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LEHRHAUS Over Shabbos

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VAERA

THIS WEEK'S LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS IS SPONSORED BY
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# THE ANTI-SPIRITUAL RABBI: A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

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*Translated by Levi Morrow*

*Rav Menachem Froman (1945-2013) was a man of ecstatic spirit, who strived to ensure that ideas from the realm of words, reached the realm of practice, reality, and action. This essay was written from the perspective of a student.*

When we tell stories of *tzaddikim*, righteous people, we do so in an attempt to learn from their lives, lessons that should be primarily spiritual, as well as intellectual. Archetypically, the *tzaddik* is someone who finds spirituality in trivial things, in the seemingly meaningless expanses of life.[1] As the Hebrew Bible with its heroes and the Talmud with its sages, stories of contemporary *tzaddikim* must present all of their different facets and complexities; not angelic figures distant from reality, but human beings like us who lived meaningful, full lives.

Rav Froman was a Religious Zionist teacher, *rosh yeshivah,* and grass-roots peace activist. Anyone who met Rav Froman saw first and foremost a person praying. His prayer was always full of emotion, handwaving, exclamations, and song. In the manner of the *Hasidim*, it often seemed like Rav Froman was constantly going off alone and talking with his creator, seeking elevation. However, his prayer had another side to it as well, which many people might see as dry or formalistic. As opposed to many popular stereotypes about Hasidic prayer, Rav Froman paid strict attention to halakhic requirements ; Rav Froman was careful to pray with a *minyan* three times a day until his final days, and made sure to read each word from the *siddur* in front of him.

He himself described his careful attention to halakhic details as a struggle going on inside him, wherein his obligation to the fixed prayer framework defeated his commitment to spontaneous, personal prayer. He used to say that he considered it unequivocally more important to pray with a *siddur*, so that he would remember to say "*Ya'aleh ve-Yavo*," than to give himself over to ecstatic prayer with his eyes closed.

**Torah of the Roads**

While Rav Froman's unique way of praying became a dominant symbol of his personality, perhaps more central in his life was the actual study and teaching of Torah. This was certainly the center of our encounter with him as students. Rav Froman usually uttered a short prayer out loud before teaching Torah. I often hoped that he would recite a spiritual prayer, about connecting to the incredible power of the Torah, but it was always a request that the Torah we learned would affect the world of our everyday lives. Classic *yeshivish* approaches prioritize learning Torah for Torah's sake, and mystics focus on affecting spiritual worlds, but Rav Froman believed learning Torah should primarily affect the rest of a person's life.

He would start his lessons by dedicating the learning to a list of people who were sick, and then he would add a prayer for the success of soldiers in their missions or for the advancement of political matters. Sometimes he would add something along the lines of "The Torah should bring us closer to God," or "God should illuminate our eyes with his Torah," but the aim of most of the prayers was to orient the spiritual activity of learning Torah toward influencing the material world.

Rav Froman understood Torah study as a way of using any given moment to connect directly with God, but the study was always strongly connected to real life. He always made sure to learn Torah while traveling on the road, seeing Torah learnt on the road not just as a fulfilment of the halakhic requirements to learn Torah "when you walk on your way" (Deuteronomy 6:7), but as an expression of the

[1] [Translator's note- This might more typically be framed as "raising up the sparks" of divinity scattered throughout the mundane, even profane, world. The ability to find divinity in moments, spaces, and actions seemingly empty of it represents a key mode of Kabbalistic and Hasidic engagement with the world. See, for example, Rabbi Isaac Luria, *Sefer ha-Likkutim* (Jerusalem: 1988), 239-240; Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezritch, *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov*, ed. Rivkah Schatz-Oppenheimer (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990), 24, §9. This was also what Rav Kook was doing when he identified both secular Zionism and bodily healthcare as forms of religious piety, holiness, and devotion. See Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook, *Orot*, (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1963), 70–72, *Orot ha-Teḥiyah* §18; 80, *Orot ha-Teḥiyah* §33-34. –LM]

dynamic nature of Torah. He noted that "Halakhah comes from a language of 'walking,'" and so you have to "walk with the Torah."

Rav Froman believed that learning Torah on the road creates a dynamic connection between the Torah above and life below. Many passages in the Zohar recount conversations and ideas discussed by the sages of the Zohar while they were walking on the road. Moreover, the greatest mysteries of the Zohar were revealed specifically by people the sages came across during their travels, seemingly simple individuals, like the old grandfather or the donkey driver. Rav Froman identified the Zohar as Torah of the Land of Israel because it is learned on the road, as opposed to Torah of the Exile which is learned in yeshivah, in a static manner. Classic yeshivah study involves cycling through the same texts year after year, each student sitting in their "set place" within the four walls of the *beit midrash*. The Torah of the Land of Israel is studied throughout the valleys and vistas of the land, where surprises abound.

**A Radiant New Zohar in Torah Study**

In his classes, there was a clear divide between the students who were seeking elevation and transcendence, and Rav Froman,who was constantly pulling them back down to earth. "*Zohar Hadash*," was the rabbi's favorite term for someone who shared deep ideas or wondrous thoughts that were insufficiently rooted in the actual words of text they were learning (the phrase literally means "new Zohar," but plays on the name of the latest layer of the Zoharic corpus). Whenever he studied any Torah text, and the Zohar most of all, Rav Froman would first and foremost attempt to understand the words of the text. Only later would he attempt to determine what relevance it has for our lives, what its existential meaning might be. This second stage was the goal of the learning, and when they would finally reach it, Rav Froman would remark in an intentional Ashkenazi accent "*ha-Ikker le-Mayseh*," "the main practical point," a reference to Rebbe Nahman of Bratlsav. However, this teaching always had to be based on the learning uncovered in the first stage.

For a time, the Zohar classes that Rav Froman taught in his house began at 3:30 AM and went until sunrise. In one class, a new student came expecting to hear wondrous ideas. He got up at midnight, immersed himself in a *mikvah*, and arrived at the class positively shaking with awe and excitement. The class began, and after reading one line of the Zohar, Rav Froman wanted to look in-depth into one of the verses cited by the Zohar. As he always did in such scenarios, Rav Froman opened up a concordance, and he proceeded to spend 45 minutes researching the philological meaning of one of the words. The student's face showed just how distant this was from the experience he had been expecting.

This helped me to fully understand Rav Froman's approach to Torah study: his philological precision was a means to reaching the deeper meaning of the words. He once explained this to be the deep meaning of the unity of *Kudsha Brikh Hu* and the *Shekhinah*: The *Shekhinah* is the earth, the lowest of the *sefirot*, which according to the Zohar "has nothing of her own." In the process of Torah study, she manifests as the need for the student to "justify themselves textually," as Rav Froman put it. The attribute of *Kudsha Brikh Hu* is the divine attribute associated with heaven rather than earth, and it manifests as the student's freedom to seek spirituality and meaning. Only when solidly grounded in the precise meaning of the words can the student seek out the spiritual expanses contained within the text. Connecting these two traits leads to the truest understanding of and connection to the Torah. In this way, spiritual meaning is anchored in the meaning of the words themselves, rather than read baselessly into the text. Bringing together *Kudsha Brikh Hu* and the *Shekhinah*, creating an inner-divine unity, is achieved through holding together the seemingly opposite poles of textual fidelity and the quest for meaning and relevance.

I merited to experience Rav Froman's approach to Torah study in its clearest form in the study of the Talmud. When I organized Rav Froman's Talmud class in Yeshivat Tekoa, I asked him how I should advertise the class. "Talmud study focusing on *omek ha-pshat*, the depths of the straightforward meaning," he said, paraphrasing Rashbam. In choosing this expression, Rav Froman combined "depth," which grants intellectual freedom, and "straightforward meaning," which expresses the reader's obligation to the text.

In the 2007-2008 *Shemitah* year, we studied Tractate *Shevi'it* from the Jerusalem Talmud together. Rav Froman was very excited to use the critical, academic commentary of Professor Yehuda Felix, because it was based on extensive research into the agronomic realities of the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods. Indeed, Rav Froman loved using the Steinzaltz edition of the Talmud for the very same reason, because it contains marginal notes with scientific and historical details relevant to the Talmudic discussion. After several months of studying *Shevi'it*, during which time Rav Froman spent a lot of time delving into footnotes, we got stuck on one section, going over it again and again while Rav Froman remained unsatisfied with our understanding of it. "I am having trouble understanding the agronomic reality of that time," he said," and that is why I cannot understand the Talmud." After several weeks, I tried to subtly hint to him that we were not really making any progress and perhaps it was time to move on. He agreed, and deliberated about what to do while flipping forward through the pages. He pointed out that in just a few pages there was a section he thought was very important for us to learn, but, as he said, "However, skipping seems wrong from the perspective of service of God!"

Rav Froman would "walk around with Torah teachings," another expression borrowed from Bratslav teachings. This meant that he would always seek out texts that were connected to his daily life and the life of the nation, which would enable him to delve deeper into ongoing events. For example, during the Disengagement, or when there were terror attacks, he would learn Torah that he felt spoke to those events. This approach reached its crescendo when Rav Froman was ill; he chose to learn the Zohar on the Torah portion of *Vayehi* for months on end, specifically because it discusses death.

However, it is worth reiterating how central Halakhah was in Rav Froman's life. His Shabbat meals always began with a Halakhah learned from the Mishnah or some other book of Halakhah, like the *Arukh Ha-Shulhan*. As one of his sons notes, Rav Froman would often read Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* aloud to everyone at yeshivah meals, and he once read it aloud to the entire bus for an entire trip from Otniel to Haifa and back (*Hasidim Tzohakim Mizeh* §12). "The Hebrew word *'halakhah'* derives from '*halikhah*,' going, so it must always be our starting point," he would say. He always insisted that Torah be relevant to life, but his life always started from Halakhah.

**A 'Rav Kook' for Islam**

Rav Froman was a pioneer in the realm of grassroots interfaith dialogue in Israel. He believed that dialogue and understanding held the keys to solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He also did not shy away from writing essays critical of every sector of Israeli society, particularly when it came to issues around peace and the land (see the collected volume *Sohaki Aretz*, cited below). Consistent with his insistence that Torah affect practical life, Rav Froman never cordoned political matters off from the rest of his life entirely. These matters

were present in the background of almost every daily encounter with him. However, as his students, we did not hear much about them. He never discussed them directly, and he certainly did not let these topics take over his classes. If he mentioned politics at all in a class, it was only to relate some relevant anecdote.

In 2014, a collection of Rav Froman's essays called "*Sohaki Aretz*" was published, containing a glimpse into his intense involvement in social and political issues in Israel. The book displays the rabbi's responses to different matters, his clear perception, and his ability to foresee how things would turn out. A few lines from one of the essays indicate the balanced place that politics had in Rav Froman's life:

> Recently, after one of my classes, a young woman approached me, visibly agitated. With great emotion, she asked me, "How does the rabbi think we should solve the problem of Judea and Samaria?" I will be so bold as to tell you what occurred to me then. I wanted to say to her, "Perhaps instead of being so agitated about the question of Judea and Samaria, it would be better to think about how to love your husband, about how to raise your children."

Later in the same text, Rav Froman is even more direct:

> Ultimately, the place we give politics in our lives must be realistic. We are forbidden from allowing politics–with the dynamic skill of all superficial matters–to override and take over our lives, making them superficial and alienated. (Sohaki Aretz, 38-39)

As part of his faith-based peace efforts, Rav Froman met with Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the founder and spiritual leader of Hamas, who was in prison at the time. After studying religion and Koran together, they built a lasting relationship of mutual respect, which allowed Rav Froman access and safety in his occasional visits to PA controlled cities. Rav Froman loved to quote something Sheikh Ahmed Yassin told him during one of their meetings: "Honorable Rabbi Menachem, you and I could make peace in five minutes. However, the problem is not you and I, but your government!" Sometimes Rav Froman would add, "Let's not delude ourselves, making peace would take us five hundred years, not five minutes!" He didn't mean that it's impossible to make peace, but the reverse: it's possible to make real peace, but real peace is a long process.

Once he said

> I hope that Islam will merit a 'Rav Kook' of its own, someone who will sublimate the religion, redeeming it from the primitivity and harsh violence that exists in the Quran. He would make it an ethical religion seeking peace on the most global level.

Rav Froman recognized the power of the Islamic religion, but did not deny that it also had negative, even violent, aspects. The spiritual basis of his peace activism, as he taught through the mediums of the Zohar and Rebbe Nahman, was the unifying of opposites between right and left, between good and evil. They believe in recognizing the place of evil (which, according to Kabbalah, issues from the left side of divinity) in the world and trying to turn the bitter into the sweet, which is the highest goal of the mystical teachings of Torah. His political positions were founded on a deep understanding that we need to imitate God and his actions. He often expressed this in noting that "*Shalom/Salam*," meaning "Peace," is one of God's names in both Hebrew and Arabic. "It's the most beautiful of his names," Rav Froman would say, quoting from his Muslim friends.

**Peace with the Neighbors**

Many people, including people with whom he had helped establish *Gush Emunim*, criticized Rav Froman's peace activism as naively idealistic. His opponents saw him as at best delusional, and at worst as someone who hangs out with murderers. Once, one of these critics even pulled a gun on Rav Froman in the middle of *kabbalat shabbat*! However, Rav Froman actually based his activism specifically on a realistic understanding of the world. He would examine reality directly and study it well, always examining it thoroughly before drawing conclusions. Rav Froman was familiar with the Palestinian citizenry, with the leadership, as well as with the meaning and role of Islam, going back to the beginning of the conflict.

"On the day we went up to Sebastia (outside Nablus)," Rav Froman recalled after thirty years, "I told Hanan Porat (the leader of the settlement movement in Judea and Samaria at the time) that we needed to start making peace with our neighbors, because if we didn't, we would not survive here for long." Finding religious and spiritual common ground was, as Rav Froman saw it, the only realistic possibility for advancing Israel's complex relationship with the Palestinians and creating peace. If you look closely at his activism, if you look at the articles he published in newspapers or at videos documenting his meetings, you can see that Rav Froman managed to penetrate the fundamental barrier between the two nations and reached the level where, potentially, there could be a true connection and even peace between the two nations. It seems to me that many times Rav Froman moved beyond the level of potential and succeeded in advancing true peace. There were also times, however, when Rav Froman perhaps failed to make this possibility that he saw into reality.

He once threw out a sharp generalization, meant perhaps to highlight the matter's importance:

> If you think Maimonides studied philosophy because he loved it, or that Rav Kook was involved with the secular world because he connected with the ideas, you are mistaken. They were both involved in the external world because they understood that it is reality and that God is there, so it is exactly there that you must find God. It may seem like a place distant from God, but it is exactly there that you have to shine the light of God's existence.

Paraphrasing Rav Froman, I might say that he was not involved in peace activism because he enjoyed it, but because he understood that, in our reality today, it is specifically there that we must find God.

**Applying the Attribute of *Malkhut***

At Rav Froman's first *yartzheit*, we gathered together – his family, friends, and students – at his grave in Tekoa. Standing by his grave, his wife, Hadassah, said something that has stayed with me ever since. Hadassah read, line by line, the epitaph Rav Froman himself wrote for his tombstone:

> Tried to run to *Rabbeinu* / And to dip in the radiance of the holy lamp / to follow in the footsteps of *Ha-Rav* / The people of your nation are all righteous, they will forever inherit the land.

This is how Hadassah explained the lines, while addressing Rav Froman in the first person:

> You wrote here the milestones of your life's journey, a journey through the great *tzadikkim* to whom you alluded – Rebbe Nahman, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai, and Rav Kook. However, your whole journey always led you to the last line, to the people and to the land. You could have chosen a different motto, also from the Zohar: "The enlightened will shine with the radiance of the firmament." You could have easily connected the radiance of the firmament with constantly ascending, up and up, throughout your life, but you always chose to bring everything down to earth.

When I told Hadassah that I wanted to write an essay about Rav Froman based on this element of his personality, I told her that I wanted to call it "The Non-Spiritual Character of Rav Froman." She agreed with my description but said that I should call it "The Anti-Spiritual Character" of Rav Froman, because he wasn't non-spiritual, rather he actively opposed what other people call "spirituality."

I spoke with Rabbi Dov Zinger, an early student of Rav Froman and Israeli educator, who advised that I sharpen the point even further. In his opinion, Rav Froman was naturally inclined to focus "above," and had to force himself to connect to us, down below. He chased after reality because he believed in it. His spirituality was realistic, and his reality was spiritual.

I cannot say if Rav Froman descended from above more than he climbed up from below, but I am certain that he was constantly moving between those two poles, in unending tension. Regardless of which was more dominant, I see here a project that we can take up from Rav Froman and continue forward in our lives. We must create an uncompromising integration between ascending above and holding tight below, between running after the greatest, most hidden teachings and constantly trying to realize them in reality.

This is what it means to apply the attribute of *Malkhut*, which Rav Froman saw as the critical center of the Zohar's secret teachings. *Malkhut*, the lowest (or last) of the *sefirot*, is also called "Land," because it connects the loftiest secrets to the earth, to the ground, in that it is the final stage in the descent of God's influence to earth. This is the integration of the greater land of Israel and peace, between prayer and Torah. Rav Froman began this integration, and we can continue it.

## Dancing with the Text: The Rabbinic Use of Midrashic Allegory

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Last Spring, I taught a Bible course at the Catholic graduate school where I work as a Professor of Jewish Studies called Women in the Scriptures. My students entered my classroom already knowing many of the biblical stories that were on my syllabus. But they were also aware that they had not studied these stories closely, as written texts. They had received these tales, tales such as the fall of the man and woman in the Garden of Eden, the story of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, and the Israelites' worshipping of a golden calf, as cultural traditions whose narrative details have been blurred and shifted from teacher to teacher, and from age to age.

In the opening unit of the course, which focused on the scriptural account and reception histories about Eve, some of my students were startled to learn certain details which they had not previously heard from their teachers. Eve's name, for instance, does not appear in the scriptural story; she is simply known as The Woman. Only after Eve's entire identity is upended, after she is plucked from a rooted life in the Garden, and after she is required to start again, in an unfamiliar and threatening wilderness outside the domain of total divine protection, is she named. And when my students discover that, despite the abundance of medieval Christian art depicting Eve holding an apple in the Garden, there was no apple involved when she feeds Adam (or more accurately, The Man), some begin to grapple with a rising tension between what they read in the text, and what they have long been taught about the story. They begin to interrogate their assumptions about the story's details and its theological ramifications. What exactly occurred when the woman approached her husband and caused a disastrous fall from grace? How can a story so important be missing so many key details? The stories that my students have learned about the Garden of Eden do not equip them to encounter the biblical text.

While "textual encounters" animate some of my students, others disengage, declaring the text to be more or less irrelevant to their spiritual lives, bearing little meaning in comparison to the story's transmitted and interpreted versions. These students are intuiting a sophisticated argument: it is possible to attribute significance to one particular, even later, version of a story, and perhaps it is the attribution of significance that makes a version authentic – even if it is not the original one, or the written one.

As it happens, Orthodox Jews are actively engaged in the same tensions as Christian readers of the Bible. One classic example arises yearly on Passover, when observant Jews read the Song of Songs, often with the Artscroll translation. The Song of Songs, which on its face reads as a love poem, includes erotic imagery which gave rise to rabbinic discussion regarding whether the text should be included in the canon of the Hebrew Bible. This debate is seemingly resolved by Rabbi Akiva's statement that, while other biblical books are holy, the Song of Songs is akin to the Holy of Holies (*Yadayim* 3:5). Akiva's interpretive wordplay on the grammatical syntax of the Song's name, which implies that the Song of Songs is a superlative expression of Israel's love for God, just as the Holy of Holies is a space of superlative and exclusive worship of the divine, correlates with later midrashic traditions that the Song is an allegory depicting Israel's

relationship with God, a relationship which is often presented in biblical prophetic literature similar to a romantic relationship. Picking up on the midrashic tradition, Artscroll's translation of the Song of Songs goes even further, insisting that a literal translation of the Song of Songs is not only incorrect, but deceptively heretical. The Artscroll edition of the Song of Songs offers the following comment of introduction:

> The Song is an allegory. It is the duet of love between God and Israel. Its verses are so saturated with meaning that nearly every one of the major commentators finds new themes in its beautiful but cryptic words. All agree, however, that the true and simple meaning of Shir HaShirim is the allegorical meaning. The literal meaning of the words is so far from their meaning that it is false.

Artscroll puts this claim front and center on their website as well with a pithy byline that advertises Artscroll's Song of Songs translation as "the first English translation faithful to the allegory that is the Song's authentic meaning." And yet, the Artscroll editors are not offering a midrashic interpretation of the Song of Songs, in line with rabbinic tradition. They are offering a *translation* of the Song of Songs that does not correspond to the literal meaning of the Hebrew text. The editors of Artscroll are making a theological claim: allegory can reflect a text's authentic meaning, which in turn can transform the plain-sense meaning of a scriptural text, the *pshat*, into a falsehood which must be rejected.

The rejection of literal renderings of the text can give way to an increasing lack of interest in critically engaging with the text. Once a text's meaning becomes elusive, and no interpretive barometers are provided by which to know whether to trust a text, a text can become vulnerable to whatever authority or community exercises upon it their desired mode of interpretation. And once literal readings of problematic stories become undermined, new readings can be offered which better correlate with our worldviews.

Monty Python's 1979 film *Life of Brian* brilliantly satirizes the revisionism that ascribes meaning to new versions of the text. When Jesus delivers his Sermon on the Mount, a crowd of people gather in the back of the assembly, trying to hear the speech above the crowd's din:

> **JESUS:** They shall have the earth...
> **GREGORY:** What was that?
> **JESUS:** ...for their possession. How blessed are those...
> **MR. CHEEKY:** I don't know. I was too busy talking to Big Nose.
> **JESUS:** ...who hunger and thirst to see...
> **MAN #1:** I think it was 'Blessed are the cheesemakers.'
> **JESUS:** ...right prevail!
> **MRS. GREGORY:** Ahh, what's so special about the cheesemakers?
> **GREGORY:** Well, obviously, this is not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturers of dairy products.

This exchange ingeniously taps into the ways in which Jews in the first century – both followers of Jesus, and those who rejected him as a messianic figure – liberally reformed their texts by supplementing them with oral traditions. Such active interpretation, of course, would continue through the 21st century, and not only by "faithful reformers." Biblical scholars of the Protestant tradition would reformulate scriptural texts in radically new ways in the late 19th century by developing theories regarding four main compositional layers of the Pentateuch. The result was essentially a de-threading of strands which comprised the Hebrew Bible: by pulling its compositional strings out, these scholars laid bare the atomized statements which replaced, competed, undermined, or rested alongside one another.

Readers who would place themselves on opposite ends of the interpretive spectrum—minimalists who assume that unless proven otherwise, the narrative material in the Bible is not historical, and maximalists who assume that unless proven otherwise, the narrative material in the Bible is historical—sometimes meet in the same place. Julius Wellhausen, the German Protestant father of Biblical Criticism, and Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, the author of Artscroll's commentary to the Song of Songs, get the reader to the same message: do not read scriptural texts as a literal representation of what someone, or some people, once thought.

At the same time, the scene from the *Life of Brian* reminds us that this is nothing new. From the time that the Hebrew Bible was coming into its final form in the Second Temple period, it was at the same time being actively interpreted, and from the time that it was being actively interpreted, it was being allegorized. Mistrusting the written word—or rather, insisting that the deeper and truer meaning of a text lies *behind* the written word, which acts as a symbol that requires further interpretation—was a notion which energized the most influential intellectuals of the age, from the Hellenistic Platonists, to the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE–50 CE), to the Christian Church Father Origen of Alexandria (c. 184–c. 253 CE). Philo and Origen were both impacted by the Alexandrian culture in which they were reared, a culture whose educational philosophy was founded upon the notion that true meaning lay within allegorical understanding.

Even Greeks expressed suspicion of the integrity of written text, on the basis that it can be misunderstood and misinterpreted. This suspicion was so widespread that famous poems, poems like Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, were transmitted orally for centuries until they were recorded. In his dialogue *Phaedrus*, Plato presents a series of dialogues between his teacher, Socrates, and the eponymous interlocutor. In one of these dialogues, Socrates declare that writing is bad because it makes one forget their knowledge:

> **SOCRATES**: Well, then, those who think they can leave written instructions for an art, as well as those who accept them, thinking that writing can yield results that are clear or certain, must be quite naive and truly ignorant of [Thamos'] prophetic judgment: otherwise, how could they possibly think that words that have been written down can do more than remind those who already know what the writing is about?
> **PHAEDRUS**: Quite right.
> **SOCRATES**: You know, Phaedrus, writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offsprings of painting stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever. When it has once been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs

its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support.
**PHAEDRUS**: You are absolutely right about that, too.
**SOCRATES**: Now tell me, can we discern another kind of discourse, a legitimate brother of this one? Can we say how it comes about, and how it is by nature better and more capable?
**PHAEDRUS:** Which one is that? How do you think it comes about?
**SOCRATES:** It is a discourse that is written down, with knowledge, in the soul of the listener; it can defend itself, and it knows for whom it should speak and for whom it should remain silent.[2]

Socrates' complaint that once a text has been written, it reaches "those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not" is one that the rabbis would have likely sympathized with. Like the Greeks, the rabbis prioritized orally transmitted traditions.[3] And the trend to begin writing scholarship down in the Greco-Roman world was contemporaneous with the rabbinic turn to the written word as well. The Pharisees, the predecessors of the Rabbis who lived in Judea toward the end of the Second Temple period, developed an oral law that would at times undermine the written one.[4] This oral law would be as authoritative as the written law, and in some ways more potent, because it could be developed and shaped in ways in ways which required the rabbis to actively interpret and often allegorize the written law. Only a small group of priestly Jews, the Sadducees, whole-handedly rejected the oral tradition, and considered the written word more trustworthy and authoritative than the oral law (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XVIII, 16). The Rabbis, however, held that both written and oral laws were equally authoritative. At the same time, they made a clear distinction between the oral law and the written law, even as the oral law was becoming recorded in written form. Consider, for instance, the following source, preserved in the Babylonian Talmud:

> Rabbi Yohanan teaches: The Holy One, Blessed be He, made a covenant with the Jewish people only for the sake of the matters that were transmitted orally [*al peh*], as it is stated: 'For on the basis of [*al pi*] these matters I have made a covenant with you and with Israel' (Exodus 34:27)....
>
> Rabbi Yehudah bar Nahmani, public orator of Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, taught as follows: It is written, 'Write these words down for yourself.' But it is also written, 'since it is through these words (lit. by word of mouth).' What are we to make of this? It means: You are not at liberty to say written words by heart; and you are not at liberty to transmit teachings transmitted orally in writing.
>
> A Tanna of the school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: [It is written] '[Write] these [words down]' – these you may write (the Written Torah), but you may not write Halakhah (the Oral Torah)... (*Gittin* 60b).

This text, ironically preserved in written form, cites a rabbinic tradition that the Oral Law may only be transmitted through word of mouth, and not through written text at all. Another legend, this one preserved in the Babylonian tractate *Shabbat*, cites Rav referencing a hidden scroll which he discovered in the house of Rabbi Hiyya which recorded oral laws. This text suggests that at one stage, the written records of oral tradition were frowned upon and possibly prohibited (*Shabbat* 6b, 96b. Cf. *Bava Metzia* 92a.)

The rabbis' attitude that the oral tradition is superior to the written tradition is related to the notion that written texts widely provide access to knowledge which can be misused or misunderstood. In one talmudic tradition, for instance, a heavenly voice intervenes when Yonatan ben Uzziel seeks to produce an Aramaic translation of the Writings section of the Tanakh. The reason for such drastic intervention, the talmud tells us, is "because the date of the Messiah is foretold in it" (*Megillah* 3a). Translating the Writings section of the Tanakh, therefore, must be avoided not because it holds a partial truth, but because it can be disseminated to people who will not have the knowledge to properly understand it. This is also why the writing of Aramaic translations of the Tanakh known as *targum* was initially prohibited as well. Note, for instance, the following story, which speaks of *targumim* being hidden and concealed:

> R. Yose said: My father Halafta once visited R. Gamaliel be-Rabbi in Tiberias and found him sitting at Yohanan the son of Nizuf's table reading the *targum* of the Book of Job. [Halafta] said to [R. Gamaliel], 'I remember that your grandfather R. Gamaliel stood on the Temple Mount, when the *targum* of Job was given to him. [R. Gamaliel] said to the builder, "Bury [the *targum*] under the bricks." [R. Gamaliel's grandson, R. Gamaliel] too gave orders, and they hid it.'[5]

What makes the rabbinic approach to oral traditions distinctive from Hellenistic attitudes toward allegory, however, is the idea that, at the heart of some oral traditions, at least within the narrative stories regarding biblical figures, there lie connections with the Written Law, particularly when it comes to midrashic interpretation. Even as the rabbis sought to maintain the two categories as separate and distinct, midrashic readings of the written law were based on close readings of the text, careful attention to added details and missing details, and efforts to resolve seeming contradictions in the scriptures by picking up on literary nuances of the written tradition.[6]

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[2] Plato. c. 399-347 BCE. *Phaedrus* in J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, ed., *Plato: Complete Works*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), 551–552.

[3] Even written documents in the Second Temple period emphasized the authority of aural and visionary revelation. Michael Stone, *Secret Groups in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 39–40. But according to Stone, maybe the ancients weren't as anti-writing as scholars have thought. Philip Davis: "Daniel...is a book in which every thing significant is done by writing." Cf. Guy G. Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity* (Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015 ), 25–26.

[4] The classic example of the rejection of such literalism is how the rabbis interpret the phrase "If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot," in Exodus 21:23–24 as a mandate to compensate an injured individual for incurred damage, physical pain, medical fees, loss of livelihood, and any embarrassment incurred by the injury (*Bava Kamma* 83b).

[5] *Shabbat* 115a.

[6] *Gittin* 60b. The rabbis' attribution of superiority to the Oral Law is reflected in the Talmudic statements which declare that the Mishnah is superior to Mikra, the biblical text, and the Gemara, the commentary to the Mishnah, is superior to the Mishnah (*Bava*

One example, which commonly circulates in Orthodox circles, will have to suffice here: the story of Abraham in the fiery furnace, a story that many of my orthodox friends have scoffed at as being an example of a story which many Jewish children believe is in the scriptural text, and yet has “nothing to do” with the scriptural tradition. These friends, in fact, are wrong: the midrashic tradition about Abraham in the fiery furnace draws closely on the biblical tradition about Daniel’s friends who are thrown into a fiery furnace in Daniel 6. Once we realize this connection, we easily note many other midrashic traditions about Abraham which are drawn from Daniel’s story. The question becomes, then, why the Rabbis seek to link Abraham with Daniel. This question yields fascinating answers regarding how, in the Second Temple period, Daniel was the wanderer par excellence, the successful Diaspora Jew, the epitome of piety, and the rabbis transfer these qualities to the First Jew, the father of the Israelites, the father of the Jews. Stories about the forefathers which seem altogether disconnected from the scriptural tradition almost never actually are.

The difference between how rabbinic tradition read written text and, say, how Plato, or modern biblical scholars do, is that for the rabbis, the midrashic “oral” readings reveal truths that lie *within and inside* the written word, whereas ancient classical and modern scholarly readings argue that a symbolic reading should supplant the textual one. This is why the Artscroll reading of the Song of Songs, reviled and mocked as it often is by Jews who live outside of the right-wing Orthodox community, is in a sense anathema to the rabbinic interpretative tradition. In arguing that there is *no* truth which lies within a plain-sense translation of the Song of Songs, Artscroll’s approach is more Hellenistic than rabbinic.

Our task as faithful readers who follow rabbinic tradition, then, should include asking ourselves whether, in reading and applying midrashic traditions, we are inviting the scriptural text to act as a conveyer of an inherent meaning. Such a question requires us to approach the categories of *pshat* and *drash* not as categories which pull at each other in continual tension, but which imbue one another with integrity and meaning.

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*Metzia* 33a.). Tzvi Sinensky has written on the rabbinic sources which declare that the Oral Law is superior to the Written Law, noting that the rabbis privilege the Oral Law because it is more complex, because it generates more laws than the written law, and because it comprises the foundational characteristic of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, which as Sinensky notes, “is exclusively in the domain of the Jewish people.”