

CONFRONTING BIBLICAL CRITICISM: A REVIEW ESSAY

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Review of Yoram Hazony, Gil Student, and Alex Sztuden, eds., [The Revelation at Sinai: What does "Torah from Heaven" Mean?](#) (KTAV, 2021)

The revelation of God's word to mankind is obviously a central feature of Judaism, but what exactly does this mean? Can anything new be said about revelation, or is all that has been said, and needs to be said, found in traditional rabbinic works? This new book, while fully accepting revelation in the traditional sense, shows that analysis of the concept of revelation is far from exhausted, even when it comes to basic ideas. It is a very rich book, with contributions from a number of distinguished scholars. In many ways, [The Revelation at Sinai](#) can be seen as a traditionalist alternative to the point of view advocated by [TheTorah.com](#), which accepts the

findings of modern biblical scholarship and believes that they can be integrated with living a traditional Jewish life. As I have documented elsewhere, acceptance of aspects of modern biblical scholarship, to varying degrees, has already made inroads in Orthodoxy,¹ a point which is ignored by virtually all of the contributors. Considerations of space prevent me from dealing with all the articles, so I will just call attention to various points that caught my eye, with full recognition that I could have just as easily picked other essays to focus on.

The book is divided into four sections with essays focusing on philosophical and theological issues, "Sinai and History," the Oral Torah, and revelation and modern biblical studies. The most significant of the essays is the lengthy contribution by Yoram Hazony that opens the volume and is a strong defense of the doctrine of Torah from Heaven. Hazony is not denying the possibility that there are a few post-Mosaic verses in the Torah. His points, rather, are directed against the widely held academic assumption that even if Moses is not a legendary figure, the Torah we have did not

¹ See my "[Is Modern Orthodoxy Moving Towards an Acceptance of Biblical Criticism?](#)" *Modern Judaism* 37:2 (May 2017): 1-29. See also Adam S. Ferziger, "[Fluidity and](#)

[Bifurcation: Critical Biblical Scholarship and Orthodox Judaism in Israel and North America,](#)" *Modern Judaism* 39:3 (Oct. 2019): 233-270.

originate with him. Hazony is also not arguing using biblical scholarship, although he does ask with reference to the academic understanding that the Torah was produced by many different people over multiple generations, “Could the books of Moses... or, indeed, any coherent literary or philosophical work have been written by means of such an editorial process?” (p. 66). Yet this is somewhat begging the question, as many academic scholars will challenge the assumption that the Torah is indeed a coherent work, as from their perspective there are inconsistencies throughout that can only be explained by a long editorial process.

Hazony’s focus is theology, as there are those who in recent years have claimed that revelation, rather than Moses, is fundamental, and that Moses’ role can be reduced or even eliminated.

Hazony specifically takes issue with Tamar Ross, who has advocated a notion of progressive revelation in which the Torah was revealed over time. For Ross, an obvious upside of her theory is that it severely lessens the conflict between the academic approach and what we can call the religious approach. Yet Hazony sees all sorts of difficulties with Ross’s model, and concludes that “there is no way to reconcile Ross’s unfolding revelation with the biblical and rabbinic theology of *Torah from heaven*, in which Moses and Sinai are regarded as fundamental” (p. 69 n. 145).²

As Hazony argues, the theory of progressive revelation is problematic because it presents a scenario of numerous scribes acting under God’s providence, writing and altering what earlier scribes had written, and all the while not realizing the significance of what they are doing. In other

² See also the statement from the Rabbinical Council of America [here](#) (published July 31, 2013):

In recent days there has been much discussion regarding the belief in Torah Min HaShamayim. We maintain that it is necessary not only to assert the centrality of this bedrock principle in broad terms, but also to affirm the specific belief that Moshe received the Torah from God during the sojourn in the wilderness, the critical moment being the dramatic revelation at Sinai. The Rambam and others have included this in their various Principles of Faith but its centrality is so evident that an appeal to these Principles of Faith is almost superfluous. The very coherence of traditional Jewish discourse concerning the authority of the Torah she-bikhtav and the Torah she-be`al peh rests upon this conviction.

When critical approaches to the Torah’s authorship first arose, every Orthodox

rabbinic figure recognized that they strike at the heart of the classical Jewish faith. Whatever weight one assigns to a small number of remarks by medieval figures regarding the later addition of a few scattered phrases, there is a chasm between them and the position that large swaths of the Torah were written later – all the more so when that position asserts that virtually the entire Torah was written by several authors who, in their ignorance, regularly provided erroneous information and generated genuine, irreconcilable contradictions. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, none of the abovementioned figures would have regarded such a position as falling within the framework of authentic Judaism.

While we recognize and respect the theological struggles that are a feature of many a modern person’s inner religious life, the position in question is unequivocally contrary to the faith requirements of historic Judaism.

words, they are prophets without recognizing their prophetic role. He also makes the powerful point that the notion of progressive revelation leads to the realization that we can never know the intent of the Torah, since it could still be unfolding. “For if no one in antiquity was able to gain a commanding view of God’s nature and his will, then why should anyone believe that we are now in possession of God’s ‘true intent,’ which was denied to all our forefathers?” (p. 74).

Hazon’s position is definitely the traditional one, and he shows the difficulties that the progressive revelation position creates for one seeking a coherent philosophy of revelation. However, many in the Orthodox world put the stress not on coherence, but on dogma (in particular, Maimonides’ Eighth Principle). In line with this, they see the progressive revelation approach as nothing less than heresy, for it replaces a unitary Torah revealed to Moses with a Torah revealed to multiple prophets over many years.

To my knowledge, the first to confront this approach on theological grounds was the great

and influential (in the Orthodox world) biblical scholar, Rabbi Mordechai Breuer. Even though the progressive revelation position preserves the divinity of the Torah, as the Torah is said to be revealed through multiple prophets, Breuer strongly rejected it on theological grounds:

This definition of belief [the traditional position] in the unique divinity of *Torat Mosheh* is the only one recognized by the Jewish people, adopted by all sages. Whoever views the Torah as an ordinary prophetic work denies its unique status. . . . Traditional belief means God’s revelation of the Torah through Moses. Only Moses, the worthy scribe to whom God committed the task of writing every section, verse, and letter of the Torah from his very lips. . . . *Torah min ha-shamayim* depends on Moses writing it.³

These are powerful words and stand as strong support for Hazon’s argument.

³ Breuer, “The Study of Bible and the Fear of Heaven,” in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1996), 169. I want to take this opportunity to correct something I wrote in my article [“Is Modern Orthodoxy Moving Towards an Acceptance of Biblical Criticism?”](#) In the article, I cited the passage from R. Breuer that I just quoted above, in which he rejects the notion of progressive revelation. However, I also cited another passage from R. Breuer’s last published work, which I said presented a different position.

One who is not able to believe that God gave the entire Torah to Moses, there is no reason for him to say that Moses wrote the Torah. Rather, he is permitted to say that the documents of the Torah were written by various prophets in a development that took hundreds of years,

and only at the end of the First Temple or the beginning of the Second Temple were they joined together into one book by the prophetic editor as has already been established by the critical Bible scholars. This position does not do any damage to the Jewish faith, since nowhere is it stated that one who says that there is no Torah from the hands of Moses, that he has no share in the World to Come. It is only stated that one who says that there is no Torah from Heaven, that he has no share in the World to Come. Indeed, these people also say that the Torah is “from Heaven” and was written by prophets through a spirit of prophecy! (*Limud ha-*

While [The Revelation at Sinai](#) generally holds to traditional approaches, unless I misunderstand, Shawn Zelig Aster's contribution, "Historical Issues Connected to Sinai," is an exception. Aster discusses where the Israelites came from, and his approach offers us a more complicated picture than what has traditionally been the case. "Some Israelites were certainly local Canaanites who settled down in the highlands" (p. 179). He states further:

It is clear that tribal nomads in the 14th and 13th centuries, and earlier, identified themselves as the nomads of YHW. . . . At the core of the Israelites were a group of nomads, who had identified themselves for some time, prior to their settlement in the land of Israel, as the people of YHW. These people emerged from the deserts of the Negev and Transjordan in the late 13th century, and settled in the land, bringing with them their political and theological views of God who ruled the land instead of Egypt" (p. 180).

Torah be-Shitat ha-Behinot [Jerusalem, 2005], p. 24.)

This passage from Breuer is also cited in Yehudah Brandes, et al., eds., *Be-Einei E-lohim ve-Adam: Ha-Adam ha-Ma'amin u-Mehkar ha-Mikra* (Jerusalem, 2015), 63n112, and in the English version of this book, [The Believer and the Modern Study of the Bible](#) (Boston, 2019), 72n5. Yet we were mistaken in how we understood R. Breuer. Although R. Breuer could have been clearer in his exposition, read in its entirety, it appears obvious that the passage I just quoted was only intended to describe the way of thinking of the

Chapter 9 is a lengthy essay by Joshua Amaru titled "The Oral Torah from Heaven." When traditional Judaism speaks of revelation, it does not only refer to the Written Torah, but also the Oral Torah, what Jacob Neusner termed the "Dual Torah." Yet what is to be included in the Oral Torah? How much of what the Sages recorded is to be understood as part of the original revelation versus teachings that were derived by the Sages through exegesis? Needless to say, there are fundamental disputes in this matter that are nicely elaborated upon by Amaru (although he unfortunately does not use Jay Harris' important book [How Do We Know This?](#), which is devoted to the issues he discusses).

Amaru's sympathies are with Nahmanides in his famous dispute with Maimonides over the definition of a Torah law. For Maimonides, only a law that is written in the Torah or received by tradition from Sinai has the status of Torah law. This excludes laws that are derived by the hermeneutical principles, which are regarded as being of rabbinic authority. Nahmanides counters that these laws are also to be regarded as *mi-de-oraita*. Since the hermeneutical principles were given at Sinai, that which is derived by them also has the status of Torah law.⁴

Orthodox—or "Orthodox"—academics who see the Torah as the product of multiple divinely inspired authors. R. Breuer's rejection of this position did not waver.

⁴ My summary of Maimonides' opinion is how it is understood by Nahmanides and most modern scholars. Yet many traditional interpreters have offered different understandings. See Marc Herman, "[What Is the Subject of Principle 2 in Maimonides's Book of the Commandments? Towards a New Understanding of Maimonides's Approach to Extrascriptural Law](#)," *AJS Review* 44:2 (2020): 345-367.

In Amaru's understanding, "The distinction between Torah law and rabbinic law is a jurisprudential matter, not a historical one. In this we follow the precedent set by Ramban that that which is halakhically categorized as Torah law is not the same as that which was revealed to Moses" (p. 250). Amaru goes even further and states that the "categorization of a particular activity as a Torah prohibition or a rabbinic prohibition is not limited to the Sanhedrin and to the practice of *midrash halakha* as Ramban claimed" (p. 251). He argues that such categorization continues even today, and to support this position he cites a responsum of R. Moshe Feinstein where R. Feinstein concludes that cooking with a microwave violates Torah law. Since microwaves did not exist in earlier times, and the only way to connect use of a microwave with Torah law is through halakhic reasoning, this suffices to show that "the distinction between Torah law and rabbinic law is not historical but halakhic" (p. 252).

While Amaru sees this as a significant point, I view it as obvious, and I have no doubt that it was seen as obvious by the great halakhic authorities as well. When a halakhic authority argues that a prohibition is Torah-based, not rabbinic, he is not focusing on revelation and is not seeking to prove historically that this prohibition was included in the original revelation. The only thing the halakhist does is argue halakhically, by citing sources that lead to the conclusion that the prohibition is based in the Torah. We generally cannot go back in time to determine the historical reality, and the only mechanism we have to determine if something is Torah law or not is halakhic analysis.

Yet there are times when historical investigation *can* come into play. For example, Maimonides, followed by other *rishonim*, writes that the identification of the biblical *peri etz hadar* as an etrog was never in doubt and goes back to Sinai.⁵ Yet if it is conclusively shown that the etrog we

⁵ Introduction to the Mishnah in R. Yitzhak Sheilat, ed., *Hakdamot ha-Rambam* (Maale Adumim, 1992), p. 38. According to Maimonides, the talmudic discussion in [Sukkah 35a](#) which at first glance might appear to be an attempt to identify what the *peri etz hadar* is, in reality is only focused on finding a scriptural support for the commandment whose details were already known by tradition.

However, R. Jacob Joshua Falk, Penei Yehoshua, [Sukkah 35a](#), appears to say that the Talmud really does raise the possibility that *peri etz hadar* need not only mean an etrog:

נראה דכוונת המקשה דכיון דפלפלין נמי עזו ופריו שוין א"כ אימא
דתרוייהו כשרין דאע"ג דאתרוג הדר טפי אפ"ה אם לא מצא
אתרוג יוצא בפלפלין

See *Avodah Berurah al Masekhet Sukkah*, p. 32 (to [Sukkah 35a](#)); R. Yehoshua Sklar, *Yalkut Perushim: Sukkah*, pp. 88-89 (to [Sukkah 35a](#)).

[Sukkah 48b](#), in both the Mishnah and Baraita, records how on Sukkot a Sadducee poured the water libation over his feet, instead of on the altar, and in response the people pelted him with their etrogs. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik mentioned in *shiur* the following reason why they threw their etrogs at him: The Sadducee was rejecting the Oral Law regarding how to perform the water libation, therefore they threw their etrogs at him as the etrog also depends on the Oral Law for its identification. See R. Soloveitchik, *Reshimot Shiurim: Sukkah* (New York, 2000), pp. 257-238. R. Hayyim Dov Altusky challenges the Rav's point that the throwing of the etrogs had religious significance. He claims that those throwing the etrogs would have included not only sages but also average people, as the Mishnah says that "all the people" pelted the Sadducee. R. Altusky states that this shows that the people simply grabbed what was in their hands without thinking about the religious implications that the Rav reads into the story. See *Hiddushei Batra al Hiddushei ha-Masbir: Sukkah*, p. 29. I find it hard to believe that the Rav was offering an actual historical explanation of what happened. It strikes me that his comment was made

use only came to the Near East many years after the days of Moses,⁶ then we would be forced to

in a homiletical vein, and therefore it does not make sense for R. Altusky to challenge the Rav's point like he did. For more on the episode in its historical context, see Vered Noam, *Shifting Images of the Hasmoneans: Second Temple Legends and Their Reception in Josephus and Rabbinic Literature*, trans. Dena Ordan (Oxford, 2018), ch. 4; Steven Weitzman, "The Etrog as Weapon in Temple Times," in *Be Fruitful!: The Etrog in Jewish Art, Culture, and History*, eds. Warren Klein, et. al. (Jerusalem and New York: 2022), 55-57. See also Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta ki-Feshutah, Sukkah*, p. 881.

⁶ Evidence for this is presented by R. David Z. Moster, *Etrog: How a Chinese Fruit Became a Jewish Symbol* (Cham, Switzerland: 2018). Yehudah Feliks, based on historical arguments rather than dogma, rejects this approach and argues that the *peri etz hadar* was always identified with the etrog. See his *Atzei Peri le-Mineihem: Tzimhei Ha-Tanakh ve-Hazal* (Jerusalem, 1994), pp. 150ff.; idem., "Peri Etz Hadar – Ha-Etrog," *Beit Mikra* 42 (1997): 288-292. See also Zohar Amar, *Arba'at ha-Minim* (n.p., 2010), 20ff. Maimonides' view, that the etrog has been used since the days of Moses, seems to have assumed the status of dogma in much of Orthodoxy. Yet in a recent book on the etrog published by Mossad ha-Rav Kook, a respected Orthodox publishing house, one article is included that suggests that the etrog was only brought to the Near East in the era of Alexander the Great. Another article in the book states that only in the first century CE was the etrog identified as the Torah's *peri etz hadar*. See Eliezer Goldschmidt and Moshe Bar-Yosef, eds., *Ha-Etrog: Masoret, Mehkar u-Ma'aseh* (Jerusalem: 2018), 93, 123.

R. Yehuda Amital cites a view, that he attributes without a specific source to the book *Benei Efraim*, which appears to be at odds with Maimonides' approach. "The Torah does not require specifically an etrog for the mitzvah. Rather, one must take a fruit that meets all the criteria mentioned in the Gemara, which Chazal derived from biblical verses. . . . Once a fruit meets all these criteria, it qualifies for the *mitzvah* of *arba minim*, even if we cannot call it an etrog." See his *Resisei Tal*, vol. 1, p. 251, translation found [here](#). He further notes that this is also the implication of Tosafot, *Sukkah 33a* s.v. *ve-eima*. R. Amital refers to *Benei Efraim*, yet I am certain that this should be *Beit Efraim*, authored by R. Ephraim Zalman Margulies. (There is no book with the title *Benei Efraim*.) See *Beit Efraim*, no. 56. Furthermore, the view that R. Amital refers to is not the opinion of R. Margulies. Rather, R. Margulies cites this opinion (which he

conclude that this is not something revealed at Sinai, but this need not remove the etrog from the

rejects) from R. Abba ha-Levi's responsum in R. Abraham Rapoport, *Eitan ha-Ezrahi*, no. 39. R. Abba writes:

ומה שכתב והתורה אמרה אתרוג וליכא, לא ידעין היכן כתב בתורה אתרוג, רק פרי עץ הדר, ומין זה הדר הוא ודר משנה לשנה באילן

See also R. Jacob Horovitz, *She'elot u-Teshuvot Ha-Rivam* (Munkacz: 1908), no. 30 (46b):

דהא דכתבה רחמנא ולקחתם פרי עץ הדר לא הקפידה בו תורה אלא שיהי' פרי הזאת פרי שטעם עצה ופריו שוה בה ואלו היו מצאי פרי אחרת שטעם עצה ופריו שוה דוגמת אתרוג הוי חזי לקחתו למצות לולב וא"כ הא דאין מוכשר למצותו אלא אתרוג הוא שמאחר שלא מצינו פרי אחרת דוגמתו שיהי' טעם עצה ופריו שוה

Jacob Reifman argues that the Torah's *peri etz hadar* was never intended to only refer to the etrog. See his letter in Isaac Reggio, *Yalkut Yashar* (Gorizia: 1854), pp. 46ff., where he even suggests that in medieval times fruits other than the etrog were also used on Sukkot to fulfill the *mitzvah*.

While this certainly seems like an un-Orthodox suggestion, none other than the famed R. Solomon Eliezer Alfandari agrees with Reifman's point, and states that in ancient times there was no distinction made between an etrog and a lemon, and both were regarded as acceptable to fulfill the *mitzvah*. See Alfandari, *She'elot u-Teshuvot Maharsha*, vol. 1, no. 13. This point was so shocking to R. Joshua Menahem Ehrenberg that he suggested deleting this responsum from R. Alfandari's book. See Ehrenberg, *Devar Yehoshua*, vol. 2, no. 124. (I learned of R. Ehrenberg's responsum from the Bein Din le-Din blog, Oct. 10, 2011.) For more rejections of R. Alfandari's approach, see the sources mentioned in R. Yitzhak Frankel, *Mesorat ha-Etrog* (Jerusalem, 2015), pp. 138ff.

R. Michael Abraham was asked if evidence that the etrog had not reached the Near East in the days of Moses creates a religious problem that needs to be dealt with. He [replied](#) that the only important point for us is the talmudic identification of *peri etz hadar* with the etrog, and the historical record has no relevance in this matter.

איני מכיר את הסוגיא אבל זה ממש לא משנה. התלמוד הוא המוסמך לקבוע והוא קבע שהאתרוג הוא פרי עץ הדר. גם אם הוא לא היה בארץ ישראל באותה תקופה אין מניעה לזהות פרי עץ הדר עם אתרוג. לכן אין כאן שאלה לענ"ד.

status of Torah law. As long as the Sages derive that the *peri etz hadar* is the etrog, then it could very well have the status of Torah law (according to those who disagree with Maimonides). But cases like this are very rare and usually determinations of what is and is not Torah law are only halakhic, with history playing no role.

Even when not dealing with matters of law, there are times when history would come into play. For example, the Hazon Ish states that not just the Hebrew vowels but even their forms were given at Sinai and are part of *Torah she-be'al peh*.⁷ Presumably, the Hazon Ish's opinion can be questioned by the fact that in different

An interesting tradition is preserved in Chabad. As is well known, Chabad Hasidim use etrogs from Calabria in southern Italy. R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson reported in the name of his father-in-law, R. Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, who quoted his father, R. Shalom Dov Baer Schneersohn, as follows: When God commanded Moses to take a *peri etz hadar*, Moses sent messengers—whom the Rebbe R. Menachem Mendel identifies as angels—by means of the Clouds of Glory to bring etrogs from Calabria to the desert where the Children of Israel were. See R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Ha-Melekh bi-Mesibo* (Brooklyn: 1993), pp. 82-83. This is actually a tradition that goes back to R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady. See R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Iggerot Kodesh*, vol. 13, no. 4381; R. Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, *Sefer ha-Sihot: 5699*, p. 294, and the accompanying notes. R. Yosef Shalom Elyashiv rejects the Chabad tradition, but that is because he takes [Shabbat 56b](#) literally that Rome—which he understands to mean also the entire Italy—only came into existence during the time of Solomon. See *He'arot Rabbenu ha-Gaon Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv: Shabbat 1* (Jerusalem: 2014), p. 379.

⁷ Kovetz *Iggerot Hazon Ish*, vol. 2, no. 169. R. Joseph Rozin, the Rogochover, goes even further, stating that the actual *sefer Torah* that Moses wrote contained vowels and cantillation notes (*trop*). See *Tzafnat Paneah al ha-Rambam: Mahadura Tinyana* (Dvinsk: 1930), p. 60a. As R. Binyamin Wattenberg points out, this ironically means that Moses' *sefer Torah* would today be regarded as invalid (*pasul*). See [Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 274:7](#):

geographical regions there were different symbols used for the vowels. In other words, one cannot make a case that the shape of the Hebrew vowels can be categorized as from Sinai based solely on analysis of a rabbinic text or based on intuition if the evidence shows that in the real world there never was such a tradition about a particular form of the vowel system, and that there is nothing special about our vowel system as opposed to the supralinear form.⁸ My point can be extended to the broader issue of the vowels themselves being *Halakhah le-Moshe mi-Sinai*. This position is held by many, but in considering which side is more compelling, it would seem important to note that there is no reference to the

ספר המנוקד פסול ואפילו הסירו ממנו הניקוד וכן ספר שיש בו פיסוק פסוקים פסול

See Wattenberg's edition of R. Baruch Epstein, *Safah le-Ne'emanim* (Puteaux, France: 2021), p. 91. Elsewhere, R. Rozin writes that Moses' *sefer Torah* also included: כל המסורה הכתיב והקרי which would also render it invalid for us. See *Tzafnat Paneah* (Petrokov: 1908), *Hilkhot Terumot*, p. 122 (Arabic numerals). R. Rozin's point is explicitly contradicted by many earlier authorities. See e.g., the responsum quoted in *Mahzor Vitry*, ed. Hurwitz (Nuremberg: 1923), vol. 1, p. 91:

ספר תורה שניתן למשה בסיני לא שמענו בו ניקוד ולא ניתן ניקוד בסיני

⁸ See R. Avigdor Amitai, *Emunah Tehorah* (n.p., 2022), p. 231.

It is likely that were the Hazon Ish aware of this, that he would have retracted his opinion. There is a similar example in the Hazon Ish's well-known opposition to the form of the letter *tzadi* that appears in Sephardic *sifrei Torah*. He believed that this form originated with Shabbetai Zvi. However, after he was shown a printing of the Zohar that predated Shabbetai Zvi, and which describes the *tzadi* in the way the Hazon Ish opposed, he retracted his claim that it arose from Shabbetai Zvi. See Shlomo Zalman Havlin, "Od be-Inyan Sefer ha-Torah ha-Meyuhas le-Ran ve-ha-Tzadi be-Yud Hafukhah," *Ha-Ma'yan* 53 (Tishrei 5773): 34. See also Binyamin Brown, *Ha-Hazon Ish* (Jerusalem: 2011), 448ff.

vowels, not to mention their forms, anywhere in classic rabbinic literature.⁹ This appears to be powerful evidence that while there was indeed a reading tradition, there were no written vowels in the rabbinic period.

Another major essay in the volume is Gil Student's "Rethinking Revelation: Three Talmudic Scholars Grapple with Biblical Criticism." The three scholars that he examines are Abraham Joshua Heschel, Louis Jacobs, and R. Menahem M. Kasher. With regard to Jacobs, Student quotes him as saying that there is a "hard core of historical truth in the great Pentateuchal themes of the Exodus and the Revelation at Sinai" (p. 279). Student quotes another passage from Jacobs that he says "might imply that there was a revelation in time at Mt. Sinai" (p. 279). Student's instinct is correct, and now is a good place to quote from Jacobs' letter to me dated September 27, 1987, in which we see, among other interesting things, that Jacobs indeed affirmed an actual revelatory event at Sinai.

On revelation there is much to discuss. For the moment I am a little puzzled by what you mean when you write about "the physical revelation". Do you mean the thunder and lightning? I do not deny that something of this sort took place, although how could one know, but believe that it is of no relevance. But I do believe in *Torah min ha-Shamayim* and here

would agree that without this belief Judaism makes little sense as a religion. Indeed, what I and many others have been trying to do is to defend the doctrine of *Torah min ha-Shamayim* by trying to show that it need not be understood in a fundamentalist manner. Thus I am far from "denying any original Torah," as you put it. On the contrary, the Torah for me is the whole process, in which there is a human element but also a divine element. Your remarks about how do I know that Judaism has more truth than other religions can just as easily be turned against you. How do you know that there was an "original" physical revelation? The Hindus deny that it ever took place. You believe that Judaism is more true than other religions because you are a believer in the Torah and I am also a believer in the Torah. Surely your logic is at fault in this argument.

With Kasher we are dealing with a different sort of person. He had enormous erudition in the entirety of rabbinic literature, but he also showed an utter lack of historical sensibility that Student does not call attention to. Thus, Student mentions Kasher's notion (based on earlier sources) that Adam wrote the beginning chapters of Genesis (p.

⁹ Jerome (d. 420) also testifies that there were no written vowels for the biblical text. See the references to his commentaries in William Wickes, [A Treatise on the](#)

[Accentuation of the Twenty-One So-Called Prose Books of the Old Testament](#) (Oxford: 1887), 5.

297). Such a conception is so foreign to any modern way of thinking that it can have nothing to say about the reconciliation of Torah and modern biblical scholarship.

I am puzzled by Student's statement (pp. 265, 292) that in the talmudic dispute over whether Moses or Joshua wrote the last eight verses of the Torah (*Bava Batra 15a*, *Menahot 30a*), the Talmud rejects the view that Joshua wrote the last verses. This is not the case at all, and the Talmud leaves the dispute undecided. (In *Bava Batra 14b* the view that Joshua wrote the last verses is recorded in a *baraita* without objection.) This explains how various post-talmudic authorities, including apparently *Mishnah Berurah (428:21)*, adopt the position that Joshua wrote the last eight verses.

After reviewing the approaches to *Torah min ha-Shamayim* of Kasher, Heschel, and Jacobs, Student concludes that

all have failed to adequately reconcile Jewish tradition with biblical criticism. Jacobs consciously breaks with Jewish tradition while Kasher chooses tradition over biblical criticism. Heschel unconvincingly attempts to revise tradition, insufficiently to answer the challenge (p. 298).

It seems as if Student is offering a criticism here. To this I would reply that Kasher never attempted to reconcile Jewish tradition with biblical criticism, as he had no interest in the latter and

did not think that it had any truth to it. One only reconciles when one feels that there are two conflicting truths. Jacobs' attempt at reconciliation is explicit and lengthy, and Heschel accepts that the findings of biblical criticism can be true, but in his eyes this does not affect the fact of revelation. He sees discussions of biblical authorship as matters of historical scholarship that have nothing to do with revelation. This is also the position advocated by certain Orthodox—many would prefer to say Orthoprax—academics who accept revelation while denying Mosaic authorship, in whole or in part.¹⁰

Continuing with Student's article, I also find the following passage noteworthy:

This does not mean that we must reject biblical criticism out of hand. Based on Maimonides' approach, we need to evaluate the arguments for and against biblical criticism. While different topics and arguments vary in speculative evidence, some are quite powerful. We cannot and should not skip the step of evaluation. Yet, in the end, we come to the final step of considering revelation. As discussed above, biblical criticism undermines Judaism much more than Aristotle's eternal universe, even if its proponents attend synagogue three times a day. (p. 302)

¹⁰ See my "[Is Modern Orthodoxy Moving Towards an Acceptance of Biblical Criticism?](#)"

On the previous page, Student elaborates on Maimonides' reasons for rejecting Aristotle's view of the eternity of the universe. Maimonides notes that Aristotle was never able to prove his point, and he also states that if Aristotle's position is true, then Judaism as we know it would be rendered meaningless (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2:25). Yet if

Aristotle's viewpoint was actually proven, can we really believe that Maimonides would have rejected Judaism entirely? It is much more likely that he would have reinterpreted the traditional belief in accord with the new proven knowledge (and the emphasis is on "proven"). After all, Maimonides tells us that the creation narrative of the Torah can be reinterpreted in accord with Aristotle's position, but basic theological reasons prevent us from doing so. I assume Student has the same approach when it comes to biblical criticism. If one of its major points *were* proven, by which I mean an actual proof that all could accept, would this mean the end of Judaism? As R. Immanuel Jakobovits once told me, the answer is absolutely no. As far as R. Jakobovits was concerned—and would anyone disagree?—the only result of the new evidence would be that the traditional belief would have to be reformulated.

We must also answer the fundamental question of what does one mean by "biblical criticism"? Presumably, the proponents of biblical criticism who are careful to pray three times a day do not believe that the Torah is a human document, but see it as a prophetic document, albeit not a Mosaic document or not an entirely Mosaic document. This approach needs to be distinguished from the academic approach that

sees the Torah as no different than any other ancient Near Eastern document. Does Student see the problem of biblical criticism in the affirmation of human authorship, or is non-Mosaic prophetic authorship to be viewed in the exact same light?

While in years past it was easy to simply point to Maimonides' Eighth Principle as affirming complete Mosaic authorship, wider acknowledgment of the views of Ibn Ezra and various medieval Ashkenazic sages, that there are indeed post-Mosaic additions to the Torah, requires clarification of what is considered acceptable in the broader Orthodox tent. Student writes: "Because any interpretation of historical or textual material is inherently speculative, those interpretations that contradict divine authorship and Mosaic transmission are discarded" (p. 305). But what about the medieval authorities who do not insist on complete Mosaic authorship? What implications if any does Student think that these views have for a modern theology of *Torah min ha-Shamayim*?

Whatever criticisms I have expressed of any of the contributions to this wonderful volume, I fully concur with the final words of Student's essay, that just as medieval Jews had to deal with approaches that were at odds with traditional Torah teaching, so too "we must create our own intellectual space in which we confidently and unapologetically study the divinely written and transmitted Torah that is our heritage" (p. 307).

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TORAT HESED: MY RABBI, RAV YEHUDA KELEER

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Of all the global struggles and hardships of the past year, nothing has hit me so personally and painfully as the passing of our communal rabbi, Rabbi Yehuda Kelemer, *zekher tzaddik li-vrakhah*, of the Young Israel of West Hempstead. I cannot even pretend to do justice to his character, a shining example of the Gemara's dictum ([Haqiqah 15b](#)) that a Torah scholar is akin to an angel. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to publicize my memories of Rabbi Kelemer, a man who shunned publicity, to provide the smallest glimpse of a person who in turn has given me a glimpse of spiritual greatness.

Without having met Rabbi Kelemer, I could not have believed the folklore about Rabbi Yisrael Salanter's sense of human dignity, Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev's love of his fellow Jews, and the Vilna Gaon's multifaceted genius; to me, Rabbi Kelemer was a link to all of this, and more. More, because inasmuch as his spiritual stature towered far above our heads, he was so close to us, his students and congregants, and would probably insist upon being remembered not only as a mentor but as a loving friend, despite the utter absurdity of anyone being his peer.

His extreme acts of kindness were beyond legendary; even traditional rabbinic

hagiographies rarely include as many examples of righteousness as attested by recipients of his extraordinary generosity. Dozens of people have shared experiences of being stuck on a highway when Rabbi Kelemer turned up as if by magic, spending hours with them in order to help get them home. Hundreds of people have witnessed Rabbi Kelemer walk for hours on Shabbos to and from hospitals, congregants' homes, and who knows where else, to be with those who may have been suffering. Several times, Rabbi Kelemer was also discovered doing private acts of charity, sometimes going to extraordinary lengths to hide his acts of *hesed*, so his congregants could only speculate the true extent of his generosity. This secrecy stemmed from Rabbi Kelemer's extreme, almost comical humility; indeed, he turned any praise about himself into a joke and with total sincerity laughed off any honor given to him as preposterous. Once, I thought I "tricked" Rabbi Kelemer into allowing me to walk him home, with the intention of discussing Torah matters, but when we reached his house he insisted upon walking me back to *shul*. He was uncharacteristically forceful in preventing yeshiva students from addressing him in the third person (as is customary for rabbinic teachers), turned down living in a house owned by the *shul*, and refused congregants' offers to upgrade his increasingly timeworn car.

Rabbi Kelemer personified dignity; whether in speaking publicly or in free conversation, I only heard him speak in polished sentences and in a precise, measured tone. Even when delivering a *derashah* from the podium, raising and lowering his voice for dramatic effect, somehow Rabbi Kelemer's demeanor remained soft, reserved -

more welcoming than imposing. This was no mere affectation: he welcomed everyone with genuine love, and his disarming disposition was coupled with a total lack of sanctimony. Countless people confided in Rabbi Kelemer, trusting him with their most intimate secrets, as they correctly assessed that he would provide guidance and support without an iota of negative judgement.

His speech and mannerisms bespoke a quiet intensity, and nowhere was this more evident than in his prayers. Rabbi Kelemer *davened* relatively quickly, often even after coming late due to his communal responsibilities, but with an unmistakable seriousness and fervor. As with his other traits, Rabbi Kelemer kept the true extent of his profound devotion and emotional religiosity private, but it nonetheless shone forth in his prayers and speeches. Rabbi Kelemer often referred to the power of songs as a means of religious expression, and the importance of heartfelt singing and melodious prayer was at the core of more than one *Shabbat Shuvah* or *Shabbat Ha-Gadol derashah*. I once overheard a congregant say that for Yom Kippur, he wanted to be in Rabbi Kelemer's *minyán* because only Rabbi Kelemer could be "intensely emotional without any of the usual rabbinic theatrics." Especially around the High Holidays, his *derashot* frequently referred to God as "*ha-Rofei li-shvurei lev*," the Healer of broken hearts ([Psalms 147:3](#)), a rare divine appellation that speaks volumes about Rabbi Kelemer himself - as Rabbeinu Yonah

¹ Published with the full heading in *Kitvei HGRY"Š: Shabbat* (Jerusalem: 2005), p. 14. Of course, when Rabbi Kelemer himself sent the letters for publication in a Torah journal (*Beit Hillel* 46:2, Tamuz 5771), he omitted the titles and greetings that Rav Elyashiv wrote to him.

Gerondi writes (to [Proverbs 27:21](#)), one can judge a person's character based on what he praises.

Just as it would be hard to exaggerate Rabbi Kelemer's righteousness, it is likewise difficult to overstate his mastery of Torah. Already in his late twenties, upon becoming Rabbi of the Young Israel of Brookline, Massachusetts, Rabbi Kelemer received a letter from Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv *zt"l* that included several lines of praises for the young *talmid hakham*, congratulating him on his rabbinic post.¹ Many [recent articles](#) have noted Rabbi Kelemer's impeccable rabbinic and scholarly credentials, but simply listing his teachers or even noting his published *sefarim* cannot do justice to his exceptional mastery of Torah. His deep familiarity with Gemara and *poskim* enabled him to seamlessly recite passages by heart in the flow of conversation; he expounded upon the conceptual "*lomdus*" behind linguistic nuances, and he possessed a preternatural ability to invent brilliant *gematriot* on the fly. It was also Rabbi Kelemer's love of Torah that sustained him through difficult times. While recovering for many difficult months after he was hit by a car four years ago, he constantly requested for Torah material to occupy his mind, just as many decades ago he channeled his grief after losing a young daughter into publishing a *sefer* comprising several short essays on topics in *Shas*.²

² *Tzenif Melukhah* (Jerusalem, 1971). Years later, Rabbi Kelemer also wrote a *sefer* on the laws of the marriage contract, [Tosefet Ketubah](#), which includes many footnotes providing ample evidence of Rabbi Kelemer's erudition (see, e.g., 6:2).

I have often heard Rabbi Kelemer expound the difference between wisdom and cleverness. Not only did he overflow with wisdom, but he also was uncommonly clever, often concocting a brilliant *bon mot* (usually a talmudic or biblical allusion) to fit any occasion. Rabbi Kelemer employed his wit to invent creative ways to judge favorably and compliment others. In justifying his frequently effusive praise, he once “reminded” me that Rambam writes in *Hilkhos De’ot* (6:3) that there is a *mitzvah* to speak positively of someone.³ He almost never spoke ill of any Jewish institution, and in rare cases where he expressed disapproval of a certain practice, it was purely educational, to bring attention to a problem that he knew would likely be unrecognized by those of lesser sensitivity.

The Gemara ([Sukkah 49b](#)) provides two explanations of the term *Torat Hesed*, “a Torah of kindness” ([Proverbs 31:26](#)): the *Torat Hesed* is one that is learned “for its own sake;” alternatively, it is the Torah that one learns in order to teach others. In Rabbi Kelemer, these two explanations merge: because he loved Torah for its own sake and not out of desire for self-aggrandizement or even intellectual stimulation, he used his knowledge to connect with and elevate others through his teachings. I have seen Rabbi Kelemer listen with rapt attention as a young yeshiva student related a piece of Torah, and despite his encyclopedic knowledge his face shone with excitement as he joyously and

honestly praised the student’s “*hiddush*.” Rabbi Kelemer also generously ascribed his own insights to whomever he was speaking with. He happily allowed anyone to borrow from his endless reservoir of Torah wisdom, be they his children or congregants asking for *divrei Torah*, boys or girls preparing their bar or bat mitzvah speeches, or even a Christian minister who asked for assistance with a sermon on [Psalm 27](#).

Rabbi Kelemer never condescended to his audience, and he comfortably employed his wide lexicon to teach sophisticated Torah concepts with great nuance while ensuring that they remained accessible to a wider audience. He almost always provided the biographical context of each rabbinic author he cited, and he frequently translated halakhic concepts into simple English terminology with concrete, illuminating examples. My favorite instance is his demonstration for *lo pelug rabanan* [“the rabbis did not differentiate”], the idea that a rabbinic decree stands independently of the circumstances that initially motivated the decree. The Sages prohibited eating food cooked by a non-Jew out of concern that it might lead to intermarriage with the non-Jew’s daughter. Rabbi Kelemer noted that this decree applies even to a convert’s own food that he cooked before converting to Judaism, despite the fact that the motivation for this prohibition is inapplicable; in Rabbi Kelemer’s words, it would be a decree “to

³ There are several laws and potentially complicating factors which may be applicable, depending on the circumstance; see *Sefer Hafetz Hayyim, Leshon Ha-Ra* 9:2. Rabbi Kelemer noted that he had good precedence for his view (he referred specifically to the Brisker Rov), although he acknowledged that other great rabbis have felt otherwise (see, for

example, the ethical will of the Vilna Gaon). Rambam writes that one should praise another’s good deeds as an extension of the *mitzvah* to “love your fellow,” and Rabbi Kelemer’s practice in this regard was of a piece with his general inclination to be “stringent” in the *mitzvah* of loving one’s fellow as himself, as discussed below.

prevent you from marrying your own daughter, yesterday.”

Rabbi Kelemer’s *Torat Hesed* also expressed itself in ways beyond the Talmud’s two explanations of the verse. A creative *ba’al mussar* (master of ethical manners), Rabbi Kelemer frequently extracted gems of inspiration for *hesed* from seemingly prosaic and often arcane halakhic sources. Here too, I have a favorite example: in a responsum (no. 772), the Radbaz writes that a king convicted of unintentional manslaughter is not subject to the usual punishment of exile to a “city of refuge.” because if he were forced into exile, *the entire Jewish people* would be required to live in the city with him, which is an impossibility. Rabbi Kelemer understood from this Radbaz that definitionally, a king worthy of his name must be accessible to his people; he must be halakhically able to dwell among them and vice versa.⁴ This responsum about an abstruse detail in a law pertaining to the city of refuge thus teaches a powerful lesson in leadership: a true leader is someone who is fully available to his followers and lives in their midst. As mentioned above, Rabbi Kelemer himself embodied this teaching, as he insisted upon being counted among his congregants even while, as [Rabbi Dovid Cohen put it, “he wore the crown.”](#)

As in teaching Torah, so too in the realm of *pesak*: just as he expertly and seamlessly tailored *shiurim* to his audience, he administered *pesak* only by

⁴ Rabbi Kelemer associated this with God’s sovereignty as well. For further elaboration on this idea, see R. Yitzhak Hutner, *Pachad Yitzhak: Rosh Hashanah*.

⁵ Rabbi Kelemer once referenced his teacher, R. Chaim Shmuelevitz, in ensuring that halakhic rulings are seen as weighing different priorities, and not as *has ve-shalom*

intimate familiarity with the situation. Many times he advised greater stringency for yeshiva students than for matters pertaining to the whole community, reflecting his consideration of the needs of his *shul* and his belief that full-time study of Torah should elevate a person to higher standards. His empathy in *piskei Halakhah* also reflected a profound *Torat Hesed*, borne from internalizing the words of Rambam, “the laws of the Torah are not meant as vengeance against the world, but rather [provide] compassion, kindness, and peace to the world” ([Hilkhos Shabbat 2:3](#)). What others might perceive as leniencies, such as accommodations for the *shul* schedule or directives to override Shabbat or Yom Tov in the face of health risks, Rabbi Kelemer considered as stringencies regarding the value of human health, *kevod ha-tzibur* (respect for the congregation), or the like.⁵

Similarly, Rabbi Kelemer nearly always ruled on the side of greater inclusivity. As [published elsewhere](#), he was a trailblazer in encouraging Yachad members to receive *aliyot* and speak in the *shul*. He likewise liberally applied leniencies regarding relationships with unaffiliated Jews,⁶ supported non-Orthodox Jewish institutions, and dispensed wisdom to any Jew who sought his counsel. [Rabbi Ari Lamm recounts](#) how Rabbi Kelemer was horrified that one of his congregants questioned the propriety of praying for Jews who violated Shabbat. I was only mildly surprised when, after asking him about a certain Halakhah

taking any Halakhah “lightly.” See R. Chaim Shmuelevitz, *Sihot Mussar* 5733 no. 30 (page 453 in the 2004 edition).

⁶ Such as employed by Hazon Ish (*Yoreh De’ah* 2:16) and R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (*Minhat Shelomo* no. 35).

regarding interactions with non-Jews, he insisted upon following Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik and Meiri's position that many of the talmudic prohibitions regarding pagans are no longer applicable.⁷ Rabbi Kelemer's positions stemmed not from an inclination towards leniency, but from his strong sense that *kevod ha-beri'ot* is itself an overriding halakhic concern. In today's society, Rabbi Kelemer felt that the proper application of laws pertaining to disbelieving Jews or non-Jews is to treat them with respect, generosity, and warmth.⁸

Rabbi Kelemer's emphasis on inclusivity reflected a personal mission to demonstrate the respect that Torah itself has for humanity and the dignity that Halakhah confers upon its adherents. In a letter to Rabbi Kelemer in 1976, when he served as a rabbi in Brookline, Rav Moshe Feinstein responded to a question regarding the propriety of the feminist movement and its implications for Halakhah.⁹ Rav Moshe emphasized that one cannot change a single Halakhah in response to modern values, but he also stressed that the Torah believes in the equality of the sexes regarding *kedushat Yisrael*, the essential holiness of men and women. He urged Rabbi Kelemer to explain this fact whenever issues of gender in Halakhah arise. Similarly, in Rav Elyashiv's letter to Rabbi Kelemer at about the same time, the former likewise blessed Rabbi Kelemer that he

sanctify God's name through his teachings and his personal example of the grandeur of Torah. Rabbi Kelemer fulfilled this charge of Rav Elyashiv and Rav Moshe Feinstein to the nth degree; as an eminent *talmid hakham*, he symbolized the ennobling power of Torah and personified the depth to which Halakhah is concerned with the dignity of both men and women. Rabbi Kelemer exemplified the talmudic dictum, "happy is his father who taught him Torah, happy is his teacher who taught him Torah" ([Yoma 86a](#)). As Rambam writes, "all praise and love him, and desire [to imitate] his deeds, behold this [person] sanctified the name [of God]" ([Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-torah 5:11](#)).

As mentioned above, the Gemara teaches that a person is supposed to seek Torah from a teacher who is like an angel. With regard to Rabbi Kelemer, who simply exuded saintliness, this maxim needs no further elaboration, but an interpretation of R. Pinhas Horowitz sheds further light on Rabbi Kelemer's character. R. Horowitz interprets this Gemara to mean that just as angels are spiritually stationary, incapable of self-improvement, so too a teacher of Torah must be ready to give up his own spiritual growth for the sake of his students.¹⁰ Perhaps precisely because Rabbi Kelemer so selflessly dedicated himself to shepherding a Jewish community, he somehow, almost miraculously, was able to continue

⁷ See Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik, [Logic of the Heart, Logic of the Mind: Wisdom and Reflections on Topics of Our Times](#) (Genesis Jerusalem Press, 1991), 65.

⁸ In a *Shabbat Ha-Gadol derashah*, Rabbi Kelemer once explained why *Maggid* begins with an invitation for "all who are hungry to come and eat," even though no person may partake of the Pesah sacrifice if not specified beforehand: to teach us that while in exile, our mission must be to

welcome *everyone* in, even those disqualified from the Pesah sacrifice, in order to ensure that at the time of redemption, as many people as possible will be "in the fold."

⁹ Published in *Iggerot Moshe* 6, [Orah Hayyim 4:49](#).

¹⁰ This idea is published in more than one instance, but among them is in the introduction to his work on Talmud, *Sefer Haflaah*.

devoting superhuman energies to studying Torah. Several times I have heard him cite from recently published *sefarim*, and he frequently shared insights that were, by his own testimony, products of his recent rethinking of an issue. Despite having totally thrust himself into assisting and supporting others, his mind was continually occupied with *havayot d'Abayei ve-Rava* [the give-and-take in Gemara].

With yeshiva students who grew up in the community, he would continue their previous conversations in learning each time they would meet, as if he had constantly been thinking of them and the Torah they had shared, even if years had passed in between. I personally have had dozens of unfinished conversations and emails with Rabbi Kelemer that ended on cliffhangers; there was always another question to ask, another source to cite. Rabbi Kelemer remembered every unanswered question. Every time we'd meet in person, he would say, "I owe you an explanation of this *Tosafot* in *Yevamot*," or "I owe you that *mareh makom* [citation]."

Rebbe, how could you possibly owe us anything, after you have already given us so much of yourself in impossible amounts? You never let us give back anything in return, but now we all owe it to you, to the *Ribbono shel Olam*, and to each other to study more Torah, focus more on prayer, to be kinder, more generous, more welcoming, and more loving to help fill even a tiny drop of the gaping void left by your passing.

Yehi zikhro barukh.

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RABBI JONATHAN SACKS'S PORTRAIT OF MOSES

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The first thing one notices about the biblical commentaries by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks is the cover art. Comprising [volumes](#) on Genesis through Numbers—as well as two companion volumes, [Lessons in Leadership](#) and [Essays on Ethics](#)—each edition of *Covenant and Conversation* is adorned with another seventeenth century European masterpiece, including several by Rembrandt.

The choice is suggestive. The paintings from this era, whether of the Dutch Golden Age or the Baroque tradition, collectively represent one of the crowning achievements of Western art. Likewise, one of the central arguments of *Covenant and Conversation* is that the five books of Moses should be seen as essential and foundational texts for Western civilization. And with the caveat that "Judaism is a complex faith[,] there is no one Torah model of leadership" ([Exodus](#), 113), the personality that looms largest in Rabbi Sacks's biblical interpretation is Moses. While this is to be expected for a corpus—*Torat Moshe* (Joshua 8:31)—that has traditionally borne his name, the Moses that emerges in Rabbi Sacks's writings embodies two of the core themes of *Covenant and Conversation*: the challenges of wielding power, and the importance of building a just society that will stand the test of time.

Rabbi Sacks employs two different strategies for uncovering each theme in Moses's career. In eliciting the first, Rabbi Sacks plays the role of textual interpreter. Through close readings of the Biblical text, the traditional Jewish commentaries, the classics of political theory, and modern social science, he explains how Moses dealt with various leadership challenges. We the readers are meant to learn from Moses's personal example through the Torah's usually positive—but sometimes quite critical—depiction of the legendary prophet.

In developing the second theme, by comparison, Rabbi Sacks seeks not to explain the text, but to comment on the fundamental structures of Jewish life and community throughout the ages. What institutions, offices, and ethical principles characterize the Torah's vision for a good, lasting society? Here we are less interested in literary analysis of Moses as a singular individual as we are in the Torah's grand vision for the future of human flourishing.

But whether Rabbi Sacks trains his focus upon scripture or upon society, the life of Moses proves instructive.

I.

Rabbi Sacks prefaces his commentary on Exodus with an unequivocal statement on the dangers of power, "Power destroys the powerless and powerful alike, oppressing the one while corrupting the other" ([Exodus, 2](#)). For Rabbi Sacks, wariness of power animates Moses's entire career. This is not to say that Moses found power

inherently evil. He was simply convinced that there is only one being—God—to whom absolute power truly belongs. God could wield this power because He truly understands the necessity for evil and human suffering in the grand scope of history. But human beings are not capable of this, nor, thought Moses, should they *want* to be. After all, to be human is to *rage* against suffering, even when such feelings may, from the perspective of eternity, be misplaced. Moses feared losing this quality, and so always feared power. For Rabbi Sacks, this explains Moses's reticence to gaze upon God at the burning bush, described in the Bible and later rabbinic texts ([Exodus, 40](#)). Unlike so many other heroes of the ancient world, Moses did not aspire to divinity.

Of course, no leader can avoid exercising power, and Moses is no exception. But Moses knew—and this, for Rabbi Sacks, is perhaps his greatest quality as a leader—that human power requires strict, conscious limits. In fact, one of the most powerful things a great leader can do is empower others. This motif suffuses Rabbi Sacks's characterization of Moses. Moses, for instance, maintained a remarkable ability to appreciate the talents—and even different [moral foundations](#)—of others. Drawing upon the nineteenth century Lithuanian commentator, [Netziv](#), Rabbi Sacks explains Moses's decision to heed his Midianite father-in-law's advice in founding a comprehensive judicial system as born out of a recognition that whereas Moses himself intuitively embraced the strict demands of justice, it was important for the Israelites as well to have leaders who excelled at promoting compromise and reconciliation ([Exodus, 129-130](#)). In similar fashion, while Moses viewed Korah as a genuine

threat to his legitimate authority, he saw Eldad and Medad—potential prophetic rivals appearing in Numbers 11—as capable figures whose leadership, rather than undermining Moses’s authority, would in fact magnify his influence. He therefore chastises his disciple, Joshua, for accusing them of usurping Moses’s prophetic prerogatives ([Numbers](#), 222-224). The general principle at work here, in Rabbi Sacks’s formulation, is that “no one individual can embody all the virtues necessary to sustain a people” ([Exodus](#), 130). Moses, accordingly, shared power as much as possible.

Questions of power lead Rabbi Sacks to consider Moses’s “leadership style” ([Numbers](#), 128). In the history of traditional Jewish biblical commentary broadly conceived, Rabbi Sacks may be the first since Philo of Alexandria to treat this topic holistically. The results are certainly in keeping with a picture of Moses as sensitive to the challenges of power. In direct contrast to much of contemporary religious leadership, Moses led by listening rather than telling—by making space for others ([Lessons in Leadership](#), 255). It is of special significance in this context that Moses was surrounded by confidants—in particular his brother, Aaron—whose worldview so contrasted with his own. Rabbi Sacks juxtaposes Moses’s stoicism, for example, with Aaron’s deep passion. When tragedy strikes their family in [Leviticus 10](#), Moses is strengthened by his faith in God’s covenant, while Aaron is inconsolable. Rabbi Sacks represents both as legitimate reactions to catastrophe, and sees them both playing out in tandem over the subsequent course of Jewish history ([Leviticus](#), 155). Tellingly, it is precisely when Moses gives in to his grief in the wake of his

sister Miriam’s death—when he, in effect, becomes Aaron—that he loses control at Meribah ([Numbers](#), 272-275). This leads directly to God punishing Moses by refusing him entry into the Land of Israel.

In fact, Rabbi Sacks consistently describes even Moses’s leadership failures in terms of the challenges of power. At the nadir of Moses’s career, the Korah rebellion in [Numbers 16](#), the Biblical text appears to depict a Moses who has lost control. He beseeches God to make an example of Korah—the only time in the Torah that Moses ever asked God to punish another person. This show of force only worsens the rebellion. In Rabbi Sacks’s interpretation, Moses’s mistake here was to read criticism of his office as personal criticism. The ability to distinguish between one’s public role and oneself is the difference between viewing oneself as wielding power, and viewing oneself as *powerful*. “It is hard,” writes Rabbi Sacks, “not to see this as the first sign of the failing that would eventually cost Moses his chance to lead the people into the land” ([Numbers](#), 216).

For a person so preoccupied with power, one might have imagined Moses developing into a Nietzschean skeptic, [sighing](#) at “the comedy of existence.” But it is here that Rabbi Sacks identifies Moses’s true greatness. Throughout all his travails, Moses never became a cynic. This is how Rabbi Sacks reads the final verses of Deuteronomy, describing Moses’s eyes as undimmed until the moment the Almighty reclaimed his soul ([Lessons in Leadership](#), 301-302). Moses feared power, and struggled with it, but he never let it consume him. And it certainly

did not sour him on the beauty and mystery of human existence.

II.

In Rabbi Sacks's view, the Torah's project is to articulate the principles for constructing a just and lasting society. In this long-term project, Moses appears not as a literary character, but a moral and political visionary. Although Rabbi Sacks's conception of the (or an) ideal Biblical society owes a great deal to Moses at every turn, perhaps the single greatest insight that he attributes to Moses is this: a healthy society must actively cultivate future leaders.

Moses, in Rabbi Sacks's reading, saw as society's greatest enemy what economists refer to as the "discount rate," or the tendency to value the present at the expense of the future. In response, Moses consistently emphasized the need to take account of future generations.

On the basis of a Talmudic passage in [Tractate Kiddushin \(32a-b\)](#), Rabbi Sacks points to the Song of the Sea in [Exodus 15](#) as the earliest instance in which Moses stressed the danger of relying for leadership upon once-in-a-generation supernovas, like Moses himself ([Exodus, 111-114](#)). Stable, dependable leadership would be an absolute necessity in ensuring Judaism's continued vigor. This theme repeats itself frequently in Rabbi Sacks's characterization of Moses. Most importantly, it forms the basis for Rabbi Sacks's interpretation of the Temple as an institution—the introduction of which into Jewish life he associates with Moses. That is, in the wake of the crisis of the Golden Calf, one of the central

events in the book of Exodus, the Biblical text depicts Moses as the only thing standing in the way of God's wholesale annihilation of the Israelites. Moses recognized this situation as inherently unstable. No people could build a lasting society if they depended for their survival upon prophets—the supply of which is by definition unpredictable. What the Israelites needed, Moses argued, was some mechanism for ensuring that future generations would have a steady stock of leaders. In response, God instituted the Temple and its priesthood. "The priesthood," observes Rabbi Sacks, "represents continuity immune to the vicissitudes of time" ([Leviticus, 12](#)).

Concern for the future further explains why Moses's temporary embrace, in [Numbers 11](#), of the *in loco parentis* mode of leadership proves so disastrous. In this episode, Moses had suffered an emotional collapse in response to the Israelites' complaints. Rabbi Sacks contrasts this with similar complaints in the book of Exodus to which Moses had reacted with equanimity. He resolves the discrepancy by noting that over the course of the Biblical narrative, Moses appears to become increasingly convinced that, as a leader, he must do it all. By the time we reach [Numbers 11](#), Moses began comparing his role to a nurse carrying a child ([Numbers 11:12](#)). "The trouble," Rabbi Sacks notes, "is that if the leader is a parent, then the followers remain children" ([Numbers, 129](#)). Unchecked, unbalanced leadership may yield order in the present, but it stunts the social growth of subsequent generations.

Moses recognized that genuinely sustainable leadership is rooted in teaching. This, too, is a

constant refrain in Rabbi Sacks's *oeuvre*. A righteous society that wishes to remain so places education at its foundation ([Exodus, 77-81](#)). The purpose of this education is to transmit core values over long time-horizons. This is why Moses constantly exhorts the Israelites and their descendants to "remember" the significant moments in their history ([Numbers, 157](#)). The values that Moses was responsible for transmitting would take many generations to seize hold—to become a "culture." Only a robust commitment to education and instruction would ensure these values' continuity and vitality over the course of time. This sort of long-term thinking is an essential element of the Biblical *ethos* such that, as Rabbi Sacks notes, the historical narratives of the entire Hebrew Bible span roughly a thousand years. The Bible thinks in these sorts of increments.

In the end, perhaps the clearest expression for Rabbi Sacks of Moses's commitment to the long-term gains of education is that the sobriquet by which he is known in Jewish literature and vernacular to this day is *Moshe Rabbeinu*, "Moses our teacher." This reflects, Rabbi Sacks argues, the role that Moses embraced at the end of his life, in the book of Deuteronomy. When all was said and done, Moses was not a king, nor a prophet, but an educator (*Lessons in Leadership*, 243).

III.

In considering Rabbi Sacks's portrait of Moses—and more broadly, the former Chief Rabbi's legacy as a Biblical commentator—my mind keeps returning to Rembrandt's [Moses Smashing the](#)

[Tablets of the Law](#), the iconic painting that adorns the cover of *Covenant and Conversation: Exodus*. It strikes me that another masterpiece might have been even more fitting: Marc Chagall's [Moses Receiving the Tablets of the Law](#). After all, in Rembrandt's work, Moses stands alone on a mountaintop, a lonely man of faith. This is not Rabbi Sacks's Moses.

Chagall, by contrast, paints Moses's encounter with God on Mount Sinai—in direct contradiction to the Biblical text!—as a crowded emotional spectacle. A joyous smile upon his face, Moses is surrounded on one side by the Israelites at the foot of the mountain, looking up at him in wonder. On the other he is ringed by contemporary figures—a bearded man lighting a *menorah*, a religious official grasping a Torah scroll, and other modern Jewish onlookers. Moses's receipt of the Torah is not a solitary experience, but a communal one, a societal one. And its significance reverberates not just across space but across time, touching the lives of Jews—in truth, all of humanity—throughout history.

Rabbi Sacks's Moses—like Chagall's Moses—is not an inscrutably righteous person perched atop an unscalable mountain. He is a man who can only be understood in the context of his people, his followers across the generations, and the great moral and political philosophy he helped birth. He is a leader whose teachings guide the Jewish people, inspired Western Civilization, and continue to speak to the great human questions of the day.

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