

FEAR OF THE FOREST: AVOIDING META-THEMES AND OVERVIEWS IN ORTHODOX BIBLE EDUCATION

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Abstract: This paper argues that overviews of the biblical books and broad themes ("meta-themes") are critical to teaching and understanding the Bible. Traditional *Yeshivah* and Day School pedagogical techniques too often focus on individual verses and commentary, to the detriment of student interest in and deeper comprehension of the biblical text. The essay analyzes "overviewing" as a pedagogical technique and outlines a pedagogy of "extensive reading" of the Bible. Lastly, it enumerates an inventory of skills for successful extensive reading of biblical literature.



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In this article, I examine a major shortcoming in the approach to Bible education in Orthodox day schools, both in Israel and abroad. I believe that this shortcoming is attributable not only to the professional or pedagogic weaknesses of a particular teachers or schools. It reflects, rather, a pervasive tendency of the milieu in which the schools operate to avoid meta-questions when studying and teaching Bible.

The article is divided into three parts: In part one I describe the specific shortcoming that is the main subject of this paper. I rely mainly on my experiences in teaching Bible to all grade levels, to different populations in several countries. In part two, I briefly attempt to analyze why this problem exists and why it is so pervasive. In part three, I propose a pedagogic typology of value-informed extensive reading skills, intended to develop in teachers and students alike a "deep and flexible understanding"¹ of the Bible. I believe that a skilled use of this typology by teachers and students can redress many weaknesses in Bible education.

I have chosen to develop an inventory of extensive reading skills, rather than intensive reading skills, since much has been written on the latter and very little on the former. In addition, even those teachers willing to "try" close reading (or literary analysis), are reticent about in-depth extensive reading. They might feel comfortable asking their students to divide the chapter or unit according to

the story line and title each section—a more superficial form of extensive reading. Yet they hesitate to ask students how different perspectives can be brought to bear upon a particular text, which is extensive reading of a more in-depth and adventurous form.

I. *Stating the Problem.*

A *yeshivah* high school student can graduate from day school after spending many years immersed in the study of *Tanakh*, and have no clue as to the most basic intentions, meanings, and messages of the biblical books that he has studied.

Teachers avoid or waffle over meta-questions, meta-themes, and overviews when teaching the Bible. They may devote many hours to in-depth analysis of each verse and its multiple commentaries, but shy away from questions like: "What is this book about?" "What are its messages?" "Why was this book written?" "Whom was it written for?"

The following two stories, spanning two generations of Bible students and two continents, illustrate the deeply entrenched nature of this phenomenon.

1971 and the Book of Job

As a high school student, I attended a Modern Orthodox

*This work is dedicated to the memory of my father, Isaac Orenstein, *z.t.s"l.*, and my father-in-law, Rabbi Ben-Zion Lopian, *z.t.s"l.*, who both loved Torah, and who encouraged my every endeavor to learn and to teach.

¹Williamson McDiarmid, Deborah L. Ball, Charles W. Anderson, "Why Staying One Chapter Ahead Doesn't Really Work: Subject-Specific Pedagogy," in *Knowledge Base for the Beginning Teacher*, ed. M.C. Reynolds (Pergamon Press, New York, 1989), p. 193.

day school highly esteemed for both its Jewish and general studies education. In eleventh grade, we studied the Book of Job, closely accompanied by major medieval commentaries. I recall devoting many hours to studying Job, particularly before exams and being rewarded in the end by a satisfactory, even pleasing, final grade. In a graduate course on Jewish thought at Brandeis University several years later, Professor Nahum Glatzer alluded to, "the Book of Job and the problem of evil." I was a bit perplexed, but said nothing. A day or two later, he made a similar allusion, this time to "the Book of Job and the question of reward and punishment." By now I was completely confounded. Turning to a classmate, I asked, "Job is about the problem of evil? Job is about reward and punishment?"

I went home and reread Job, stunned to find a complex and fascinating book dealing with the nature of the universe, questions of good and evil, and the manifestations of divine providence, among other things. I could have recited verse and commentary almost by heart, but had no idea that the Book of Job was about the problem of evil.

I had been starved for discussions on these topics throughout my high school career, and forever begged the administration and teachers for courses in Jewish philosophy. Sadly, they never materialized. In truth, there was no need to introduce new courses in order to discuss "ideas"; we had Jewish thought right in front of us—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Genesis, Esther. Had the essential questions of the biblical books been raised, the themes they put forth and the insights they offered would have kept our minds racing for months.

2001 and the Book of Genesis

Thirty years later, my eleventh-grade daughter, a student at a "*dati-le'umi*" high school, not very different from the one I attended thirty years ago, asked me to "do Rashi" with her. She had a comprehensive ("*beqi`ut*") matriculation exam for which she had to prepare all of Rashi's commentaries on the first eleven chapters of Genesis.

I cut a deal with her: I would give her all the time she needed for Rashi, in exchange for ten minutes of questioning. (Of course, I was trying to forestall the inevitable lament, "Can't we just do the Rashis!") I asked my daughter if she knew what the first eleven chapters of Genesis were about.

"Which chapter?" she wanted to know.

"All of them," I insisted. "Can you detect a common idea or theme running through all or most of the chapters?"

"Not really. *Beri`at ha-olam*?" she guessed.

"OK," I said. "But that's only chapter one and a bit of chapter two. How about all eleven?"

"*Qayin and Hevel*?"

"Fine, but that's chapter four. Can you think of anything that's true for the entire unit?"

No response.

I began to explain to her about universal history and patriarchal history, about God's original intention to establish His covenant with all of humankind, of human envy of God's power and the consequent attempt to reach the heavens. "This how we might understand the consistent sinning throughout chapters 1-11," I explained. Listening with interest, the student became thoughtful.

"Is that why God approached Abraham? Why He chose one individual?" she asked.

The student was beginning to discern a big picture, to make connections. She was beginning to think. And yet, I had not introduced any lofty terminology or extraneous ideas. I had only asked an essential question about the big picture. We had looked at the whole, and it helped us understand the parts.

These two stories span the course of three decades. During those years, teachers of Jewish subjects have integrated new concepts and pedagogies into their professional repertoire, particularly in the areas of multiple intelligences and special needs. Yet, in most classrooms the pedagogy of teaching *Tanakh* remains remarkably static. While the subject matter may change from year to year, the level of our questions, and thus our understanding, does not advance beyond *kitah daled* (fourth grade).

To test this point, I decided to conduct some soft research of my own. I "interrogated" several American and Israeli day school graduates from excellent schools. "What is the outstanding message of the prophets?" I asked. "What were Yeshayahu, Yirmiyahu, and Amos railing against?" Most answered: "*Avodah zarah*," ("idolatry—always a safe guess) or "Not keeping the *mitsvot*."

"Which *mitsvot*?" I persisted.

After much coaching and many hints, some students were able to recall, "Oh, right, *miszvot bein adam le-havero* (interpersonal commandments)." But they were remembering and reciting, not understanding.² Few of the fourteen students I quizzed could articulate that the great prophets of Israel were pleading for a just society for all, particularly for the disadvantaged and downtrodden, for those outside the protection of the law. They remembered, but did not understand that the prophets of God were bitterly criticizing the spiritual decay of the Temple service and the numbing effects of too much *teqess* (ceremony)³. If teachers are reluctant to highlight those abuses upon which the prophets truly vented their anger, they will be unable to conduct "constructivist"⁴ conversations with their students about similar abuses in our own societies and in our own institutions.

High-school-age students are excruciatingly concerned

with questions of fairness, for themselves as well as for others. Suppose, for example, that in the midst of studying a chapter in Amos we were to generate a discussion with our students about how the prophet would have reacted to the allocation of millions of shekels to the Ministry of Religious Affairs when the coffers of Ministry of Social Welfare are empty, or under what circumstances the prophet Amos might have approved of such an allocation. Not only would students better understand the uniqueness of the prophetic texts and hopefully identify with the messages, they might even begin to enjoy studying them.

Teachers of Bible in day schools and *yeshivot* rarely step back and ask meta-questions about the books they teach. When teaching the Book of Judges, they do not ask: "How can we understand this book as a whole? What are its messages? Is there a unified message, or is it merely a collection of unrelated episodes?"

The Book of Judges does indeed have a unified message concerning the consequences of a nation's not having an organized, stable, and consistent way of choosing its leaders. The Israelites go from crisis to crisis, and by the end of the book, we find them on the brink of anarchy. The Book of Judges is intended as a *segue* to the book of Samuel. Its aim is to prepare the reader for the introduction of monarchy in Israel.

Why is this well-kept secret in our schools? Do we fear that by acknowledging this, we open doors to criticism of the Judges? But isn't that precisely what the book itself does? To read Judges without assessing the behavior of the individual judges is not to read the book at all. When teaching the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, how often do we ask:

"What are the purposes of the historical books?"

²It is noteworthy that Prof. Lee Shulman titled his seminal work on teacher knowledge, "Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching," *Educational Research* 15, 1986 (2):4-14.

³See: Isa. 9:13-20; Jer. 7:3-15, 21-28; Amos 5: 2

⁴"Constructivism" proceeds from the assumption that students are not simply empty vessels waiting for teachers to fill their heads with information. Rather, they are constantly "constructing" their own understandings of the material in front of them.

"Why were they written?"

"Are the historical accounts accurate, or are they meant to be read as teaching stories?"

"If so, what do they teach?" "Why are they often referred to as 'the historiography books'?"

Like the Bible as a whole, the Book of Leviticus is replete with complex and esoteric concepts. Throughout primary school, teachers spend years teaching verse after verse about *qedushah* (holiness), *tumah* (ritual defilement) and *tahorah* (ritual purity), but they do not step back and ask themselves, "What do these terms mean? What did they mean then? What do they mean today?" If we don't ask these questions of ourselves, we certainly cannot ask them of our students.

II. *Analysis*

What accounts for this problem? Why do our *Tanakh* teachers avoid asking essential questions? Overview questions may be divided into two categories:

1. Questions having to do with origins, such as: "For whom was this book written, by whom, when?"
2. Questions that have to do with intentions and purposes, such as: "Why was this book written?" "What does it want to say?" "Does it have one unified message or several messages?"

Teachers tend to avoid questions of both types. I will attempt to explain why based on my observations of teachers in practice, on conversations that I have had with student teachers, and on my experience in the classroom.

1. **Teachers Simply Don't Know:**

Teachers don't ask essential questions because they themselves don't know the answers. They don't know the answers because they were never taught. Teachers tend to teach the way they were taught.

2. **The Answers are not Obvious:**

The messages of the Biblical books are rarely transparent; on the contrary, they are opaque. The intentions of the narratives are embedded in the words, in the sentences, and in the structures. The stories need to be read and reread, examined and excavated, in order for the reader to arrive at their meanings. It is much easier for a teacher to ask informational questions such as:

"Where did this happen?" "How did this happen?" "To whom?" "By whom?" and even, "Why did this happen?" than to pose overview questions like, "What does this book want to say?" It is difficult to know the answers to essential questions, so teachers prefer not to ask them.

3. **"Overviewing" Demands More Preparation Time:**

It takes more time to prepare an overview lesson than to do a verse-by-verse analysis. Often, we must read two or three articles, or several introductions, in order to get a sense of the "the big picture." For most teachers, this is daunting. It is particularly true for primary school teachers who may teach *Tanakh* four to five times a week and believe that they are expected to teach a chapter a day. They feel that they do not have the time to do outside reading, and that they need to read a great deal of material in order to form some perspective or opinion about the book.

Although such reading always enhances and sharpens our own ideas, it is not a necessary prerequisite for formulating an overview.

4. **Pedagogically, Overviewing is Difficult.**

Asking essential and overview-type questions demands rigorous planning. Unlike the typical introductory lesson in which information is passed on from teacher to student in a more or less straightforward manner, overviewing is an interactive activity. It involves drawing meta-themes out of the students themselves. The groundwork

must be expertly and painstakingly laid in order for students to make the connections and arrive at a "big picture" on their own.

5. Overviewing Raises Serious Theological Questions: Overviewing a biblical text often leads to theological questions. For example, let us refer back to the Book of Judges and the other books in the Early Prophets. We need to ask overview questions such as, "What are we meant to learn from each of the individual judges?" "How are we to understand the character of Samson?" "Is he a role model, a hero, or a rogue?" "What of Jephthah, who sacrificed his daughter?"

If we look at the Book of Samuel, how are we to understand King David? Can he serve as a role model even though much of his behavior shocks our sensibilities? What about the prophet Samuel, who ensnares the well-meaning Saul in order to bring about his demise?

Is the Book of Kings history or theology, or both? What does that mean? What of the prophet Elijah? How are we meant to relate to this zealous avenger of God, this prosecutor of the Jewish people? Turning to the Torah, we can ask: "What is the meaning of the sacrifices in the Book of Leviticus?" "Why the prominence of the Tabernacle?" "Why, in a terse, concisely written text, are so many chapters devoted to its construction, twice?"

What are the themes of The Book of Numbers? Why the persistent reiteration of Israel's sins? What are we meant to learn from this, other than that the early Israelites were always thirsty? Why was an entire nation condemned to wither in the wilderness?

The list of questions is endless, because the *Tanakh* is a collection of books that ask essential questions. By concentrating solely on a verse-by-verse reading, or on rabbinic commentary limited to specific words or phrases, the essential questions are avoided.

⁵*Olam HaTanakh*, Davidzon-Itai, (Tel Aviv, 1994).

6. Circumventing Biblical Scholarship:

One of the best ways to circumvent knowledge that has become available to us as a result of biblical scholarship—a tool that Orthodox teachers are still reluctant to use—is to avoid asking essential questions. Several years ago, I observed a young teacher teaching the verses regarding the rebellious son (*ben sorer u-moreh*; Deut. 21:18-21). Although well-prepared for the class, and well versed in the rabbinic commentaries, she did not really understand the material, and, therefore, had great difficulty teaching it. The lesson was not successful: The students, as well as their teacher left the classroom frustrated. During our feedback session, I suggested that she have a look at the interpretation of *Olam ha-Tanakh*, an encyclopedic commentary combining scholarly, historical, and archeological information.⁵ The teacher read the commentary, told me that she found it fascinating and illuminating, and thought that her students would as well. She added that she surmised the interpretation to be "probably true," but she had no intention of repeating it to her class. "I can't quote the *Olam ha-Tanakh*," she said, "I am not comfortable doing that." She returned to class the next day, and tried to teach the lesson again. In her own words, "This wasn't one of my better classes."

I do not blame a teacher for withholding material from her students that makes her feel spiritually uneasy; not doing so would probably lead to an educational debacle of a different nature. It is unfortunate, however, that educators in Orthodox schools continue to ignore, or circumvent valuable educational material that is interesting, as well as edifying because it does not come from "approved" sources. I am well aware of the educational complexity and possible crises of faith that may result from the introduction of such this material into the Bible curriculum of a religious school. But there is much to gain from the use of these tools, and my experience has shown that circumventing this knowledge only delays the confrontation; it does not prevent it. Biblical scholarship is in the air, and in today's world, where all information is

"right out there," we would do better to discuss than to disregard.

7. Teachers Prefer the "One Book-One Message" Approach:

Overviewing and finding meta-themes usually leads to the conclusion that there is more than one way to read a text. Looking at the big picture usually suggests that there may be several big pictures, that the text has many "voices." While teachers feel comfortable quoting the rabbinic dictum, "*shiv'im panim la-Torah*," they tend to be troubled by the notion of multiple, sometimes contradictory, messages. Those who have been educated in more traditional schools, find it hard to relinquish the idea of "one book-one message."

8. Studying Torah is Another Form of Prayer:

For most teachers who teach *Tanakh* in Orthodox schools, it almost doesn't matter what we say, as long as we are "talking Torah." It was once suggested that the quality and content of a *devar Torah* delivered at a public gathering of Jews is subservient to the fact of its telling.⁶ If this observation is correct, as I think it is, it helps us understand many bewildering aspects of Jewish education. In particular, it helps explain why a community with such high standards in other school-based disciplines would allow the teaching of Jewish subjects to be so unprofessional. For many, "talking Torah" is enough; it does not have to be "good Torah."

For many teachers, *Tanakh* is not a discipline; it is a way of reaching God. This approach to Bible study yields a much larger, more complex, yet fascinating discussion⁷ that cannot be dealt with in the confines of this paper.

Certainly, the study of *Tanakh* in an Orthodox school should be viewed as religious education. But using literary tools to analyze the Biblical text, asking meta-questions and looking for themes should not undermine that experience. On the contrary, it should only enhance it.

For these causes and more, *Tanakh* teachers in day schools try to avoid dealing with essential questions. But if we don't ask essential questions, we cannot have "essential discussions." The effect of this omission for students is frustration, distrust, and anger that, sadly, usually turn into apathy. Students of high-school age in particular are interested in meta-questions; they are eager to explore the big picture. With time, they become wary and suspicious of those disciplines in which the teachers tend to waffle over the essential questions. "What are they hiding?" they want to know.

In his book, *The Disciplined Mind: What All Students Should Understand*,⁸ Howard Gardner advocates schools where students delve into deep epistemological questions. He refers to that approach to education as "the understanding pathway." In an interview about the book, Gardner offered the following:

I don't actually advocate teaching directly about truth, beauty, and morality; that sounds like a graduate philosophy course. I advocate teaching those disciplines—history, science, the arts, and literature—that will present to students their culture's image of what is true (and not true), beautiful (and not beautiful), ethical (and immoral).⁹

Are not Bible and Talmud our civilization's way of teaching about that which is true and that which is untrue, about what is beautiful and what is not beautiful, what is

⁶ By my teacher and friend, Rabbi Jay Miller, who coined the phrase, "talking Torah."

⁷ A fascinating debate on the issue of "*Tanakh* as Literature," or "*Tanakh* As the Word of God," pitting the approach of Yad ha-Rav Herzog [or, the "*Gush*"] against the approach of the school of Rav Tau and his followers, is currently receiving much press in the Israeli national-religious daily, *Ha-Tsofeh*.

⁸ Howard Gardner, *The Disciplined Mind: What All Students Should Understand* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1999).

⁹ Marge Scherer, "The Understanding Pathway: A Conversation with Howard Gardner," *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 57,3 (Nov. 1999):13.

ethical and what is immoral? Should not these be the questions that are the focus of our discussions when teaching *Tanakh* to children?

III. *Towards a Pedagogy of Extensive Reading*

The question of why teachers and many other members of the community are content to study Bible without asking essential questions is a compelling one that deserves extensive reflection. The analysis presented in the previous section of this paper may generate the beginnings of such a discussion. However my intentions here are of a more practical nature. Since my immediate concerns are with teachers, students, and curricula, I approach the issues addressed above from a pedagogical perspective, not a philosophical one.

In the following section I present an "inventory" of reading skills, informed by the literary approach to reading *Tanakh*, though not exclusively so. When we study Bible from a literary perspective, we use tools of inquiry and discovery to uncover the layered meanings of the text. We are interested in uncovering what the text says, and in exploring how the text works to convey a certain meaning or make certain points.

The literary approach to reading Bible is of particular interest and appeal to many religious educators.¹⁰ This is true because, in the words of the great Bible scholar and teacher, Professor Meir Weiss, ז"ל:

It seeks to explore the text in its totality (*be-kuliyuto*). The literary method is particularly comfortable for us, the *dati-le'umi* community, who find ourselves both attracted and troubled by the questions raised by biblical research. The underlying principles of

these new approaches are valuable tools for inquiry into biblical literature, and as such, may be perceived as both a continuation and an emendation [*tiqqun*] of the accepted critical philological approach.¹¹

Literary analysis is underpinned by a variety of textual skills that need to be made explicit to students as they come across them in the course of their study, in the hope that they will be able to draw upon and transfer these skills to other books of the Bible. In order to help teachers identify some of the reading skills that they need to master to analyze a biblical text, I have composed an outline of extensive reading skills, which I refer to as an "inventory."¹²

The skills presented here are "value-laden." Their intention is to open up the text for inquiry and enable teacher and student alike to arrive at a broader and deeper understanding of the Bible. McDiarmid, Ball, and Anderson, in their article cited above, explore the question of how teachers can bring their pupils to a "deep and flexible understanding of subject matter." The writers discuss the tendency of prospective teachers, to view the teaching role as telling pupils what they need to know and giving them practice in it. [New teachers] tend to assume that learning means accruing information, and that the teacher's main task is to "motivate pupils" and get them to pay attention... The goal is to prepare teachers to break out of this conventional pattern of teaching and help pupils develop deep and flexible understandings of subject matter [emphasis my own].

"What is essential for teachers to know in order to help pupils develop flexible understanding of the subject matter?...Flexible understanding of subject matter entails the

¹⁰ It is also anathema to others, as attested to by the current debate being conducted in the Israeli press.

¹¹ Meir Weiss, "Avnei B'enyah liMeleket ha-Sippur ba-Miqrah," in *Miqra'ot ke-Kavvanatam* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1987), p. 294.

¹² Special thanks to Mr. Paul Forgasz, colleague and friend, for being a skilled sounding board for many of the ideas expressed in this inventory. A detailed and expanded introduction to both intensive and extensive reading skills can be found in our joint Teachers' Guide entitled "Reading Esther: A Curriculum for Teaching *Megillat Esther*," written by Esther Lopian and edited by Paul Forgasz. This is joint project of the Hebrew University Melton Center for Jewish Education and the Mt. Scopus Memorial College, Melbourne, Australia. It is as yet an unpublished manuscript.

ability to draw relationships within the subject as well as across disciplinary fields and to make connections to the world outside of school... Flexible understanding also involves knowing about the discipline.¹³

Knowledge of the principles of literary analysis, as well as constant and consistent practice in the skills that underpin it, will enable our students to read the biblical books as a whole. It will assist them in perceiving and understanding *Tanakh* as a discipline and direct them to creating connections between the themes put forth in the *Tanakh* and the themes of great literature, of politics, of history, and of their own lives as well.

I have chosen to focus this inventory on extensive, not intensive, reading skills for several reasons: Much has been written about intensive reading skills (also called close reading).¹⁴ Also, since extensive reading is the more difficult and the more controversial of the two modes, it is the more neglected. Yet the pathway to vibrant classroom discussions of essential questions begins with knowledge and expertise in extensive reading skills.

The listing presented here is not exhaustive. Each one of the skills listed below warrants distinctive deliberation and analysis. This inventory is a work in progress and is constantly being amended in response to feedback from teachers and student interns. I intend for this inventory to serve as a model of pedagogic skills that need to be mastered by Bible teachers so that students will arrive at a "deep and flexible understanding" of the biblical text.

IV. *An Inventory of Skills for Extensive Reading of the Bible*

Skill # 1: "Overviewing" a Text

Overviewing a text is looking at and asking carefully chosen questions about the text as a whole. Overviewing necessitates becoming familiar with the entire narrative. What kinds of questions might we ask when we do extensive reading?

What is this book about? What story does it tell?

Can we ascertain for whom it was written? Why it was written?

What questions does the book raise? Which of these questions would you consider "an essential question"?

How does the text raise these questions? How is the reader meant to ascertain them?

What message or messages does the book convey?

How does the book convey its messages?

What literary tools or language patterns does it employ?

How do the Rabbis relate to this book? Why was the book canonized?

What are the major themes in the book?¹⁵

More book-specific overview questions might be:

¹³ McDiarmid, Ball, Anderson, pp. 193,194

¹⁴ For an excellent typology of close reading skills, see Maria Frankel, "The Reading of Bible in the Elementary Grades of the Day School," Masters thesis, University of Toronto, 1979. For literary analyses of the biblical narrative, see writings of Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Jewish Publication Society of America Basic Books, (Philadelphia, 1981); Shimon Bar-Efrat, Shmuel I and II, *Am Oved*, (Tel-Aviv, 1996);, and David Silber, "Kingship, Samuel, and the Story of Hanna," *Tradition*, (New York, 1988); "The Joseph Narrative: The Reconstruction of a Family," 8 CD's produced by the Drisha Audio Project, The Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, New York; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, Indiana University Press, (Bloomington, 1985); Meir Weiss, *The Bible from Within*, Magnes Press, (Jerusalem, 1984); Yair Zakowitz, *Mavoh Li'Parshanut P'nim-Miqrait*, Reches, (Even-Yehuda, 1992).

¹⁵ See Skill #5 for a separate discussion.

From your reading of *Megillat Esther*, what aspects of the story did you find interesting or puzzling?

What aspects of the Diaspora experience described in the *Megillah* are familiar to you? What aspects unfamiliar?

These questions open up the books of the Bible for discussions that engage students and lead directly to essential questions. Although over-viewing texts may sound obvious to the people inclined to be reading this article, in truth, these kinds of questions are seldom posed in our classrooms.¹⁶ A teacher recently confessed to me that she had not "yet" read the entire narrative of the biblical book that she was teaching, although she was midway through teaching the book. If so, how could she possibly ask any overview questions or any questions that require a broad look at the book?¹⁷

Skill #2: Identifying a Genre

One of the major contributions of the form-critics to Bible scholarship has been the identification and naming of genres.¹⁸ The rabbinic tradition discerned distinct literary styles in the Bible¹⁹, but did not classify or identify specific distinctions.

Biblical literature can be divided according to different kinds of categories. For example, the Torah may be divided into narrative and law, or into prose narrative and poetry. A popular breakdown frequently referred to in literary analyses of the Bible is a fivefold division into the following genres: Narrative, Law, Prophecy, Poetry, and Wisdom Literature. Each one of these genres has dis-

tinctive rules and its own internal dynamic. Within each genre, there are sub-genres. Narrative prose, for example, includes stories, first-person speeches, blessings and curses, laws, lists, genealogies, enumerations, and more.

Identifying genres is part of understanding *Tanakh* as a discipline. It is important for teachers to determine the genre of the text that they are teaching, to know something about the rules of that genre, and to be sensitive to their application.

Let us look for a moment at the first two chapters of Genesis. We are by now familiar with the distinctions between the two "versions" of the creation story presented in chapters one and two of Genesis.²⁰ To my mind, these distinctions are to be found not only in the details of the stories, but in the differences in style between the two chapters. Chapter two is an easy, flowing narrative; chapter one, a highly-charged hierarchical list of the Almighty's daily creations. The distinct style of each of the chapters corresponds in an exquisite manner to the differing content of each.

"Historical" events related in narrative form must be understood differently from similar events related in an elegy.²¹ Repetitions used in poetry should be read differently from repetitions used in prose.²² Each genre underscores the subtle nuances of the text as well as its overt meanings. Genres exist, and it is a mistake to continue to ignore them. Identifying genres and understanding how they work to convey meaning are essential parts of extensive reading. Pedagogically, it is advisable to reveal and explain the genre to students while in the midst of study, and not in an introductory lecture about genres.

¹⁶ I refer here mainly to primary and high-school classrooms, not to *midrashot* and *yeshivot*.

¹⁷ In defense of this teacher and most of her colleagues, her teaching load includes Language Arts and Math in addition to *Tanakh*. Time constraints, excessive teaching loads embracing too many disciplines, and exaggerated expectations of primary school teachers seriously impede even the best teacher's ability to teach any subject in depth.

¹⁸ *Mavo Le-Miqra, Ha'Universitah ha-Petuhah*, (Tel Aviv, 1988-1990), Vol. 2, p. 26.

¹⁹ R. Naftali Zevi Yehudah Berlin (the Netziv), in the introduction to *Ha'ameq Davar*, his commentary on the Torah, refers to all of the Bible as poetry.

²⁰ See Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition* 7:2 (New York, 1965), pp. 5-67.

²¹ Compare the description of Saul's death as related in I Samuel 31 to the story related in II Samuel 2:17.

²² The *midrash* has its own unique understanding of repetition. For example, see *Mekhilta, Shabbat* 86: 1; 87:1 on Exodus 19:3. Also, see Yitzhak Heinemann, *Darkhei Haggadah* (Magnes Press: Jerusalem 1970).

Skill # 3: Choosing a Reading Orientation

A reading orientation²³ refers to the reading approach that one takes when analyzing a text. A teacher should be knowledgeable enough about her subject matter to be able to deliberately choose one, two, or three reading orientations. Teachers are naturally pulled to orientations that they are familiar with from their own days as students. In most cases, they are not even aware that they are teaching an approach that is underpinned by certain assumptions. As a young teacher, I recall being asked by a colleague what was my approach to teaching *Humash*. The question was disconcerting, because I had never been challenged by anyone to articulate my approach to teaching Tanakh. I mumbled something about Rashi and Nehama Leibowitz and fled as quickly as I could.

Teachers need to be exposed to different orientations, so that they may deliberately choose an orientation based on knowledge of various approaches, as well as personal inclination, and not an approach based solely on imitation. Ideally, teachers should be able to work with several different, perhaps even opposing, orientations in order to enrich their teaching, and to develop in their students a "flexible understanding" of the subject matter. It is both respectful and empowering to develop in our students the ability to negotiate between reading orientations.

Some common orientations to teaching Bible are:

(1) *Literary*: An approach that focuses on what the text says and how it says it. It aims to understand the text from "within" and is exemplified by the writings of scholars such as Meir Weiss, Yair Zakowitz, Meir Sternberg, Shimon Bar-Efrat, Robert Alter, and David Silber. Rabbinic/Traditional uses early rabbinic sources, as well as medieval commentators such as Rashi,

Ramban, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam to understand "the plain meaning" of the text (*peshuto shel mikra*). The books of Nehama Leibowitz and Rav Issachar Jacobsen are examples of commentaries that rely heavily on the rabbinic tradition.

(2) *Midrashic*: A particular way of understanding the text based on the *midrashim* of the Sages. *Midrash* is a window to the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual world of the rabbis. In this approach, we read the text from "without." The *midrash*, too, asks "literary" questions, but offers different kinds of answers. A midrashic orientation can uncover an entirely different set of significances and essential questions.

(3) *Historical/ANE*: An approach that gleans from archeological discoveries and from contemporaneous Ancient Near Eastern texts in an attempt to illuminate the Bible. This approach can deepen our understanding of the political, economic, and social world in which the heroes of the Bible found themselves. This orientation may be found in the books and commentaries of Nahum Sarna, Moshe Greenberg, the JPS, M. D. Cassuto, and the *Olam ha-Tanakh*, among others.

(4) *Modern Midrash and Interpretation*: Includes diverse modern approaches, such as Nationalist/Zionist, Secular/Humanist, School of Rav Kook, Modern Midrashic, Feminist, Orthodox/Literary. These orientations can be found in the writings of Yehezkel Kaufman, Zvi Adar, Martin Buber, Shelomo Aviner, Adin Steinsaltz, Aviva Zornberg, Ilana Pardes, Mieke Bal, Yisroel Rosenson, Menachem Leibtag, and the journal *Megadim*.

Teaching varied and sometimes opposing orientations is absorbing and thought provoking. It affords students the

²³In current education literature, the word "orientations" is used to denote religious inclinations as well as varying reading approaches. For example of the former usage, see Sam Chervin, "The Transformation of Personal Orientation to Pedagogic Orientation of Torah Teachers in Jewish Schools: Six Case Studies," unpublished doctoral dissertation. In this paper, I adopt the latter definition.

opportunity to understand the seminal role played by interpretation in all of our readings of the Bible. It allows students to connect the texts with different aspects of their own selves. When teaching and comparing various approaches, essential questions cannot be avoided.

Skill #4: Reading from Different Perspectives

There are alternative ways to read a text. For example, it is possible to read *Megillat Esther* from a political perspective, from a feminist point of view, and as a paradigmatic "Book of the Diaspora." Each perspective uses a different "set of glasses," and is based upon different "interests" and assumptions. Students should be able to appreciate how these interests and assumptions lead us to view textual details in a certain way.

With each perspective, we can ask different kinds of questions. Some questions we might ask when we are wearing a political set of glasses are:

What kind of regime is being described here?

How is that regime structured? What are its components?

How are decisions made in this empire? How are decisions revoked?

Give examples of at least two major decisions, and describe how they were made?

What does this tell us about the Persian Empire?

How many different appellations for court servants are enumerated in the *Megillah*?²⁴

What does this tell us about the nature of this regime?

If we try on feminist glasses, what kinds of questions would we ask if we were reading the *Megillah*?

How does the *Megillah* describe the position of women in the Persian Empire?

Why does the *Megillah* give us so much detail about the beauty contest?

What does the writer of the *Megillah* think about the beauty contest?

Is Vashti portrayed as a heroine or as a fool? Why are we told the Vashti story at all?

What is Zeresh's function? Lady Macbeth? loyal wife? wise pragmatist? evil schemer?

Would she would have obeyed the decree issued by the king at the end of Chapter 1?

What role does Esther's femininity play in this story?

Is this question important to the *Megillah*, or just to us 21st Century creatures?

Or, if we were to read Esther as a paradigmatic book of the Diaspora, we could ask:

Was the Persian exile typical?

Is it meant to be portrayed as archetypal? What characterizes this particular Diaspora?

What elements of it are familiar to you? What elements are strange to you?

Reading texts from different perspectives is challenging, eye-opening, and fun.

²⁴Gavriel Chaim Cohen, "Megillat Esther," in *Iyyunim be-Hamesh Megillot (Ha-Madpis ha-Memshalt*: Jerusalem, 1967) p. 12.

Skill #5: Finding themes and motifs

Finding themes is one of the most important skills that students need to develop in any study of the great books. It enables us to ascertain the deeper meanings of the text. In teaching *Tanakh* it is a skill that both the teachers and the students need to acquire.

How do we do this? We look for patterns and repetitions. We look for key words, key phrases, key places. We look for repeating ideas, words, artifacts, and places. We look at structure. When we look for themes, we are looking for key ideas that form part of a narrative's value system, define its central purpose or underpin the whole narrative structure. We look for motifs, i.e. a recurrent action, word, or object that keeps drawing attention to itself and forms links that help unify a story. Motifs force the reader to think of one passage in terms of another, and help shape the way in which the story is read. Students should be able to identify particular motifs and understand how they influence one's reading of the text. If we learn how to locate themes and motifs in the *Tanakh*, then we learn to read.

Skill #6: Intertextual Reading

An intertextual approach involves examining one text in light of and in comparison to other texts in the Bible. Intertextual reading involves a comparison of motifs, ideas, events, characters between two texts. The reason that this skill is so important is because the Bible is written intertextually.²⁵ Certain texts are written with other texts in mind. In order to enhance our understanding, we must therefore learn to look for and listen to the echoes of other texts.

One example from *Megillat Esther* would be to read the *Megillah* with an eye to the story of King Saul and Agag (1 Sam. 15) and to the story of Joseph.²⁶ An example

from Genesis would be to read the story of the expulsion of Hagar (Genesis 15:21) in comparison to the flight of the Israelites from Egypt.

A particular form of intertextual reading involves identifying story repetition. Thus when studying a particular text, students should be challenged to recall a similar story in some other text in the *Tanakh*. We ask them, "What other story in the *Tanakh* does this remind you of?"

Students should be able to identify a similar episode told or retold in different ways. They should be able to locate the changes, compare them and discuss possible reasons for the alterations.²⁷

V. Conclusion

Each of the skills discussed above leads us to essential questions. They demand and contribute to a deeper understanding of the contents, the structures, and the significances of the Bible on the part of the teacher, and of the student in turn. A teacher adept at these skills cannot avoid the big picture. The skills of extensive reading are also aimed at understanding the *Tanakh* as a discipline, seeing how the text is structured, and how the values are put forth.

In an interview about *The Disciplined Mind*, Gardner states:

In a classroom that focuses on understanding, teachers are clear about the understandings that they value and the understandings they want students to exhibit. In general, these understandings focus on important topics and reveal disciplinary ways of thinking.²⁸

A constant and consistent devotion to extensive reading skills, along with those of close reading, will lead students

²⁵I thank Rabbi David Silber, who first opened my eyes to this wonderful way of reading *Tanakh*.

²⁶David Silber, "The Scroll of Esther," an audiotape from The Drisha Audio Project, N.Y. 1995.

²⁷Lapian and Forgasz, "Introduction," *Reading Esther: A Teacher's Guide*."

²⁸Scherer, p. 13.

to a "deep and flexible understanding of the Bible." This hopefully would redress some of the shortcomings of Bible educations that were discussed in the beginning sections of our paper. The key word for all of us—teachers, students, parents, and community leaders—is "flexible." We need to graduate from *kitah daled* in our understanding of the Bible. Yes, the stories in Genesis are about the sun and the moon and which was created first. They are about snakes and fruit and who said what to whom in the Garden. But they are also about origins and beginnings, about the meaning of creation and creatureliness, about

commandment and obedience, about will and choice, about sin, guilt, and retribution, about false beginnings and fresh starts.

When we do not ask the essential questions with our students, we miss the essential discussions. If we miss the essential discussions about Torah with our students, particularly our high school students, then, to paraphrase our matriarch Rebecca, "Where are we?"