LEHRHAUS
Over Shabbat

Korah

Vol. 9, Issue 36 • 1 Tammuz 5785 / June 27, 2025

Irony of the Torah: A Tool for Moral Education and Self-Reflection

Hershey H. Friedman is a professor of business management at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York. Linda Weiser Friedman is a professor in the department of Information Systems and Statistics at Baruch College (CUNY) as well as Associated Faculty in the Jewish Studies Program there.

Some scholars, such as Alfred North Whitehead, have argued that the Hebrew Bible lacks humor.[1] However, a counter-argument has emerged, highlighting the presence of irony, satire, and other comedic elements within the text. Humor in the Torah serves a very serious goal: to teach people how to be good and avoid sin. For instance: idolatry was the cause of many wicked practices in ancient society, such as human sacrifice. As a result, much of the humor in the Torah is there to mock idolatry. Knox (1969) extensively explored the use of irony in the Hebrew Bible,[2] while Jemielity focused on satire in Hebrew prophecy.[3] Jonsson, Friedman, and Friedman & Friedman have challenged the notion of a humorless Bible, citing stories like the reciprocal deceptions of

[1] *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead*. Lucien Price, ed. Little, Brown and Co., 1954.

[2] Israel Knox. "The traditional roots of Jewish humor," In M. Conrad Hyers (ed.) *Holy Laughter*. The Seabury Press, 1969, 150–65.

[3] Thomas J. Jemielity. *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets*. Westminster / John Knox Press, 1992.

Jacob and Laban as examples of biblical humor.[4] Furthermore, the Hebrew Bible's linguistic richness, with over 500 wordplays and puns, further supports this view. [5]

This paper will focus on one specific type of humor used in the Torah: irony.

About Irony

The word "irony" comes from the Latin *ironia*, which means "pretending to be ignorant" or "something different from what was expected." Irony is a literary device that shows a gap, incongruity, or mismatch between what is expected to happen and that which actually occurs.

There are several kinds of irony. *Verbal irony* is a figure of speech that occurs when a person says or writes something different from—and often the opposite of—the literal meaning. In a nutshell, the literal, surface meaning of what is said differs from the intended or underlying meaning. For example, when someone says, "What a beautiful morning!" during a ferocious thunderstorm, a comic declares, "It's too crowded here" when walking into an empty club, or a teacher tells a quiet class, "Don't speak all at once," they are using verbal irony. Verbal irony can be utilized for humor, criticism, or suspense. Different types of verbal irony exist, such as understatement, overstatement or hyperbole, and sarcasm. People often confuse verbal irony and sarcasm, but they are not the same. Sarcasm is a form of verbal irony that specifically uses words to hurt or mock someone.[6] An example of sarcasm in the Torah is (Exodus 14:11), "Was there a lack of graves in Egypt, that you took us away to die in the wilderness?" In his commentary on Exodus, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888) remarks that the reason the Torah includes this sharp statement made by the Israelites to Moses at a time of great fear and desperation was to show that wit and a sense of humor are characteristic features of the Jewish people.

Dramatic irony is a literary device in which the audience or reader knows something that the characters do not.[7] It can be used for humor, suspense, or tragedy. For instance, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the audience knows that Juliet is alive, but Romeo thinks she is dead and kills himself out of grief; hence, tragic dramatic irony. As discussed

[4] Jakob Jonsson. Humor and Irony in the New Testament. E. J. Brill, 1985.
Hershey H. Friedman. "Humor in the Hebrew Bible." *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 13.3, 257-85.
Hershey H. Friedman & Linda Weiser Friedman. God Laughed: Sources of Jewish Humor. Transaction Publishers, 2014.

[5] Gheorghe Girbea. "Irony and humor in the biblical canon." *Limba și literatura – repere identitare în context european*, 2019, 154-164.

[6] Millie Dinsdale. "20 irony examples: In literature and real life." 2022. Online at https://prowritingaid.com/irony-examples

[7] Ibid.

later, when Jacob's sons visit the Egyptian viceroy, we know something they do not – that the viceroy is really their long-lost brother, Joseph.

Situational irony is a literary technique or situation in which an expected outcome does not happen or, perhaps, its opposite happens instead. Thus, there is a discrepancy between what is expected and what occurs; one's expectations are thwarted. The outcome can be tragic or humorous, but it is always unexpected. For example, O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" is the story of a poor, young couple, each of whom sells their most prized possession to buy the other a holiday gift. The wife sells her hair to buy a chain for her husband's watch, while the husband sells his watch to buy combs for his wife's hair. However, their gifts become functionally useless as a result of their sacrifices. The story is a poignant example of situational irony, where the outcome contradicts what is expected.

A fire station burning down, a psychiatrist being committed to a mental institution, and a police station being robbed would also be examples of situational irony. Purchasing an English teacher a mug that states (using incorrect grammar), "Your the best English teacher ever," would be an example of situational irony.[8] For an example from the Torah, we cannot do better than the story of Joseph. His brothers conspired to sell him as a slave to put an end to his dreams of ruling over them; Joseph ultimately became an Egyptian viceroy *because* of their actions.

Socratic irony occurs when a person pretends to be ignorant in order to entice others to admit to knowing or doing something, or to guide them in a specific direction. It is sometimes referred to as "playing dumb" and was used by Socrates to elicit information from his students. This technique is still popular among parents and teachers, and it is also employed as an interrogation technique by investigators and lawyers to expose inconsistencies in a suspect's version of events.[9] Abraham's conversation with God (Genesis 18:23-32), in which he attempts to negotiate to save Sodom, can be considered an example of Socratic irony. There, Abraham was asking the questions, but God was actually leading him to the only possible conclusion.

In the following sections, we examine specific examples of irony in the Torah. Some are well-known and have been much-discussed, although, perhaps, without characterizing them as ironic humor. These include measure for measure, unintentional prophecy, the meanings of names, and birth order reversals.

Ironic Reversals

The Torah (Genesis 2:23) describes the creation of Eve, the first woman, stating: "And the man said: 'This time it is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because out of man she was taken.'" The irony of Genesis 2:23, as Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam) noted, lies in its exceptional nature—the only time a woman would be formed from a

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

man. This singular act set the stage for a permanent shift in the natural order, with all subsequent men being born of women. This reversal establishes a beautiful mutuality between the sexes: the initial creation saw a woman emerge from a man. In contrast, all future generations would see man emerge from woman in childbirth, a poetic balance deepening the creation account and emphasizing their reliance on each other.

Good also notes an ironic reversal in Genesis: the initial blessing of Adam and Eve as "rulers of all" (Genesis 1:28) becomes a curse of hard labor, toil, and eating bread "by the sweat of your brow" (Genesis 3:17-19), after their sin of eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, fundamentally transforming their relationship with creation. Humankind is now the servant of the soil.[10]

Rhetorical Questions

Wenger observes that God was being ironic, given that He is omniscient, when He called to Adam in the Garden of Eden, asking (Genesis 3:9), "Where are you?" [11] This is obviously a rhetorical question. God knew where Adam was but wanted to provide him with an opening so that he could confess that he had eaten from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. God asked Adam another two rhetorical questions (3:11): "Who told you that you are naked? Have you eaten of the tree from which I commanded you not to eat?" Unfortunately, Adam did not show remorse and instead blamed his transgression on "the woman whom You gave to be with me." Being an ingrate was not the way to ask forgiveness.

The irony is stark: despite partaking of the Tree of *Knowledge* of Good and Evil, Adam displays no discernible increase in *wisdom*. Instead of offering an intelligent response to God, he foolishly attempts to conceal himself and then compounds his error by shifting the blame to Eve. Such responses hardly suggest the enlightenment one would anticipate from someone who has consumed the fruit of moral awareness. It seems Adam might have mistakenly eaten from, say, a Tree of Folly.

After Cain killed Abel, God asked him (Genesis 4:9), "Where is Abel your brother?" God knows the answer, and the reader understands that this is a rhetorical question. God asked this to engage Cain, get him to confess his sin, and repent. The answer given by Cain was also rhetorical, as well as disrespectful: "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

It is verbally ironic whenever God asks a

[10] Edwin M. Good. *Irony in the Old Testament*. The Westminster Press, 1965, 84.

[11] Mark Wenger. "Irony in Scripture," 2014. https://www.academia.edu/7114303/Irony_in_the_Bible.

rhetorical question because God never needs the information. [12] The Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 19:11), noting that there are four rhetorical questions in Scripture whose addressees should have responded more appropriately, says, "God banged on their barrels and found them to be full of urine," that is, urine rather than wine. This is an idiomatic way of saying that God tested these four individuals and found them wanting, as they did not know how to properly reply to God's rhetorical question. They are Adam, Cain, Balaam, and Hezekiah (who responded inappropriately to a prophet of God).

Mocking Idols

As noted, biblical humor is often used to mock idolatry. One example is in the story of the matriarch Rachel and the *teraphim* (household gods; small statues used for private idolatrous worship and rites of divination). Rachel's husband, Jacob, took his family and fled from his father-in-law, Laban, in Haran after noticing that Laban was not treating him as he had in the past. Unbeknownst to Jacob, Rachel had stolen her father's *teraphim*. When Laban caught up with them, he asked (Genesis 31:30), "Why have you stolen my gods?" The reader undoubtedly realizes that a god that can be stolen cannot be much of a god. Even worse, Rachel hid her father's deities by sitting on them. This seems very disrespectful and is a way of further mocking the idols. The reader knows exactly where Laban's beloved deities are – underneath Rachel. The reader also understands the foolishness of worshipping deities that can be sat on without complaining about their abuse.

Ironic Wordplay

In the Torah, we see that not only do actions have consequences, but words do as well. Much of the irony in the Torah instructs people to watch what they say, as they may regret it later. This shows that God has a plan where evil does not escape justice, and we repeatedly see that "what goes around comes around."

When Joseph's brothers came to Egypt and met with the viceroy (who was actually Joseph), they were accused of being spies. Their response (Genesis 42:11): "We are all one man's sons; we are honest men; your servants are not spies." They were telling the truth. They were *all* sons of Jacob, *including* the viceroy. There is a great deal of dramatic irony in this story. The reader knows the viceroy is Joseph; the brothers think he is Egyptian.

The viceroy accused the brothers of being spies and imprisoned them for three days. Because the brothers thought the viceroy was an Egyptian, they mistakenly assumed he did not understand Hebrew. They said to one another that this is a punishment from God for selling Joseph (Genesis 42:21), "Surely we are guilty [and being punished] concerning our brother. We saw his heartfelt anguish when he pleaded with us, yet we did not *listen*; that is why this distress has come upon us." Reuben rebuked his brothers, declaring (Genesis 42:22), "Did I not tell you, saying, 'Do not

[12] Ibid.

sin against the boy'? And you would not *listen*! Now, we must give an accounting for his blood."

The narrative continues (verse 23), "They did not know that Joseph understood (*shomeah*), for the interpreter was between them." The word *shomeah* generally means to hear or listen. In verse 23, it means understood. The Torah uses *shomeah* rather than *maivin,* which unambiguously means understood. Alter states, "The verb for understanding [*shomeah*], which also means "to hear" or "to listen," plays ironically against its use in the immediately preceding verse, "and you would not listen." Even more ironic may be that Joseph took Shimon, whose name is itself derived from the same root, *shomeah,* and imprisoned him before the brothers' eyes. When Shimon was born, Leah gave the reason for his name (Genesis 29:33), "because the Lord *heard* that I was unloved."[13]

Unintentional Prophesy

Pharaoh's words to Joseph regarding his family are filled with irony. Pharaoh said (Genesis 45:18), "And take your father and your households and come to me, and I will give you the best of the land of Egypt." The commentators note that Pharaoh unknowingly alluded to what would happen centuries later when the Israelites left Egypt and emptied it after the final plague. The Egyptians gave the Israelites vessels of silver and gold and clothing, and the Israelites "despoiled the Egyptians" (Exodus 12:36). Rashi (1040-1105), a medieval French commentator on the Torah, writes here that Pharaoh "prophesied but did not know what he prophesied."

The expression "He prophesied but did not know what he prophesied" (*Nibah v'lo yodah mah nibah*) is often used to describe a situation where an individual says something without realizing that it also has another meaning. These moments of unintended prophecy are examples of dramatic irony.

The expression "will lift up your head" (*yisah et roshekha*) is used several times to describe Joseph's interpretation of the dreams of the butler and the baker (see Genesis 40:13, 19, 20). The lifting of the head when referring to the Pharaoh's butler means that he will be restored to his original position and be counted again among the Pharaoh's servants. However, "lifting up your head" when referring to the baker means that the baker will be hanged. This is a clever play on the idiom "will lift up your head." Dreams, often taken as prophecy, are, as we know, subject to interpretation.

Judah pleaded with Joseph to allow Benjamin to go home and kept referring to "my father" (Genesis 44). However, in Genesis 44:31, Judah said to the Viceroy of Egypt (who happened to be Joseph): "And when he sees that the youth is not with us, he will die, and your servants shall bring down the gray hairs of your servant *our*

[13] Robert Alter. "The Five Books of Moses." W. W. Norton & Company, 2004. 243, n. 23.

father in sorrow to the grave." Judah did not realize what the reader does, that Jacob was indeed the father of both Judah *and* the Viceroy.

Ironically, dreams had gotten Joseph into trouble. His brothers resented being told of his dreams of ruling over them (Genesis 37:6–11). Later on, his ability to interpret dreams resulted in him becoming the viceroy of Egypt. Joseph made a mistake as a 17-year-old boy by arrogantly telling his dreams to his brothers ("Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me," Genesis 37:9). This was not a wise move, given that his siblings already did not like him.

Pharaoh commanded his people to throw every newborn Hebrew boy into the Nile. The baby Moses was placed in a papyrus basket smeared with tar and pitch and covered up among the reeds near the bank of the Nile (Exodus 2). Pharaoh's daughter found him and gave him to a Hebrew woman – who happened to be the baby's mother – to be a wet nurse for the infant. The verse states (Exodus 2:9), "Pharaoh's daughter said to her [Jochebed, Moses' true mother], Take [*heilikhi*] this boy and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages." The Talmud (BT Sotah 12b) asserts that Pharaoh's daughter "prophesied but did not know what she prophesied," as the word *heilikhi* means "this is yours" [*ha shellikhi*].

There is irony in the words of the Song at the Red Sea sung by Moses and the Israelites, which describes the miracles wrought by God on behalf of the Israelites. One verse in the song declares (Exodus 15:17): "You shall bring *them* in and plant *them* on the mountain of Your inheritance." The Talmud (BT Bava Batra 119b) points out that Moses and the Israelites "prophesied without knowing what they were prophesying" by saying "them" rather than "us." At the time, Moses and his generation were unaware of their impending sins and subsequent exclusion from the Promised Land.

Unintentional Curse

The Torah (Genesis 35:19) states: "And Rachel died and was buried on the road to (*b'derech*) Ephrat, which is Bethlehem." Because Jacob did not know that Rachel stole her father Laban's *teraphim*, he inadvertently cursed her, his beloved wife whom he worked for 14 years to marry, when he said (Genesis 31:32), "With whomever you find your gods, that person shall not live." Tragically, the man who most loved Rachel caused her death by cursing her. This may be the Torah warning us to be careful with our speech. The Babylonian Talmud (Berakhot 19a, Moed Katan 18a, Ketubot 8b) emphasizes that one should avoid saying something unpleasant that might happen in the future. This might explain why many say "Heaven forbid" (or the Hebrew equivalents, *chas v'shalom* or *chalila v'chas*) when discussing something undesirable that might

occur. Moreover, cursing others is not wise since curses may boomerang back to the curser (Friedman, 2018).[14]

Sykes, delving further into Biblical wordplay, points out a connection between the verse dealing with Rachel's death on the road (*derech*) to Ephrath and the *teraphim* incident.[15] Rachel used *derech* when telling her father she could not stand up (she was sitting on the *teraphim*). Her words (Genesis 31:35) were *derech nashim li* (for the way of women is upon me). Sykes cites several sources that say Rachel died in childbirth as a punishment for causing her father much anguish by stealing the *teraphim*. At the very least, perhaps she should have discussed it with Jacob first.

Names

The Torah frequently uses names as a kind of verbal irony. They often foreshadow what will happen in the future, and so may be considered alongside unintended prophesy.

Concerning Judah's wife, the Torah states (Genesis 38:5): "And she yet again bore a son and called his name Shelah, and it was at Kezib that she gave birth to him." Kezib means lie and deceit. The word "Shelah" may also mean false (see II Kings 4:28). The verse hints that Judah was not honest with his daughter-in-law Tamar and only pretended that he would allow Shelah to fulfill the precept of a levirate marriage with her. Kezib, when connected with water, means "the water or stream has dried up" (see Jeremiah 15:18). This also hints that Tamar was afraid that her "stream" would dry up and she would never have children.[16]

Incidentally, the names of Judah's first two sons, *Er* and *Onan*, are midrashically also said to have double meanings. *Er* is similar to the postbiblical Hebrew word *hu'ar*, meaning ejected. He died prematurely as a divine punishment because "he was wicked in the eyes of the Lord" (Genesis 38:7). Er is also similar to the Hebrew word that means childless (*ariri*). The name *Onan* has another meaning in Hebrew: grief (see Genesis Rabbah 85:4 and the commentary of Nachmanides). Onan also died prematurely as a punishment for engaging in coitus interruptus so that Tamar would not have children (Genesis 38:9).

Later on, in a moment of unintentional verbal irony, Joseph called his firstborn Manasseh (Genesis 41:51) "because God has made me forget (*nasheh*) all my troubles and all my father's house." Joseph did actually forget about his father's house since he did not communicate with his father or brother Benjamin. As ruler of Egypt, he must have had ample opportunity to send a messenger to his father and brother to inform

[14] Hershey H. Friedman. "Heaven forbid: The Talmudic attitude towards the spoken word." *SSRN*, 2018. https://ssrn.com/abstract=3172274 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3172274

[15] David Sykes. *Patterns in Genesis and Beyond*. Patterns Publications, 2014, 360.

[16] Sukes, 2014, 270-271.

them that he was not dead. They did not find out that Joseph was alive for nine more years. Several commentaries, including Pa'aneach Raza, Moshav Zekenim, and Nachamanides, ponder why Joseph, upon becoming Viceroy, did not immediately contact his father. They suggest that Joseph's reluctance stemmed from a desire to protect his family from potential harm. He believed that a premature revelation could have triggered a panicked response from his brothers, who might have fled, fearing their father's wrath (Nachamanides focuses on Joseph's dreams, which he used as a guide).

The Birth-Order Reversals and Associated Wordplay

The Torah repeatedly teaches us that birth order is not prophecy. Just because someone is born first does not mean that the eldest brother will lead. This is classic situational irony in which expectations are thwarted. Scripture (Genesis 48:14) states, "But Israel [Jacob] extended his right hand and placed it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh's head, guiding his hands knowingly, although Manasseh was the firstborn." Joseph thought his father had made a mistake because of his poor vision and told him (verse 18). "And Joseph said to his father, 'Not so, my father, for this one is the firstborn; put your right hand on his head." It is not a random occurrence in the Torah when a firstborn does not receive the customary privileges. This is a recurrent theme in the Book of Genesis, and we see it with Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Reuben and Joseph, and Manasseh and Ephraim. We find a hint of it in the story of Peretz and Zerach. Additionally, Moses was Aaron's younger brother. The message is clear: birth order is not what matters to God but who will be the better person.

The spotlight was on Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, as the heir apparent. But as Jacob's final moments approached, a twist unfolded. His blessing begins (Genesis 49:3): "Reuben, you are my firstborn, my strength, and the first of my vigor, excelling in honor and excelling in power." For a moment, the reader believes that Jacob will bestow the firstborn privileges on Reuben. However, in the next verse, Jacob reveals why he is taking it away from him. Reuben disrespected his father by sleeping with Bilhah, Jacob's concubine. In another surprise, the reader expects Joseph, the favorite son, to become the family leader after Jacob's death. This benefit is given to Judah. The double portion due to the firstborn is given to Joseph, who is promised that he will become two tribes, Manasseh and Ephraim.

Jacob's deathbed blessing to his son Judah contains an interesting wordplay (Genesis 49:9): "A young lion is Judah; from prey, my son, you ascended... The scepter shall not depart from Judah nor the ruler's staff from between his legs." The overt meaning is that Judah is like a youthful lion: he takes his prey with none daring to challenge him. The "my son" was a term of address aimed at Judah. However, if the words *teref* (prey) and *beni* (my son) are said together without any punctuation between them, then the meaning of the verse becomes that Judah ascended from the prey of Jacob's son (Joseph).

Indeed, it was Judah who said, "What profit will there be if we kill our brother?" Years earlier, when Jacob was shown Joseph's coat covered with blood, he said (Genesis 37:33): "An evil beast has torn apart (*tarof toraf*) Joseph." The word *tarof* is from the same root as *teref*. The major commentaries on the Bible argue whether the "my son" referred to in Jacob's blessing is Judah or Joseph.

The ruler's staff not departing from "between his legs" could very well be a double entendre and hint at the incident of Tamar, where Judah gave his staff to a "prostitute" as collateral for sleeping with her. The enigmatic phrase "Shiloh" (Genesis 49:10) reminds the reader of Judah's son Shela, who was promised to Tamar, but Judah had no intention of keeping this promise.[17]

Jacob blessed Judah (Genesis 49:11) with a land rich in vineyards: "He will bind his donkey to a vine, his donkey's colt to the choicest vine branch; he will launder his garments in wine and his robes in the blood of grapes." Sykes[18] believes that this verse hints at what Judah and his brothers did when they took Joseph's varicolored robe and dipped it in the blood of a goat to convince Jacob that Joseph was devoured by a wild beast (Genesis 37:32–33).[19]

Sykes also believes that there is a double meaning in verse 12: "His eyes (*enayim*) will be red from wine, and his teeth white (*u'l'ven shinnayim*) from milk." The word for eyes is *enayim*. This is the term used for the crossroads where Tamar seduced Judah (Genesis 38:14), when she sat *be-fetah enayim*, "at the entrance to Enayim." The term *u'l'ven shinnayim* is similar to the words meaning two sons (*ben* means son, and *shnayim* means two); as we know, Tamar gave birth to twin boys.[20]

Measure for Measure

The Torah teaches that our actions have consequences, but these are not always what we expect. In fact, we see that the expected is often turned on its head.

In the Torah, God often punishes wrongdoers in a way that matches their sins – *midah k'neged midah*, which translates to "measure for measure." This ironic punishment ridicules the wrongdoers and shows how they get what they deserve. The reader immediately notes that the divine punishment fits the crime.

One of the main lessons of Genesis is that the one who deceives is ultimately, in turn,

---

[17] Good, 1965, 111.

[18] 2014, 485.

[19] Good, 1965, 111. Note that the word used for "vine" in verse 11 is *soreqah*. Timnah (Genesis 38:12), the town where Judah went to shear his sheep and had an encounter with Tamar, was in the Valley of Soreq. Timnah, where Samson would fall in love with Delilah, was located in the Valley of Soreq, and was on the future border of Judah and Philistia.

[20] Sykes, 2014, 486-487.

deceived. Jacob deceived his nearly blind father, Isaac, by pretending to be his older brother, Esau. The younger brother pretended to be the older brother. Several years later, Laban fooled Jacob and substituted Leah, his elder daughter, for Rachel, his younger daughter. Laban told Jacob (Genesis 29:26): "Such is not done in our place, to give the younger before the elder." Laban, the deceiver, outsmarted Jacob and hinted that a younger brother may pretend to be the older one where you are from, but this is not done here. Basically, Laban said that Jacob got his just rewards. The Midrash Genesis Rabbah (70:19) has Jacob calling Leah "a deceiver, daughter of a deceiver" because on his wedding night, he called her Rachel, and she replied, pretending to be her younger sister. Her response to Jacob was that she learned this from him. After all, his father called him Esau, and he also responded, pretending he was the eldest son.

Later, Jacob's children deceived him into believing that his favorite son, Joseph, was devoured by a wild animal. They took Joseph's robe of many colors, dipped it in goat blood, sent it to their father Jacob, and asked if he recognized it (Genesis 37:31–32). Years later, as Viceroy of Egypt, Joseph deceived his brothers, who did not recognize him. One of the most ironic statements in the Torah is the statement made when Joseph's brothers see him from afar (Genesis 37:19–20): "They said to one another, 'Here comes the dreamer! Come now, let's kill him, throw him into one of these pits, and say that a ferocious beast devoured him. Then let's *see* what will become of his dreams.'" The Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 84:14) has God responding to this statement with, "We will *see* whose word will stand, mine or yours."

The entire story of Joseph is ironic in this vein. The brothers conspired to sell him as a slave, believing that this would be the end of his dream of ruling over them. What they accomplished was that sending him to Egypt enabled him to become the Viceroy and fulfill his destiny. Instead of harming Joseph, they helped him become a great success. Moreover, they provided him with the opportunity to enslave them if he so wished. Instead, the boy they thought would be an insignificant slave for the rest of his life becomes the individual who saves all of his brothers from starvation. Joseph himself hints at this reversal: "Do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither…. God sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival… and to save your lives…. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God" (Genesis 45:5-8).

Genesis 38 tells the story of Judah's daughter-in-law, Tamar. Tamar discovered that Judah was lying to her and had no intention of allowing her to marry his youngest son, Shelah. The custom was that if a widow was childless, the brother was obliged to marry her to ensure the continuation of the family line (known as a levirate marriage). Judah was afraid to allow Tamar to marry Shelah because he thought that Tamar was somehow responsible for the deaths of his two older sons, Er and Onan. Er and Onan had married Tamar, but they both died of God's wrath for doing something wicked. Onan, who married Tamar after Er died, did not want to have children with

Tamar, so he practiced coitus interruptus. Judah suspected that Tamar was a "deadly woman" who would also cause Shelah to die. Tamar decided to fool Judah into having relations with her by disguising herself as a prostitute so she would not remain childless.

We read how Tamar deceived Judah with a goat. The Torah states that (Genesis 38:20): "Judah sent the young goat" to the prostitute (Tamar disguised as a prostitute). The brothers dipped Joseph's coat in goat blood (Genesis 37:31). The phrase *haker nah* (do you recognize?) is used twice. It was used by Tamar when she sent a message to her father-in-law, Judah, asking whether he recognized the seal, wrap, and staff he left with her as collateral to ensure that he paid her for her services as a prostitute. Her words were (Genesis 38:25): "I am pregnant by the man to whom these items belong." And she added, "See if you recognize (*haker nah*) whose seal, wrap, and staff are these?" The Babylonian Talmud (Sotah 10b) notes that this very phrase was used when Joseph's brothers deceived their father and asked whether he recognized Joseph's bloody coat, "See if you recognize (*haker nah*) if it is your son's coat or not?" (Genesis 37:32).

Similarly, using Divine irony, the Egyptians drowned Hebrew children in the river, so God drowned them in the sea. Sacks sees the irony that chariots, the military asset that made Egypt so powerful, became an enormous deficit once God sent a strong east wind that drove the sea back and transformed it into dry land.[21] The wheels of the chariots came off in the mud, and the stuck Egyptian army could not turn around. That which had made them powerful was, in the end, the source of their destruction.

Providing Power to the Powerless

In the Torah, not only is the deceiver deceived and birth order repeatedly upended, but nowhere do we learn that "might makes right" – quite the opposite. Sharp examines the biblical stories of Tamar, Rahab, and Gomer—prostitutes (Tamar pretended to be one) who, though social outcasts, are pivotal figures in salvation history.[22] Using situational irony, these narratives subvert societal biases and reveal God's practice of using the marginalized and unexpected as agents of redemption, thereby underscoring the biblical imperative to welcome and value the stranger. Ruth, a Moabite woman traditionally marginalized, became a pivotal figure in biblical history by becoming the great-grandmother of King David, thereby transcending ethnic and social boundaries through her remarkable story. Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, heroically delivered Israel from Canaanite oppression by killing Sisera, a Canaanite general, who had sought shelter in her tent (Judges 4).

[21] Jonathan Sacks. *Covenant & conversation: A weekly reading of the Jewish Bible. Exodus: The book of redemption*. OU Press/Maggid Books, 2010, 104-105.

[22] Carolyn J. Sharp. *Irony and meaning in the Hebrew Bible*. Indiana University Press, 2008, 84-103.

The two stories of Tamar and Potiphar are contiguous in the Torah to demonstrate the difference between Judah and Joseph. The reader determines that one succumbed to sexual temptation and one did not. Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph, but she was unsuccessful. One day, when they were alone together, she grabbed his garment and told him (Genesis 39:12): "Lie with me." He ran away, leaving the garment in her hand. She decided to teach him a lesson for spurning her advances and said after summoning the men of the house (Genesis 39:14): "See, *he* has brought in a Hebrew man *l'tzachek* (to mock) us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice." Alter[23] observes the double meaning of the term "came in to me." She was actually saying Joseph came into the house, but she phrased it in a way that had a strong sexual connotation. The word *l'tzachek*, meaning to mock or play, also has a sexual implication (see Genesis 26:8). It is also surprising how she referred to her husband, Potiphar, as "he" without a title or name; she seems to have contempt for him. The Torah hints at how she truly felt about Potiphar, which may explain why she was attracted to Joseph.

After Jacob died, the brothers were afraid that Joseph would get even with them for having sold him as a slave. Joseph reassured them (Genesis 50:19): "Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God?" Those words "for am I in the place of God" (*ha-tachat Elohim ani*) were almost the exact words Jacob used when Rachel said to her husband that if he did not give her children, she would be as if dead (Genesis 30:2). The Torah uses this ironic wordplay to show that Jacob was wrong in not comforting his wife. He should have shown more compassion and told Rachel he would pray for her.

Conclusion

We can see that biblical irony is far from being only a Divine jest. By focusing on the ironic elements within the Torah, mainly in Genesis, this paper offers a specific contribution to the understanding of biblical narrative.

When one's words come back to haunt one, when transgressions are punished in kind, when one can unintentionally curse or prophesy, when God clearly wants us to promote "right" not "might" – how can you not see the Torah as a resource for moral education? In fact, the above stories demonstrate how the hand of God constantly plays a role in history. Why humor? Humor shortens the distance between the speaker and the listener. Perhaps couching a profound message in humor presents God in a warm and loving light. The goal is not to punish but to get mortals to change their behaviors. The Torah encourages self-reflection such as, for example, that of Joseph's brothers, especially Judah.

[23] 2005, 223.

Readers wishing to extend this analysis to the entirety of the Torah will find more in Friedman & Friedman (2025).[24]

Science and Torah in the eyes of Rambam, Maharal, and Rema: The Nexus of Knowledge, Uncertainty, and Belief

Ron Ennis is Professor of Radiation Oncology and Vice Chair of Quality, Safety, and Network Integration in the Department of Radiation Oncology at the Cancer Institute of New Jersey and Robert Wood Johnson Barnabas Health System.

For medieval Europeans, including Jews, religion was the source of truth about the world - how it came to be, how it functions, its early history, how to act, and what to believe. The Scientific Revolution disrupted this. Now there was another source of truth, and its methods and sources were human-made rather than revealed. Some *Rishonim* and *Aharonim* appreciated the significance of this, and their responses reverberate within traditional Jewish life until today. Herein, I will share their views, explore their differences and nuances, and place each in its context to enrich the reader's understanding.

Rambam (1138-1204, Muslim Spain, Morocco, Israel, Egypt)

Rambam embraced scientific knowledge and incorporated it into his halakhic and philosophical thinking. For example, the Talmud *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 20b discusses when the moon is visible before or after its "monthly (re)birth", the *molad*. Abba, father of Rav Simlai, interprets a *baraita* to mean that the moon cannot be visible until 6 hours after the *molad*. Rebbi Zeira, in the name of Rav Nahman, says the moon is not visible for 24 hours total. In Israel that is 6 hours after the *molad* (and 18 before), but in Bavel it is 18 hours after the *molad* (and 6 before). However, the Amoraic opinions are not empirically correct. Rather, the moon cannot be seen for about 24 hours both before and after the *molad*. Rambam incorporates this scientific knowledge without even quoting the Talmudic opinions (*Mishneh Torah, Kiddush Ha-Hodesh* 1:3). "A full day is needed before the moon can be seen in the beginning of the month."

He explains his thinking in *Mishneh Torah, Kiddush Ha-Hodesh* 17:24:

> The rationales for all these calculations, and the reasons why this number is added, and why that subtraction is made, and how all these concepts are known, and the proofs for each of these principles are [the subject] of the wisdom of astronomy and geometry, concerning which the Greeks wrote many books. These texts are presently in the hands of the sages. The texts written by the Sages of Israel in the age of the Prophets from the tribe of Yissachar have not

[24] Hershey H. Friedman & Linda Weiser Friedman "Irony of the Torah: A tool for moral education and self-reflection." *SSRN*, 2025. https://ssrn.com/abstract=5014600 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5014600

been transmitted to us. Nevertheless, since these concepts can be proven in an unshakable manner, leaving no room for question, the identity of the author, be he a prophet or a gentile, is of no concern. For a matter whose rationale has been revealed and has proven truthful in an unshakable manner, we do not rely on [the personal authority of] the individual who made these statements or taught these concepts, but on the proofs he presented and the reasons he made known. [Translation from Sefaria.org]

He reaffirms this in *Moreh Nevukhim* Section 3:14:

> You must, however, not expect that everything our Sages say respecting astronomical matters should agree with observation, for mathematics were not fully developed in those days: and their statements were not based on the authority of the Prophets, but on the knowledge which they either themselves possessed or derived from contemporary men of science. But I will not on that account denounce what they say correctly in accordance with real fact, as untrue or accidentally true. On the contrary, whenever the words of a person can be interpreted in such a manner that they agree with fully established facts, it is the duty of every educated and honest man to do so. (Translation Sefaria.org, Friedlander 1903 version.)

However, Rambam only supports adopting the views of science which appear to conflict with previous understandings of Torah when these are unequivocally proven as he makes clear below:

> We do not reject the Eternity of the Universe, because certain passages in Scripture confirm the Creation; for such passages are not more numerous than those in which God is represented as a corporeal being**;** nor is it impossible or difficult to find for them a suitable interpretation. We might have explained them in the same manner as we did in respect to the Incorporeality of God. **….** For two reasons, however, we have not done so and have not accepted the Eternity of the Universe. First, the Incorporeality of God has been demonstrated by proof: those passages in the Bible, which in their literal sense contain statements that can be refuted by proof, must and can be interpreted otherwise. But the Eternity of the Universe has not been proved; a mere argument

> in favor of a certain theory is not sufficient reason for rejecting the literal meaning of a Biblical text, and explaining it figuratively, when the opposite theory can be supported by an equally good argument. (*Moreh Nevukhim* 2:25, Translation Sefaria.org, Freidlander, 1903 version.)

For Rambam, a scientific finding, if proven, is fact. And if we find that fact in conflict with what we thought was true based on our understanding of Torah, we will reinterpret the Torah to fit with the science, as we have done with anthropomorphism. One could challenge this perspective, however, by asking how much certainty about a scientific "fact" is necessary to treat it as such. Aside from the basic laws of nature, few scientific advances are unequivocally facts but rather are highly likely postulates based on the experimental evidence. The certainty of these varies from extremely likely to less so, but all have some level of compelling evidence to support them. Indeed, we know that sometimes what has been considered a scientific fact is disproved by later research. This phenomenon affirms the fact that scientific knowledge is rarely absolutely true. That being said, we should be careful not to leap to the conclusion that apparent scientific facts that conflict can be simply dismissed. To do that would be intellectually dishonest when we use these scientific facts daily to make decisions of all types in our lives, including those of life and death, on personal and societal levels, and when we see these facts being used to invent new technologies and medicines. To use these facts but then dismiss them when we recognize the conflicts with our understanding of Torah is no doubt what Rambam cautions against.

Maharal (1520-1609, Prague)

Maharal discusses the issue of conflict between Torah knowledge and scientific knowledge in his *Sefer Be'er Ha-Golah* (Be'er 6, 7:2) where he analyzes the discussion in the Talmud *Rosh Ha-Shanah* (20b), discussed above. Maharal responds-

> The warriors who know science…throw stones at this statement of the Talmud and say this contradicts the Talmud because the Talmud says one can see the moon 6 hours after its rebirth but this is impossible because the moon is not visible for a full day, more or less. So, the moon is invisible for about two days, a day before and a day after, which is what the Rambam writes in the *Mishneh Torah*, *Kiddush Ha-Hodesh* 1:3- "A full day is needed before the moon can be seen in the beginning of the month." Apparently, it is also not visible a full day after it completes waning because the same applies at the end of waning as the start of waxing. And because of this, many who learned this information went to lengths to try to align the

> statement in the Talmud with this scientific knowledge and what the senses (i.e. vision) testify, that the moon is not seen six hours after the *molad* (as the Talmud had claimed), and they worked very hard. And one does not have to respond to these responses regarding whether they are true or not, because it is clear, this is not the path - because the words of Torah are alone and the words of their scholars are alone. (Translations of Maharal are my own.)

Maharal stridently and unambiguously disagrees with Rambam's approach. For Maharal, Torah and other (scientific) knowledge are separate domains and best kept apart. A Maimonidean synthesis is misguided.

What Maharal means by "the words of Torah are alone and the words of their scholars are alone" requires explanation. Later in the same section, he elaborates:

> And this is the difference between the secret of the intercalation that has been given to us from the mouth of the Holy One Blessed Be He through Moses because He gave us words that are possible from their perspective…but the words of the scientific scholars are not such, but only the measurement according to human sight [under specific conditions] and should not enter into Wisdom at all.

For Maharal, statements of the *Amoraim* are part of what we have been taught directly from God while the scientific knowledge challenging the *Amoraim* is based on human visual capabilities which are inherently limited. When these are in conflict, of course, we believe the Perfect G-d over the imperfect, limited human. Maharal seems to understand that "visible" from a human perspective may not mean something is fundamentally impossible to see, only that humans cannot see it without assistance.

Maharal also addressed the issue of conflict between scientific knowledge and Torah knowledge in his *Sefer Gevurot Hashem* (*Hakdamah* 2:39) where he discusses the miracle in which God stopped the sun from setting to facilitate the Israelites and their allies, the Givonim, continuing the battle with the Amorites (Yehoshua 10:12-14). Maharal explores whether this meant the sun stopped moving for the entire world or only locally at the battle site. He asks, rhetorically, how is the latter option possible? There is one sun, it is either moving across the horizon or it's not?! He responds:

> It is possible that the sun can move according to its normal way and for it to stop in the context of a miracle [at the same time] because these are two different perspectives (*behinot*), – nature on one side and

> miraculous on the other. And there can be no doubt that the miraculous is greater. Because they are two different levels (*madreigot*), the sun was miraculous in one level and natural in the other. Just like it moves naturally, it could stop cognitively (*behinah sikhlit*).

We should not leave this opinion of Maharal at the superficial level but should rather try to understand the position more clearly. What does the existence of different perspectives or levels mean? There is only one sun and one earth, and all humans perceive the sun-earth relationship similarly. One possibility is to assert that the miracle was a hijacking of the perceptions of those in battle to perceive that the sun was standing still even though in reality it was not. Perhaps this is Maharal's meaning when he describes the combatants' ability to continue to perceive the sun as *behinah sikhlit*, cognitive.

While saying the miracle was a hijacking of the combatants' perception solves the conflict, the mechanism through which this happened i.e. in the words of the Maharal, the different *behinot* or *madreigot*, remains unexplained. One way to explain Maharal is to invoke ideas suggested centuries later, in the eighteenth century, by philosopher Bishop George Berkeley who proposed, in his *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, a theory he called "immaterialism" which said that the physical world which we think we perceive is actually only composed of ideas, not a physical reality. If this is true, then God's miracle is merely the modification of the soldiers' perceptions in the battle to perceive different things from the remainder of the world. Whether the Maharal subscribed to such a view of reality cannot be asserted from the texts above, but this does provide a framework for understanding his views.

Rambam and Maharal disagree regarding two core issues. First, they disagree whether Torah knowledge and scientific knowledge are part of the same domain, the same reality. The Rambam believes scientific discovery can be proven and, when proven, is as true as any Torah we know. Torah and science must be integrated both halakhically and philosophically. Maharal, however, believes that at a fundamental level, scientific knowledge, since it is humanly derived, is inferior to Torah which we have received from the Perfect God. Secondly, they disagree about the knowledge possessed by the *Amoraim* regarding planetary motion. Rambam opines that they only had the scientific knowledge of the time while Maharal believes that the understanding of the *Amoraim* had been given to Moses by God and unerringly passed down to them. It is worth wondering how far Maharal would extend this privileged status of statements of *Hazal*, if at all. Does this apply only to the topic of the workings of the universe or others which have been attributed as a "Law given to Moshe from Sinai" or would he extend this to all statements of the *Amoraim* or to all statements of *Rishonim*? Of

Aahronim?

Surprisingly, at the conclusion of his discussion about the visibility of the moon in relation to the *molad*, Maharal asks, what if it could be proven that the inability to see the moon is not just a human limitation, but that it is scientifically impossible (even with God-like, superhuman, perception)? Based on the principles he laid out, one would expect Maharal to stand firm and reject the scientific claim of impossibility by invoking an argument of different domains? However, Maharal equivocates when considering this possibility. In *Be'er Ha-Golah*, *Be'er* 7:2 he says, "Certainly, if the Rabbis had said the moon could not be seen for two days, but the scientists could demonstrate the moon is seen at an earlier time this would be a strong question." In this vein, we can also wonder what Maharal would think of the results of experimental science rather than just observational science. If he understood that research through experimentation can assert a fact with a high degree of certainty (e.g. lice do not spontaneously regenerate despite the Talmud's opinion otherwise) would he accept this?

<u>Rema (1530-1572, Krakow)</u>

Rema also weighed in on this topic in his *She'eilot and Teshuvot* 7:3 where he responds to Maharshal's criticism of a previous writing in which Rema quoted Greek wisdom. He first deflects the Mahashal's criticism by noting this is an old debate and even Rashba, who ostensibly agrees with Maharshal, did so in a more limited scope than Maharshal:

> First, I will answer that which my master (Maharshal) has turned the world against me because I brought, in my first writing, something of Greek wisdom and the head of the philosophers. This is an old argument, and the Rabbis of Provence have already answered Rashba on this. And even Rashba was only concerned with youngsters who have not learned Torah yet …. (Translations of Rema are my own.)

Second, he defends himself by aligning himself with Rambam while simultaneously dismissing the notion that Rambam did not really believe what he wrote in the *Moreh Nevukhim*. Notably, Rema then concedes that books articulating ideas that would draw one away from Judaism are prohibited to read:

> Who do we have greater than Rambam who made the Book of *Moreh* [*Nevukhim*] which is entirely about this?! And even though Maharshal has written in his responsa that he (Rambam) only did this to answer the heretics, in truth, I say that I have two responses regarding this and both of them are true according to my limited capabilities. They (the Rabbis in general) were only afraid to learn Greek books that were

> cursed … and regarding these the law is like them (Maharshal and his supporters) because we are afraid that the reader may be drawn toward another belief…

He then argues for the religious benefits of understanding science:

> But it is not prohibited to learn words of the wise ones and their insights in the essence of reality and nature because, the opposite, through this becomes known the greatness of the Creator may He be blessed…

He then makes his third argument in his defense, asserting that the existence of differing valid opinions within Torah is an accepted phenomenon:

> And even though there are those who accept another opinion (i.e. Maharshal's) on this topic "These and these are the words of the Living God."

He then returns to a positive argument in support of knowledge from non-Torah sources:

> And even though Wise men of other nations said these things, we have already said in Tractate *Megillah* (16a) "Anyone who says something wise, even from the (other) nations is called a H*akham* (Wise man)." ...Second, even if one claims that is it prohibited to learn from all their books because of the prohibited things that are in them, when these things are quoted by our *Hakhamim* (wise men) we drink from these works, specifically the great Rambam, and in this situation there is no rationale to prohibit them…

Rema then concludes with a final defense of the Rambam and himself:

> And even though a minority of our Sages disagreed with him and burned his books, nevertheless his works have now spread to all the *Aharonim* and all of them use him to crown themselves by bringing proofs from his words as though they were "Law given to Moses from Sinai." And therefore I also say that I am innocent from sin in this matter…The author of the *Moreh* (Rambam) wrote in Chapter 22 of the second part that all that Aristotle thought about the rotation of the moon is correct and he also wrote that all of Aristotle's opinions are the same as *Hazal* aside from a minority of beliefs about God and His works and the

> rolling of the heavens for in these alone did he deviate from the truth.

In Rema's view, there is no prohibition to study scientific material from any valid source and in fact one should believe wisdom from whatever its source with the caveat that works that will draw a person away from Judaism are prohibited. He expands the argument in support of this approach by arguing that knowing science is a good thing because "through this becomes known the greatness of The Creator may He be blessed." However, he adds two nuances that soften Rambam's principled approach. First, he argues, it is fine for others (e.g. Maharshal) to disagree with him (and Rambam) because "[t]hese and these are the words of the Living G-d." Second, he accepts Maharshal's argument in the situation in which scientific knowledge would draw people away from proper belief.

It is likely Rambam would disagree with Rema on these points and would rather assert that Maharshal's opinion is simply wrong. Secondly, he would assess the veracity of the scientific assertion that was drawing people from Judaism and either find its weakness and dismiss it in a way that would make it no longer threatening or accept its truthfulness and rework our understanding of Torah accordingly. We do not know what Rambam would do if his arguments would not stem the tide of disaffection from Judaism.

In summary, the opinions of these three dominant rabbis span the spectrum that we see today from the broad acceptance of science from the more modern elements of the Orthodox community to rejection of any scientific fact that conflicts with any part of the perceived *Mesorah* on the conservative side of Orthodoxy. The continuity of these positions for 450 years is remarkable as is the fact that no broad consensus has emerged over half a millennium. At a minimum, I think we can recognize that all three were genuine in their attempt to understand Hashem and his world and we owe it to each other to approach those with whom we disagree on this topic with the knowledge that each position is supported by a giant of our tradition and as Rema quotes- "These and these are the Words of the Living God,"

Afterword:

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider why, among all the *Rishonim* and *Aharonim*, it was these three who tackled the issue. Regarding Rambam, there is no surprise since he was deeply enmeshed in understanding Aristotelian philosophy along with Torah. But what are we to make of Maharal and Rema? The first major step in the Scientific Revolution that challenged religion's primacy in understanding the world was Copernicus's discovery of the heliocentric nature of our solar system. Copernicus (1473-1543) was born in Krakow, where Rema would later be born, went to University in Krakow from 1491-95 and later returned a few times. He published his revolutionary "On the Revolutions of Celestial

Spheres" in 1543, which led to a severe firestorm of criticism from the Church. Rema, who was 13 years old at the time of publication, undoubtedly heard about this given that he was living in Copernicus's hometown. Given this, it is unsurprising that he was moved to consider the broader issue of the conflict between science and Torah that Copernicus's discovery highlighted.

Johannes Kepler was a student of Copernicus. Kepler lived in Prague from 1600-12 and helped make Prague a center for astronomical sciences where he improved Copernicus's discovery by showing the orbits of the planets were ellipses, not circles. Maharal lived in Prague during this time.Thus, similarly to Rema, it is not surprising that he would become aware of the implications of the new astronomic science and respond to them.[1]

This article is dedicated to the memory of my father, Dr. Herbert L. Ennis, Tzvi Aryeh ben Refael ve-Faiga.

[1] For more on the topics of this article, see David B. Ruderman, D.B.,. *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (Yale University Press, 1995) and Jeremy Brown, *New Heavens and a New Earth* (Oxford University Press, 2013).