plan. The *Akedah* thus reveals that divine will is bound to moral law.

The angel promises Abraham descendants through Sarah and possession of the land. However, these are not new rewards but reaffirmations of blessings already unfolding. Isaac has been born. Abraham has settled in Be’er Sheva. Avimelekh has recognized him as a source of blessing. Faith had already been proven; what remained was making sure that it was understood by all that true faith renounces cruelty.

While the angel’s intercession moved the standoff forward, the consequences of unresolved misunderstandings often linger. Abraham and God never speak again to each other. And so too with Isaac, who was not asked for his agreement to participate in this event. Abraham and Isaac walked together (*yahdav*) up the mountain ([Gen. 22:6, 8](#)), but Abraham came back alone, going to Be’er Sheva together (*yahdav*) with his anonymous attendants instead ([22:19](#)).

After this high drama, the Torah closes the chapter with what seems an anticlimax: a genealogy.

Abraham is told that his brother Nahor has fathered many children. These few verses seem innocuous but are so integral to the *Akedah* story that they are included in the Rosh Hashanah Torah reading of the *Akedah*. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik¹⁰ offers a striking insight: After the *Akedah*, Abraham might well have wondered, “Why me? Why must I endure years of longing and trial, while my brother Nahor, an idolater, flourishes effortlessly? Is it worth it?” This is the real test of all believers.

It is interesting that the information about Nahor is “told to him” ([22:20](#)). Abraham was a rich and powerful individual who could have enquired about the family he left behind decades before if he had cared. He did not, but those whom Abraham was trying to proselytize might well have taunted him with such questions. In the end, Abraham offers the ram. “Judaism has a tremendous tradition: it is not simple or easy to live a life of Torah and *mitzvot*. One must be willing to sacrifice on its behalf many things, large and small.”¹¹ One must have a heart strong enough to surrender, yet discerning enough to know what God never asks. Moral conscience lies at the very heart of covenantal faith.

The Poet and the Rabbi: A Conversation on Browning and Judaism

Rowan Williams was Archbishop of Canterbury from 2002 to 2012 and Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge, from 2013 to 2020 Irene Lancaster has taught Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Liverpool, Manchester, and Haifa Universities.

The two of us have been working together as conveners of a Jewish–Christian dialogue group for quite a few years, discussing a variety of texts, biblical and contemporary (we’re currently working through a book by Michael Wyschogrod). Rowan is a priest and retired bishop of the Anglican Church; Irene is a Jewish academic who has specialized in the work of Abraham ibn Ezra and taught Hebrew and Jewish Studies in British universities. Among many common interests, we are enthusiastic readers of poetry.

Rowan:

I know we share a deep appreciation of Robert Browning’s poetry—and a recognition also that he has a very distinctive approach to religious questions that manages to avoid some of the worst clichés of Christian antisemitism.

His early poem “[Holy-Cross Day](#)” (1855) is a case in point and one that has been frequently misunderstood. It is a fierce satire on the unpleasant tradition that survived in Rome well into the nineteenth century of forcing the Jews of

¹⁰ R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Yemei Zikaron*, ed. Mosheh Kroneh (World Mizrahi, 1986), 161.

¹¹ Ibid.

Rome to attend an annual sermon aimed at their conversion.

Browning represents the captive audience of Jews as subversively mocking the process, pretending pious compunction and compliance while recalling the supposed words of “Rabbi Ben Ezra”—Abraham ibn Ezra, your own scholarly specialization—on the eve of his death.

This poem-within-a-poem is [sometimes presented](#) as a piece of implicit Christian triumphalism, but it is exactly the opposite. “Ben Ezra” articulates very clearly both the hope of a final return to the land and the immutable vocation of the Jewish people. “God... gave us the word to keep... ’Mid a faithless world.” This is something that cannot be taken away until the end of time: “Till Christ at the end relieve our guard.”

“Christ” here must mean simply the Messiah, the anointed, not the Christian savior. It emphatically doesn’t mean that the rabbi looks forward to a final “conversion,” as some have thought.

The lines that follow offer a “thought experiment.” What if, for the sake of argument, Jesus *was* the Messiah and the Jews failed to recognize him. Well, let God be the judge of that. “But, the judgment over, join sides with us!”

That is to say, ‘We (the Jews) may have deserved punishment, but that is God’s business. What cannot be God’s will is the centuries-long humiliation, torture, and persecution of an entire people.’ The Jews still “withstand Barabbas”—

they refuse to compromise their sense of justice and so, in effect, choose Jesus over Barabbas the robber and murderer. They will not call self-styled Christians who persecute them followers of Jesus, and so they “wrest Christ’s name from the Devil’s crew” and go on resisting the violence of Empire and Church, resisting tyranny and atrocity.

A thought experiment, not a recantation or a conversion. Even if Jesus was the Messiah—which “Ben Ezra” does not in fact grant—the history of Christian anti-Judaism would mean that God was on the side of the persecuted, not the persecutor, and so would be aiding and accompanying the Jewish people on their long journey home.

And in this subtle and powerful idea, I hear some echoes of the more familiar poem, “[Rabbi Ben Ezra](#)” (1864). Like “Holy-Cross Day,” it challenges the notion that “it’s all over”—that some new and final revelation has arrived. We are still a “work in progress,” spiritually speaking.

What is unchanging is not the truth that we think we have clarified but the reality of God, a reality that is only ever active, not passive, never there for us to exploit or take advantage of. Our development as physical beings living in time is an essential aspect of what we are.

Body teaches soul just as soul teaches body. “Maker, remake, complete,” prays the rabbi. And we must “work enough to watch / The Master work,” learning discernment through our contemplation of what we have been, our mistakes and frustrations, not our successes.

So I'll be intrigued to know, Irene, if you think there is anything in either of these poems that echoes anything of the real Ibn Ezra, on whom you have written so well—or is it just a Victorian religious theme arbitrarily put in the mouth of a Jewish teacher?

My own suspicion is that there really is something here of imaginative empathy with Judaism in the awareness of the significance and positive value of the body and its history, and also in the skepticism about “the end of history,” any premature closing down of both the labor and the joy of law-keeping, on the basis that some new dispensation has “relieved our guard,” to use the image in “Holy-Cross Day.” What do you think?

Irene:

When I first embarked on my life's work, bringing the life and achievements of Abraham ibn Ezra to the general public—first in the form of a PhD thesis, then in the book on the subject published by Routledge¹—I little imagined the worlds this would open.

The idea of filling a gap in the market first arose at a chance meeting in 1989 with the great Moshe Idel, who was to take up Gershom Scholem's chair in Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University. A serious study of Ibn Ezra had not yet been attempted, he told me—a bit of an irony, as that

year was the 900th anniversary of the birth of Ibn Ezra (1089–1164).

So back in Liverpool I set to this task enthusiastically, helped by members of my university department, who ordered every Ibn Ezra book under the sun. But that was not all. One day, the doorbell rang—another tourist searching out the childhood home of John Lennon? No, a middle-aged lady, unknown to me, who introduced herself as a neighbor from further down the street.

She had heard on the grapevine that I'd embarked on a PhD about Ibn Ezra and wanted to give me a book. It was a miniature edition of Browning's “Rabbi Ben Ezra,” a gift to help me along, she said. Up until then, I had been aware only of the Browning poems we had learned at school—the unforgettable rhythms of “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” and “How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix.”

But here was something different. In answer to your question, yes, I think that Browning really “gets” Ibn Ezra. So much so that when the doctorate eventually became a book, I prefaced every chapter with a line or two from Browning's poem.

Browning is a mesmerizing writer, with a huge sense of irony and not averse to depicting the

¹ Irene Lancaster, [*Deconstructing the Bible: Abraham Ibn Ezra's Introduction to the Torah*](#) (Routledge, 2007).

unsentimental dark side of life. But “Rabbi Ben Ezra” was of a different level entirely, introducing a new profundity of philosophical perspective, and—unbelievably for a non-Jewish poet—a true understanding of Jews and Judaism.

Rowan:

It would be quite an undertaking to look at all Browning’s Jewish-related poems—the 1876 “Pisgah-Sights,” for example, or the long and fearfully complex “Jochanan Hakkadosh” (1883), which again seems to celebrate the incompleteness of human justice or holiness, over against idealizing myths of perfectibility.

But we might start with a short work from 1856, [“Ben Karshook’s Wisdom.”](#) It isn’t clear whether Browning had any particular Jewish sage in mind or whether it is meant to represent a generic rabbinical figure. The poem takes the form of a typical “aphorism” narrative. An opponent or skeptic asks a question, and the teacher gives a devastating or unexpected reply.

So first the rabbi is challenged about the maxim that a man should turn to God “The day before his death.” Which is all very well, says the questioner, if you know when you’re going to die. But the rabbi replies that if you don’t know this, you should turn to God immediately, precisely because you don’t know.

And then “a young Sadducee” asks if we really have souls. The rabbi responds sharply by saying

that I can know / have a soul, but not that we do—which seems to me to mean that talking about the soul is never a “third-person” matter. It is about my unique responsibility as a self before God.

Do these themes strike you, I wonder, as in any way characteristically Jewish? I don’t think they’re completely alien to Christian thinking, but they’re not what you’d call mainstream.

Irene:

I suspect that “Ben Karshook’s Wisdom,” written just a year before “Holy-Cross Day,” owes something to the character of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, a student of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai. He features in the popular mishnaic “Ethics of the Fathers” (*Pirkei Avot*), where he is quoted as saying, “Repent one day before your death” ([Pirkei Avot 2:10](#); and compare [Avot de-Rebbe Natan 15:4](#) and [Shabbat 153a](#)). This is because Karshook, emulating Eliezer and unlike the “young Sadducee,” believes in the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the dead, and the Day of Judgment.

The poem’s opening—“Would a man ‘scape the rod?”—seems to allude to [Proverbs 13:24](#). Karshook echoes Eliezer in advocating treating every day as one’s last and so repenting daily: “Then let him turn to-day!” For the Sadducee, true repentance is unnecessary in the absence of belief in the soul or resurrection. In Ibn Ezra’s day, “Sadducee” was a term of abuse for the literalistic Karaites, who eschewed Oral Torah and presented

a clear political threat to its upholders.

The final stanza's "Hiram's-Hammer" most obviously refers to the biblical Hiram of Tyre, who helped Kings David and Solomon in building their palaces and the Temple (notice the "Right-hand Temple column" mentioned by Browning and compare [I Kings 5](#) ff., [9:11](#) ff., [II Chron. 2:2](#) ff).

Here Browning, like Ibn Ezra, connects the building of divine structures with the correct, grammatical teaching of Torah. Ibn Ezra pioneered this approach of concentrating on *peshat*, the primary and "plain" sense of scriptural language, and popularized it widely in his travels through Ashkenazi Europe after leaving Spain in 1139–40, ending up in England.

But the term "Hiram's-Hammer" also evokes Jeremiah's statement ([23:29](#)), "Is not My word like a fire... and like a hammer?" God's word may be "one," but its interpretation is manifold—a good thing, reflecting the "seventy faces of Torah" (*Numbers Rabbah* [13:15–16](#)); "seventy" stands for "wine" which, like the Torah, improves with age.

Browning admires old age. The famous opening of "Rabbi Ben Ezra"—"Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be"—has found many echoes, not least in John Lennon's last (posthumously issued) musical recording, intended to be played at weddings.

Is "Karshook" an amalgamation of Eliezer and Ibn

Ezra? Neither suffered fools gladly; both were sticklers for accuracy and rectitude enabled by firm foundations, whether in child-rearing, building construction, or Torah study. Without these, the whole edifice collapses.

Browning has got to grips to an astounding degree with the very essence of Judaism, in a way perhaps never surpassed in the gentile world. But he was not completely alone in his philosemitism. He published "[Pisgah-Sights](#)" in the same year (1876) that his friend George Eliot published [Daniel Deronda](#), which has been called the first Zionist novel in the English language.

Here Browning presents Moses reminiscing at the end of his life, looking at the horizon: "Over the ball of it, / Peering and prying." He sees the earth as it really is, with all its contradictions. "I am earth's native," he says, always beginning with the literal and local, wary of assuming a divine view of things. "I would teach no one," he says—but of course Moses is the teacher par excellence, just because of this starting point.

It is a modest, circumscribed approach, reminiscent again of Ibn Ezra. Common sense, context, historical fact, geography, scientific astronomy—these appeal to Ibn Ezra and Browning's Moses alike. For Ibn Ezra, *peshat* trumps allegory, rabbinical flights of fancy, or mysticism. These latter may be used sparingly, but only when required by the nature of the text or if the text's literal meaning is obviously nonsensical.

Rowan:

Just to interject briefly that this is exactly the position on interpretation taken by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century and by some earlier Christian thinkers too, including at least one—Andrew of St. Victor—who had studied Hebrew. There may be links here...

Irene:

Frank Talmage's article "Apples of Gold," in Arthur Green's edited volume [Jewish Spirituality](#) (1986), 319–321, is really helpful on this; Moshe Idel called it "one of the best, if not the best, article that has ever been written on mediaeval Jewish exegesis."

But to return to the main theme, what Browning is doing in "Pisgah-Sights" is presenting Mosaic Judaism as a faith that observes limit, creatureliness, not seeking timeless perfection or total, final understanding within this world. If the Sadducean perspective is rejected, what remains is the collaborative work of a community of interpreters, the importance of repentance, resurrection, and immortality. If this life is not the last word, then the Faustian pursuit of knowledge, power, and dominance is irrelevant.

Rowan:

That's a key point. You can read Browning as a systematic critic of the Faustian mindset in all these poems. Moses is "the fixture," the central point of reference, because he is the well-earthed

human being, standing firm against any aspiration to the superhuman. Others struggle around him—some "above" who look back on him as a "precursor," someone who has helped to make their achievement possible; they "love" him, but perhaps patronizingly. Others are "below," and they resent what they have not yet seen. But he stands constant, anchored to present and prosaic human existence, but with his eyes on the distant glory of God. The challenge is to be rooted in this present earth, this moment, yet never to reduce God to a "glow-worm," a little bit of local illumination rather than a burning star in heaven. That imagery, incidentally, has parallels with Browning's well-known poem, "A Death in the Desert," about St. John the Evangelist (one of my favorite poems, I admit)—we see a distant star and gradually realize that it's an entire world of its own.

Irene:

I think we can say of Browning overall that he was a consistent lover of Jews and Judaism, of Hebrew and the "Jewish project," with a clear understanding of the urge to return to Israel, from which Jews would be able to teach the world. In this he is unlike his contemporary, Charles Dickens, born in the same year. Dickens may have moved away from the gross caricature of Fagin in [Oliver Twist](#) (1838) to the dignified figure of Riah in [Our Mutual Friend](#) (1864—the year of "Rabbi Ben Ezra" and just a year later than George Eliot's [Romola](#)), but it is a safe guess that for everyone who has read *Our Mutual Friend* there will be twenty or more who have read *Oliver Twist* or

seen stage and film versions. The damage to the notion of Jewishness in the English psyche and beyond is enormous.

Ultimately, Browning, like Ibn Ezra, was an optimist. Compare “Oh, to be in England / Now that April’s there” with the other Eliot’s—T. S. Eliot’s—line, “April is the cruellest month.” Both lines were written when the poets were 32–33 years old (and both died at 76–77). T. S. Eliot was not in love with life—any more than he was in love with Jews; his appallingly antisemitic lines have been mercilessly mocked by writers like Saul Bellow.

Browning enjoyed a happy and fruitful marriage, and when Elizabeth Barrett Browning died, he returned to England and threw himself into London life, maturing like a good wine, in full Ben Ezra mode.

It’s not just a matter of opposing a positive nineteenth-century mindset to a disillusioned and unhopeful twentieth-century one. This is the spirit of Judaism permeating the soul and spirit of—in my view—our greatest English poet, just as George Eliot is our greatest English novelist.

And the key to both, I’d say, is the incomparable

Abraham ibn Ezra, who died at the age of 75 here in England, at the hands of Crusaders en route to the Holy Land, if we are to believe Ibn Ezra’s most respected biographer, J. L. Fleischer, in his brilliantly detailed and well-documented Hebrew-language articles on Ibn Ezra’s travels.²

Despite that terrible end, Ibn Ezra lives on in English poetry and prose—and even in the music of John Lennon! Aware of his own mortality, the very human Abraham ibn Ezra has, for many, become immortal through this extraordinary and inspiring legacy.

Rowan:

It’s a legacy whose surface we have only begun to scratch here, I know. We haven’t had a chance to discuss that difficult long poem, “Jochanan Hakkadosh”—though I think we’d agree that much of the same vision runs through that as well: the same Ibn Ezra focus on the fallible and earthbound path to wisdom and even holiness. It too shows Browning’s wide acquaintance with Jewish history (it’s set in what is now Iran—possibly in Shiraz—at some distant but unspecified period) and Jewish thinking. Perhaps this exchange will stimulate someone to have a go at a more detailed reading of that poem in the light of what we’ve been

² Referenced in Lancaster, 20; full citations to Fleischer’s articles from the 1930s appear on p. 209.

discussing. Thanks for so many insights.

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