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TOLDOT

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**"EVERYMAN'S GADOL": AN APPRECIATION
OF RAV DOVID FEINSTEIN ZT"L**

**ZVI ROMM is the rabbi of the Bialystoker Synagogue on
the Lower East Side of Manhattan.**

Virtually Eighteen years ago, I came to the Lower East Side to serve as the rabbi of the Bialystoker Synagogue, the largest Shul in the area. Almost immediately, I was initiated into the unique culture of the Lower East Side Orthodox community: a tight-knit, unassuming, relatively tolerant community where everyone knew one another and, in many cases, had grown up together in the neighborhood. The single figure who personified the values of the community while simultaneously shaping those values was Rav Dovid Feinstein zt"l, the *Rosh Yeshiva* of Mesivtha Tifereth Jerusalem (MTJ), who passed away last week. In this urban "shtetl" of a community, the loss felt personal, as almost everyone, young and old, had at least some degree of connection to Rav Dovid. Many cried when they heard the news.

When listening to the eulogies for Rav Dovid zt"l, I noticed that one particular emotion was repeatedly invoked to describe his relationships with others: "love." The *Rosh Yeshiva* - in the Lower East Side, Rav Dovid was almost universally known by that title - was portrayed as both the giver of love to others and the recipient of love from them.

It was striking. Eulogies of great people tend to focus on their many accomplishments, describing them as "revered." Certainly, describing the *Rosh Yeshiva* in these terms would be accurate. But the emphasis was on love. This dimension of Rav

Dovid's personality left the greatest impression on those around him.

A Lower East Side woman shared with me a simple but poignant story. She went to speak with Rav Dovid, as so many did, about a difficult personal issue. "I watched as he cried," she told me. At that moment, she felt first-hand the love that Rav Dovid had for others.

The word "accessibility" similarly captures much of Rav Dovid's legacy. So many prominent figures, whether in the religious or secular worlds, are "protected" by circles of "handlers," who limit their exposure to the public. In truth, these barriers enable the prominent person to focus on important tasks and projects, without getting sidelined by people whose issues might be addressed in other ways.

But Rav Dovid was a model of accessibility, even as his halakhic decisions and advice were sought after by people from many walks of life and many geographic locations. For much of my early tenure on the Lower East Side, one could find Rav Dovid eating breakfast at the local pizza shop every morning. He walked the neighborhood streets and did his shopping in the local supermarket. That personal accessibility went hand-in-hand with his love for others; is a parent not accessible to his or her child?

Clearly, much of Rav Dovid's decision to make himself accessible to the public stemmed from a genuine, deep-seated sense of humility, as has been noted very frequently since his passing, as well as the sense of love for others mentioned above. But I believe that Rav Dovid's personal accessibility was

also an ideological choice, one which connected with his legacy of intellectual accessibility.

For Rav Dovid's intellectual output seems quite unusual for a *Rosh Yeshiva*. On one hand, Rav Dovid was described by his father, the late Rav Moshe Feinstein *zt"l*, as knowing *Shas* and *Shulhan Arukh*. "You can ask him anything," is a quote attributed to Rav Moshe about his illustrious son. Indeed, Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv *zt"l* labeled Rav Dovid as the foremost *posek* in America. Yet the intellectual legacy of Rav Dovid seems very different from that of his father. Rav Moshe bequeathed to the world volumes of responsa which tackled some of the burning halakhic questions of the late twentieth century. The more lengthy responsa, in particular, are a dazzling display of creative halakhic thinking, marshalling unexpected sources to make a point. In Rav Moshe's talmudic commentaries, which he actually considered to be his main intellectual legacy, his keen analysis requires hard work to even understand, let alone fully appreciate.

Rav Dovid answered innumerable halakhic questions orally. Those who asked know that his answers tended to be short and to the point. He would elaborate if pressed - but one had to press. His written works were popular in nature: a commentary on the *Haggadah*, a treatise outlining the basic principles of the Jewish calendar, notes on *Haftarot*, and short *Humash* insights based on *gematrias*. What's more, they were written in English. The contrast between his literary output and that of his father could not have been more striking. Why would the foremost *posek* in America devote himself to writing English-language *sefarim* for a general audience?

The answer lies, I think, in that the *Rosh Yeshiva* viewed at least part of his life's mission to make Torah accessible to a broad audience. Rav Moshe's works were brilliant, but one had to be a scholar to appreciate them. Rav Dovid, in contrast, was incredibly democratic. His literary output contained nuanced novel insights, but you could overlook those insights and still come away informed and inspired.

That drive to maximize Torah's accessibility expressed itself in Rav Dovid's unflinching support for the ArtScroll Talmud translation. A perusal of the rabbinic approbations written for ArtScroll's monumental translation reveals that there was a degree of unease with translating the Talmud into English. More than one writer explained the move as a necessary concession of some sort. Rav Dovid never spoke in those terms. In his approbation to the Talmud translation he wrote that "everyone knows that my master, father, and teacher *zt"l* loved the work of ArtScroll-Mesorah in the area of English translations and commentaries ... It is clear to me that he would support this great, important project... I know for a fact that these [ArtScroll] works have already brought numbers of our brethren to Torah and Teshuva."

Yisroel Besser (*Mishpacha*, "Higher Purpose on the Lower East Side," November 11, 2020) has shared the moving story of

how Rav Dovid loaned his life's savings to Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz to fund ArtScroll's activities. While the story is an inspiring tribute to Rav Dovid's incredible generosity and nobility of spirit, it also speaks to his conviction that ArtScroll was a project worth supporting. ArtScroll embodied Rav Dovid's worldview that making Torah accessible and understandable to the English-speaking public was desirable. From his perspective, it meant that even *gedolim* should spend their time producing "popular" works. Just as the Torah scholar should be open to the public, so too the Torah itself should be open.

Many of the most endearing memories I have of Rav Dovid involve his interactions with children. He was a fixture at any milestone ceremony in the MTJ elementary school; he handed out *Siddurim* to the preschool, *Humashim* to the first-graders, Mishnah volumes to the third graders, and Gemara volumes to the fifth graders. The junior high school davened with him each morning, lining up after davening to shake hands, one by one, with the *Rosh Yeshiva*. And boys donning their *tefillin* for the first time would come to him after *davening* for a *berakhah*, a warm smile, and a "photo-op" with Rav Dovid. The love and attention paid to the youngest members of society spoke to his democratic ethos.

Young or old, learned or unlettered, one had the sense that Rav Dovid cared for you and your Torah learning. In a world of elitism, he was "everyman's *Gadol*."

A EULOGY FOR RABBI JONATHAN SACKS; TEACHING US HOW TO TAKE ON THE WORLD NATHAN DIAMENT is the Executive Director for the Orthodox Union Advocacy Center.

To presume to properly eulogize Rabbi Jonathan Sacks is to reach for something clearly beyond grasp. To appropriate an idea that Rabbi Norman Lamm said when Rav Soloveitchik passed away, only Rabbi Jonathan Sacks could possibly deliver a eulogy worthy of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.¹

However, Rabbi Sacks was a teacher and mentor of mine – and I must make the attempt to honor him in appreciation of what I learned from him.²

Like many American Jews, I first encountered Rabbi Sacks through his writings.

After graduating law school, I delayed beginning work at a New York City law firm to return to Yeshiva University and study Torah full-time, for the first half of the year at the Gruss Kollel in Jerusalem and the second half at YU's main campus in Washington Heights.

In that second half of the year, I spent a few hours each afternoon on the fifth floor of the YU library. At the time, I was

looking for works to read that presented Jewish values in ways that were most relevant to being a Modern Orthodox Jew in the real world -- outside the walls of the *beit midrash*. While I had previously read one of Rabbi Sacks' early books, in the library's stacks I discovered the back issues of the *L'eyla Journal* he edited, and proceeded to read through the many articles he published there. Then I started reading all the books he'd published to date -- there were only a handful then. As so many in the Modern Orthodox community experienced, I could hear his voice echo from those compelling pages, and felt as though Rabbi Sacks was speaking to me.

A few years later, in 1997, once I'd begun working at the Orthodox Union, I finally had the *zekhut* to meet Rabbi Sacks in person as I facilitated his speaking, for the first time, at an OU convention. Since I was making the arrangements, I took the liberty of proposing a topic for Rabbi Sacks to address -- one that interested me: An Orthodox Jewish View of *Tikkun Olam*.

In that lecture, Rabbi Sacks addressed what he said, was "a very difficult subject, a subject in fact that I have not spoken about before: *Tikkun Olam* -- perfecting, preparing or repairing the world..."

He then went on to offer a stunning and compelling approach to the topic that offered a framework to think about Torah as a whole and our mandate in the world as Jews. This framework would implicitly animate so much of his writing in the decades to follow, and was the essence of so much of what Rabbi Sacks embodied.

Rabbi Sacks asked: "Why is there so little in the *Shulhan Arukh* about this topic?"

To frame his answer, Rabbi Sacks set forth the following:

There are certain questions in Jewish life which in order to answer, what do you do? You open a book; either a *Shulkhan Arukh*, or Responsa literature or the Talmud and you elicit a ruling from the sources. Why is that so? The reason is that those issues never change. Whether the issues regard *shabbat*, *kashrut*, *taharat mishpacha*, it makes no difference if you asked the question in 1897, 1997 or 2097. The issues never change, and the answers never change. I call this kind of Torah by a very ancient name, and that is "*Torat Kohanim*" because the *kohen*, the priest, was the first role model in Jewish history of the enduring structure of *kedusha*; the eternity in the midst of time. Torah as *chayei olam* -- eternal life-- in the midst of *chayei sha'ah* -- finite life. That is one kind

of Torah all of us are familiar with. It is for most of us all the Torah that there is.

However, there is another kind of Torah as well. It is much more rare, and the truth is that it is much more rarely needed; I call it "*Torat Nivi'im*" -- Torah not of the priest but of the *navi*, the prophet. While a *kohen* represents eternity, a *navi* represents history. We know that the prophets were the first people in all of civilization and certainly the greatest of all time to see G-d in history. They saw history itself as a coherent narrative; a story with a beginning, middle and end, a journey through time with a destination. *Kohanim* were sensitive to the things in Judaism which never change; while prophets were sensitive to things which do change -- things in which today's challenge are different than the day before. Why? Because we are on a journey. The destination never changes but we move, and where we are today is not necessarily where we were yesterday so each day has a new challenge. That is *Torat Nivi'im*; it needs a special kind of sensibility to deal with questions of that kind.

So, asked Rabbi Sacks, why is there no section in the *Shulhan Arukh* that lays out how Jews are to set about engaging in the task of *Tikkun Olam*? He explained:

The answer is that for two thousand years what chance did we have? For two thousand years we were dispersed, scattered, exiled, we were powerless, we were what Max Weber called the pariah people, who in the world would think of learning from us? We were the wandering Jew, Old Israel, displaced, superseded, we were the people rejected by G-d. That's what the nations thought. Who thought of learning from us?

Today for the first time in two thousand years we have a chance to put it into practice. We have a State of Israel, which is our first chance to create a macro-society run on Jewish principles. We never had a chance for two thousand years to create a global society, and in the diaspora today for the first time ever we are part of the mainstream of the democracies of the West. We are able to speak and be heard; we are able to teach and be heeded; we are able to sanctify G-d's name in public.

I repeat there is no formula, no *Shulkhan Arukh*, and no responsum governing how to be *mitaken ha'olam*.

For this the Orthodox community needs not only masters of the law but also *ba'alai nivuah* – people with historical insight; that is the challenge of our time....what stands before us is the... great, untouched challenge of *tikkun olam* that we, in a secular age, should become role models for spirituality. That we in a relativistic age should be able to teach people once again to hear the objective “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not.” In an age in which religion so often brings conflict we should teach once again that Shalom, peace, is the name of G-d and that the mighty is one who turns an enemy into a friend. If we do these things there will surely come to all of us that experience of living a Jewish life and knowing that those around us, those with whom we have dealings are blessed by that life, and they will return to us saying: you have been a prince or princess of G-d in our midst. Do that and we begin to perfect the world.

I have shared these extensive passages from this lecture by Rabbi Sacks³ – the first one I was privileged to hear from him in person – because I think it sums up his amazing life's work, his legacy, and, perhaps, why Hashem took him from us in the weeks we read the *parshiot* about our first *navi*, Avraham.

The Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 9a) teaches that the lifespan of the world is to be 6,000 years, demarcating three eras in the lifespan of the world as we know it.

The school of Eliyahu taught: The world is destined to exist for six thousand years. For two thousand years *Tohu* (chaos), two thousand years are the time period of the Torah, two thousand years are the days of the Messiah, but due to our many sins those years that have been taken from them, have been taken.

The Talmud then asks, at what point in world history did the *Tohu* (chaos) period end and the Torah period commence?

After a bit of discussion in which the Rabbis calculate that *Ma'amad Har Sinai* is too late in the calendar, the Talmud marks the beginning of the “Torah Era” of the world from the verse in *Parshat Lekh Lekha*:⁴

[Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed,] and the persons that they had acquired in Haran... (Genesis 12:5)

Why use this verse to mark the start of the Torah Era of civilization? Even if the rabbis calculated that it had to be in the lifetime of Avraham, they could have associated the beginning of the Torah Era with Avraham engaging in something we would recognize as a *mitzvah* performance, such as prayer or circumcision.

The verse which the Talmud identifies as the starting point of the Torah era is the one upon which Rashi famously explains: “Abraham was converting the men and Sarah was converting the women.”

The Talmud is teaching us that preaching the message of ethical monotheism to the world at large is the paradigmatic act of serving Hashem and thus the mark of the beginning of the Torah era.

Who more than Rabbi Jonathan Sacks engaged in this holy work in our time?

Who more than Rabbi Jonathan Sacks brought a sophisticated voice of authentic Jewish teaching and values to the world at large – across the continents of Europe and America, and across the media, from the BBC to books to social media and so much more?

And this last point – that Rabbi Sacks' presentation and translation of Jewish wisdom to his global audience was authentic and not watered down – is a crucial one. He never sacrificed Jewish tenets that are currently countercultural for the sake of convenience or to avoid controversy.

Just as important as Rabbi Sacks' authenticity and sophistication in his teaching was, in my view, his framing so much of it positively. Scanning my shelf of his many books the day after he passed, I was struck by the titles:

Faith in the Future
Celebrating Life
The Persistence of Faith
The Dignity of Difference
To Heal a Fractured World
The Politics of Hope

I should not have been surprised. In my personal encounters with him over the years, whether in Washington or New York or London or Jerusalem, he always greeted me (and everyone else) with a hale and hearty greeting.

When he spent Shabbat in our community in Silver Spring, on each occasion there happened to be a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* in our *shul* the same Shabbat he was the scholar-in-residence. He made a point to enthusiastically speak to those boys and girls and to work into his remarks praise of their *divrei Torah*.

When he had Shabbat lunch in our home, he enthusiastically enjoyed desserts (contrary to the dietary instructions his

Office gave us) and appreciated a good joke in addition to an incisive *devar Torah*.

In fact, Rabbi Sacks' penchant for jokes was regularly on display in the opening of his lectures – even the most serious ones – and many of his books. In his 2000 book *Celebrating Life*, he even explained why he liked jokes: “I like jokes because they are an unserious way of saying serious things. They get past our defences. What we can laugh at, we can face.”

One joke I heard Rabbi Sacks tell on a few occasions is particularly poignant shortly after his passing. With appropriate gusto, Rabbi Sacks spoke of a Mr. Finkelstein going to Massachusetts General - one of the nation's best hospitals - where he was treated for a week. Then, without explanation, he had himself transferred to a run-down hospital on the Lower East Side of New York. The doctor there, intrigued, asked Finkelstein, “What was wrong with Mass General? Was it the doctors?” Finkelstein replied, “The doctors were great, I can't complain.” “Was it the nurses?” Finkelstein replied, “The nurses were attentive, I can't complain.” The doctor asked, “Was it the food?” Finkelstein replied, “The food was amazing.” “So why did you leave and come here?” Finkelstein replied: “Because here I can complain.”

Rabbi Sacks, as noted, explained what we can laugh at we can face. I cannot laugh at his joke today because I cannot yet face his passing. I want to complain to the *Ribbono Shel Olam* that

he took Rabbi Jonathan Sacks away from our world far too soon. He had more to teach us, and we had more to learn.

My only means of overcoming this state is to reflect on what Rabbi Sacks' daughter Gila shared in her eulogy for her father. Gila said that her father imbued in her the mindset that no problem is too big for people to solve. Some problems are easier and some are harder, but we are charged to strive to change the world and make it better. Indeed, her father surely used the joke about Finkelstein to make the point -- there is no purpose to complaining about problems.

We cannot overcome the reality of Rabbi Sacks having passed away. But we can keep his Torah alive by taking up the mantle of bringing authentic Jewish wisdom to the world at large.

We can hone our sensibility to utilize *Torat Nevi'im* and apply Torah wisdom to our modern challenges.

In doing so, we can embrace the attitude of Avraham Avinu, and of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, and see no problem as unsolvable, as we strive to make the world better for us all.

¹ Lamm, “[A Eulogy for the Rav: 'A Great Prince in Israel Has Fallen Today'](#),” *Tradition* 28:1 (Fall 1993): 4

² See *Masekhet Kallah Rabbati* (6): “Our rabbis taught: when a *hakham* dies everyone is obligated to eulogize him.

³ For the complete transcript of this lecture, see: <https://advocacy.ou.org/tikkun-olam-orthodoxy-responsibility-to-perfect-g-ds-world/>.

⁴ Genesis 12:5.

(MIS)QUOTING SCRIPTURE IN AMERICAN POLITICS

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Abraham Lincoln knew his Bible, mostly. As a child, he listened to his mother recite Psalms as she worked.¹ During his early career as a lawyer, a dying – but particularly pious – client asked Lincoln to read some Scripture after composing her last will and testament. Her children brought out the family Bible, but instead, Lincoln quoted Psalm 23 and Jesus' farewell address (John 14:1-4) by heart.² Occasionally, however, his plastered cistern of a memory for biblical passages would leak.³ In his final 1858 debate with Democratic senator Stephen Douglas, Lincoln said: “The Bible says somewhere that we are desperately selfish. I think we would have discovered that fact without the Bible.”⁴ No single biblical passage captures Lincoln's claim. Perhaps he intended to cite James 3:16, 2 Timothy 3:2 or the commandment “Thou shalt not covet.” These verses are oblique references at best. But must Lincoln cite the Bible verbatim for his message to be biblical? A broader view of the word “Bible” will allow us to be more charitable to Lincoln than Douglas, who once, according to Lincoln, called him “a poor hand to quote Scripture.”⁵

Lincoln's scriptural pseudo-quote – a citation based on the Bible but not quite found on its pages – prefigures that of yet another leading politician. On at least twelve occasions between 2002 and 2019, Nancy Pelosi attributed the following piece of wisdom to the Bible: “To minister to the needs of God's creation is an act of worship. To ignore those needs is to dishonor the God who made us.”⁶ At best, this saying alludes to Proverbs 13:41 in the Good News Translation: “If you oppress poor people, you insult the God who made them; but kindness shown to the poor is an act of worship.” Nonetheless, at the 2019 Annual Council for Christian Colleges and Universities Conference, Pelosi admitted: “I can't find it in the Bible, but I quote it all the time,” and “I keep reading and reading the Bible—I know it's there someplace. It's supposed to be in Isaiah It's in there somewhere in some words or another, but certainly the spirit of it is there.” If we maintain a narrow understanding of the word “Bible,” one that limits its message to the black glossy letters on its sterling white pages, we would conclude that “the misquote is simply indication

that Speaker Pelosi has no clue what is in the Bible”⁷ and side with those who read Pelosi’s error as evidence of biblical illiteracy.⁸

An expansive understanding of “Bible” and “biblical” will also allow us to put into a more generous and revealing light the misquotes of two contemporary vice presidents. In September, a few months before being declared the winner of the presidential election, Joe Biden recounted his meeting with Jacob Blake, a man shot by the Kenosha police department, claiming that they discussed something “based on the 23rd Psalm: ‘May He raise you up on eagle’s wings and bear you on the breath of dawn until we ... And keep you and hold you in the palm of His hand until we meet again.’”⁹ These lines do not come from Psalm 23. Instead, they consist of the refrain of Michael Joncas’s 1979 church hymnal “On Eagle’s Wings” – itself based on Psalm 91– stitched together with an Irish prayer: “Until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of His hand.”¹⁰ Biden’s reference falls well beyond the printed and bound Holy Bible. But is there more to this story than just another moment of “brain freeze”?¹¹

Misattributing text to the Bible has not passed over the party of the religious right. Bob Woodward, in his most recent book, summarizes the following piece of wisdom that Mike Pence delivered to Dan and Marsha Coats: “Pence recounted the Old Testament story of David, who was hiding from King Saul in a cave when God sent a spider to weave a web across the cave opening. On seeing the web, Saul did not enter the cave. The spider had concealed David’s presence and saved his life. The story showed that even a spider might be an instrument of great salvation in the hand of God.”¹² Open a Bible and flip through the books of 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Chronicles, and Psalms. This story will not appear on its pages. It exists, but as a piece of Jewish folklore recorded for the first time in an early medieval Hebrew text called The Alphabet of Ben Sirā.¹³ According to this story, David questioned the utility of insects such as the spider. God teaches David a lesson about gratitude and divine forethought by using a spider to conceal his position and save him from certain death. Where Pence first learned about this tale I cannot say. Perhaps a copy of The Little Midrash Says, now encased in dust, sits on his childhood bookshelf. In any case, I believe that we can appreciate Pence’s mini-sermon beyond the textual confines of the category of biblical literacy.¹⁴

Did Lincoln, Pelosi, Biden, and Pence misquote Scripture, the written (*scriptus*) text of the Bible? On hyper-technical grounds: yes. Do their errors come from senility? Are these mistakes just additional datapoints on a scatterplot showing the unfortunate decline in biblical literacy? I think not. It is all too easy for us to accept a narrow understanding of the word “Bible,” to view it as a single book of 24 (or more for Christians) unchanging texts. Accordingly, any direct reference to it that does not replicate the words on its pages must signal memory failure, a comic error of cosmic consequences.¹⁵

At least two historical forces bequeathed the legacy of viewing the Bible as a singular sacred text to the American public,¹⁶ a society fond of citing biblical literature within the public sphere to make political and moral arguments. The first is print culture, which ultimately stabilized – and some might say monotonized – a dynamic textual tradition. Its crown jewel, the Bible from which Lincoln most often cites, was the 1611 King James Version – a doctrinal statement for the Church of England and a political charter garbed in the authoritative cloth of biblical translation.¹⁷ The second is the Protestant-dominated approach to the Bible, which demands that a written and unchanging text stand on its own (*sola scriptura*) as the primary source of religious meaning and authority: if one cannot find the idea within the confines of the written Word, it lacks the biblical Spirit.

The technical errors of Lincoln, Pelosi, Biden, and Pence point to a more textured, nuanced, and rich understanding of the word “Bible” that has flowed as an undercurrent within American culture. We can best unpack this perspective through the Bible’s Hebraic equivalent: the word *Torah*, which outsiders often infelicitously translate as “the Law.” *Torah* is anything but a simple lawbook. *Torah* signifies a) the physical scroll that contains the five books of Moses (*sefer Torah*); b) the entire 24-book biblical canon (the “Written *Torah*,” *Tanakh*); and c) the sum total of all of Jewish wisdom and learning (the “Oral *Torah*”), which continues to grow as the present becomes the past. In modern parlance, the word acquired yet another useful meaning: d) a way of life inflected by Jewish religious values, i.e. “Torah Judaism.”¹⁸ And the word *Torah* operates on all four definitional levels at the same time, as Hasidism continues to demonstrate with its clever – and sometimes disturbing – feats of (de)constructive biblical interpretation.¹⁹

This expansive Jewish view of *Torah* does not confine authority and meaning to the written text alone.²⁰ The Jewish “*Torah*” does not accept the limitations imposed by print or Protestantism. And neither should the American “Bible.” Instead of sneering at the decline of biblical literacy and mocking the mistakes of others, we should be charitable and encouraging. We should support a more dynamic view of the word “Bible” and what it means to say that something is “biblical.” In this view, the Bible should certainly refer to a specific group of texts, printed and bound. We cannot allow conceptual fluidity to devolve into complete relativism. But at the same time, the word Bible must also signify that book’s iconic status, its ability to stand in as a symbol for a much broader tradition: its history, words, material manifestations, and successive layers of intellectual and cultural interpretations.

With this understanding of “Bible” and “biblical,” let us place into context the errors explored above. Each misquote entwines most of the four views of “*Torah*.” At the same time, each highlights a different degree of expansion beyond the written text. Biden misattributes a liturgical composition to

Psalm 23. This worship hymn, however, originates with a biblical Psalm. Perhaps we may excuse Biden by noting that his reference to Psalm 23 simply stands in for a work “based on” – to use his own words – the Psalter. His reference points to an extended biblical canon, one that includes biblically-inflected liturgy. Pence cites a Jewish *midrash* as biblical. In this manner, he reads the Bible as many Jews do, through theological lenses tinted by a millennia-old oral tradition. And finally, Lincoln and Pelosi quote phantom verses, intangible words that elude the fixing grasp of the biblical *text*. Yet they certainly emanate from a biblical ethos, a way of life that demands one reflect on selfishness and “minister to the needs of God’s creations.” These are good – and divine – messages.

Have I merely spun apologetics and justified the active abuse of sacred literature? Perhaps, if we take this argument *too* far. Not every technical misquote should be lauded or tolerated. And sometimes, mistakes are simply errors. But, in an era of hyper-partisanship, where it is easy to dismiss content based on anything other than reasoned thought and active listening, I believe that we must double-down on charitable assumptions. Before “hissing and wagging our heads” (cf. Lamentations 2:15, Psalms 22:7) at those who “improperly” use the Bible, we should raise as a starting point the eternal banner: *eilu va-eilu divrei Elokim hayyim*.

¹ Jonathan D. Sarna and Benjamin Shapell, *Lincoln and the Jews: A History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015), 2.

² Clarence E. N. Macartney, *Lincoln and the Bible* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1949), 11–12.

³ See *Avot* 2:8.

⁴ *Abraham Lincoln: Complete Works, Comprising His Speeches, Letters, State Papers, and Miscellaneous Writings*, ed. J. Hay and J. Nickolay, Volume 1 (New York: Century, 1907), 506.

⁵ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln Speeches*, ed. Allen C. Guelzo (New York: Penguin, 2012), 69.

⁶ Quotes of Pelosi are from [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

⁷ <https://bigleaguepolitics.com/nancy-pelosi-continues-to-quote-made-up-bible-verse/>.

⁸ See, for example, [here](#) (note the article tag), [here](#) (note the final line), and [here](#).

⁹ <https://news.sky.com/video/square-video-joe-biden-001-mp4-12063077>.

¹⁰ <https://www.irishcentral.com/culture/road-rise-meet-you-irish-blessing-meaning>.

¹¹ <https://www.breitbart.com/2020-election/2020/09/05/joe-biden-misattributes-psalm-23/>.

¹² Bob Woodward, *Rage* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 25.

¹³ *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, Version B 24b. For further, see Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, ed. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 919.

¹⁴ Contra [Edward Cook](#).

¹⁵ See, for example, [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

¹⁶ Although he does not deal with America, James Simpson describes the pressure that these dual forces exert on modernity in *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and Its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹⁷ For the literary impact of the [King James Version](#) in America, see Robert Alter, *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹⁸ See, for example, its use [here](#), as well as the chapter in the Rav’s *Kol Dodi Dofek* titled “The Obligation of Torah Judaism to the Land of Israel,” and the product description of an [ArtScroll Introduction to Judaism](#).

¹⁹ See Ora Wiskind-Elper, *Hasidic Commentary on the Torah* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2018).

²⁰ See also Benjamin D. Sommer, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 239.

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