

Torah Mythologies
for Modern Times

Torah-Free
Bar Mitzvahs?

JFASD Michigan on
Church and State

HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

SUMMER 2012

Is the Torah for Us?

Reclaiming
ancient texts



Why Humanistic Judaism?

Humanistic Judaism provides community for people of all backgrounds to explore and shape the evolving meaning of Jewish traditions through a nontheistic, inclusive worldview. It incorporates a humanistic philosophy of life into Jewish liturgy, holiday celebrations, and lifecycle events in place of traditional worship of the supernatural. Founded in the 1960s by a community led by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine, it gives voice to the way most Jews already believe: that ethics and values are human-made, not divinely revealed, and are continually progressing based on reason, knowledge, empathy, and justice.

Today, our faith rests in one another, in the power of people to understand our world and influence it for the better to achieve universal human dignity and steward the future of our planet. For justice to exist in our world, we must create it together. And to gain new knowledge we trust academic and scientific methods over religious dogma. Because our approach is cultural rather than religious, we welcome all to participate without boundaries and we celebrate the diversity of our multiracial, multicultural, and LGBTQ+ households.



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ON THE COVER

B Mitzvah service from the City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in New York.



Interpreting the Torah Through a Humanistic Lens

Like many Humanistic Jews, I have a complicated relationship with the Bible.

I have always been drawn to the epic narratives of Tanakh, but especially the characters, who are often written with great complexity and nuance. And I'm also drawn to the history of how our text has been interpreted and reinterpreted over the centuries, not only by fellow Jews but by Christians, Muslims, and secular scholars as well.

And yet, I can't fault those who have had enough of the book, because I've also seen it be used as a weapon to enforce patriarchy, racism, and heteronormativity. Bad interpretation is part of the problem, but the text itself is problematic too — since much of it is rooted in non-humanistic values.

It is for these reasons that I am enthused about

this issue of *Humanistic Judaism* magazine which focuses on humanistic approaches to the Hebrew Bible, as explored by rabbis and members of our movement:

Rabbi Jonathan R. Cohen argues against two common flawed ways of interpreting Torah: reading it literally, but also reading it as “merely myth.”

Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick encourages readers to look for the human hands that wrote our “contradictory and inconsistent biblical texts” and to appreciate the text as being a “creation of our ancestors” rather than of divine origin.

Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld writes about the importance of remembering the names and stories of the women in Tanakh so that we better understand the oft-forgotten “leadership, resourcefulness, and wisdom” of women in the ancient world.

Rabbi Adam Chalom takes the theme in a more tangible direction, by discussing the different ways that Humanistic Jews have chosen to use (or not use) Torah scrolls in our communities.

Isabel Kaplan (director of the B Mitzvah program of the City Congregation of New York) shares why her congregation has chosen to not require the use of Torah by its B Mitzvah students, and how that has enriched both the students but also the congregation.

And finally, Rabbi Tzemah Yoreh gives us a “peek under the hood” of humanistic biblical interpretation by sharing an excerpt from his book *Why Abraham Murdered Issac*.

Also in this issue are stories from our SHJ-affiliated congregations and more. This is a very full issue, and we deeply appreciate all who contributed to making it possible.

Looking ahead to the fall, our next issue will, in part, be an exploration of the rituals and ritual symbols from a Humanistic Jewish perspective. So, if you have a story to tell, a bit of liturgy that has been meaningful to you, or maybe a critique of a traditional service — we would love to hear from you, and it might make it into either our magazine or as a post on the SHJ.org blog. Please send your submissions to humanisticjudaismmagazine@gmail.com.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James M. Branum". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'J'.

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JFASD Michigan Inaugural Event Addresses Separation of Church and State

BY NOMI JOYRICH

Michigan Jews for a Secular Democracy (JFASD) launched its inaugural panel discussion event on June 2, at Temple Kol Ami, in West Bloomfield. JFASD organizer Nomi Joyrich moderated a rabbinic panel that featured Rabbi Asher Lopatin (Orthodox Rabbi from the AJC/JCRC), Rabbi Blair Nosanwisch (Conservative Rabbi from Congregation Adat Shalom), and Rabbi Brent Gutmann (Reform Rabbi from Temple Kol Ami). The panel discussed Judaism and the separation of religion and state as it relates to questions of reproductive freedom and the use of public money for private education. These seemingly unrelated topics are, in fact, hotly debated around the nation and the topics of current ballot initiatives in Michigan.

Rabbi Gutmann began by explaining that the Jews contributed to the principle of the separation of church and state at the very founding of our nation. “Asher Levy fought for these principles in 1654 (and) George Washington visited the oldest American synagogue, the Touro Congregation, and talked about the right to worship without persecution.”

Rabbi Lopatin stated that “it is contrary to Orthodoxy to want the government to be involved in religion. The way to thrive is to take government out of religion.” Rabbi Nosanwisch stated, “Though I do not believe the separating of religion and state is inherent to our tradition, we must recognize that as a minority group in America we greatly benefit from the separation of church and state.”

The Rabbis explained that there is consensus among Jews that contraception is welcome and that there are times when abortion is not only allowed, but commanded. Rabbi Lopatin talked about the Orthodox legal authority, Moshe Feinstein, who had a narrow view of when abortion is allowed, but warned that although



Americans will do things we greatly object to (e.g., worshipping idols) we do not want to set up a system where the government can restrict such things or our own practices could also be restricted. Lopatin said, “there is a spectrum of beliefs about abortion, but I can’t see how anyone within Orthodoxy



From left: Rabbi Brent Gutmann, Rabbi Asher Lopatin and Rabbi Blair Nosanwisch.

could be in favor of the government getting involved in abortion rights.” Nosanwisch added that “our sources are pretty clear that life does not begin at conception; it is not a life until the baby is emerging in labor.”

Unlike the relatively clear stance Judaism has on contraception and abortion, all of the Rabbis believed that the use of public money for private education was more nuanced. They spoke about the value of a good Jewish education but ultimately agreed that the

interest in promoting social justice and equity in educational funding is compelling. Rabbi Gutmann told the story of a man who was visited by the prophet Elijah until he built a gatehouse that separated his own property from the property of the community. This teaches us that “there is something that is damaging to the redemptive process of the world when we cut ourselves off from that public need.” Rabbi Nosanwisch added that “the disinvestment from the public sphere, and the imagining that the private sphere will care for us like the public sphere is supposed to, is deeply concerning and a deep fear.” Rabbi Lopatin warned us to “be wary of easy money... Jewish schools want to keep their independence. So, they should not be tempted by this pot of money from taxes.” He suggested that instead of taking tax dollars, religious schools should focus on being competitive and find opportunities for their students to integrate with public school students. All three rabbis talked about our society needing to equalize resources and recognize our social contract with one another.

Rabbi Lopatin stressed that we are obliged to protect children and that this is

JFASD continued on page 22

Society for Humanistic Judaism

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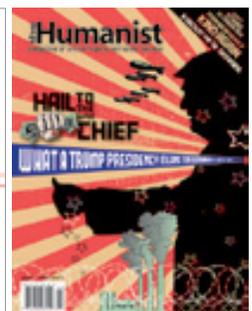
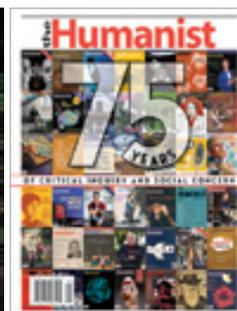
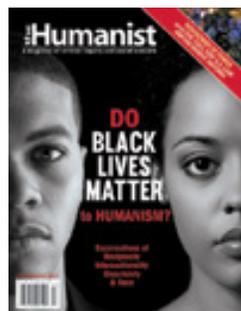
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POINTS OF VIEW

The Torah-less B Mitzvah

BY ISABEL J. KAPLAN

“Does it really count as a B Mitzvah if there isn't a Torah reading?”

The answer to this question is a resounding “yes,” as evidenced by 130 meaningful City Congregation B Mitzvahs over the last 25 years. When the program was conceived by Myrna Baron and Rabbi Peter Schweitzer, TCC's founder and first rabbi, respectively, they felt that a Torah reading might not be the most meaningful route to achieve the goals of the program, which were, in part, to deepen the student's Jewish identity and strengthen their connection to Judaism and the Jewish community in the broadest sense.

Instead, the pair developed the concept of the Major Project, which is the centerpiece of the TCC B Mitzvah service. In addition to presentations on family values, heroes and role models, and community service, each student selects a topic of their choice to research in depth. Any idea that has a connection to Jewish culture, history, observance, or language is acceptable as long as the student emphasizes the Jewish connection. By allowing the student to choose a topic for which they have an interest or passion, the assignment takes on meaning and significance that a Torah portion often does not offer.

As Humanistic Jews, we view the Torah as an important foundational document, but one that does not hold primacy or automatic authority above all other writings that encompass Jewish literature. As such, there is no need to require students to devote a major portion of their B Mitzvah training to study it if it doesn't hold an intrinsic appeal. To be sure, we have had students over the years choose to analyze a Bible story from a humanistic perspective because it aligns with their interests, but not because it aligns with their 13th birthday or is required.

At TCC, the major project is an eight-to-

nine-page research paper or presentation that can take a number of different forms including PowerPoint, video, and creative writing. In all cases, the work is grounded in solid research and genuine student interest. It's not unusual for a student to begin with one topic only to reject it once they learn more, and choose another. Each student meets with the rabbi to discuss potential topics and resources for information. Once a topic is approved, the student works with their mentor to break down the topic into manageable parts and proceeds to develop their ideas.

While the topics vary widely, they often fall into categories such as: Jews from various parts of the world (Brooklyn, Ireland, Morocco) that have meaning to the student because of their own family histories or travels; Jews in various professions (scientists, inventors, musicians, artists, politicians, philosophers, writers, composers, comedians); the history and details of iconic Jewish foods

(gefilte fish, challah, delicatessen foods, matza balls, Sephardic and Ashkenazi cuisines); historical events in the life of the Jewish people (Masada, various aspects of the Holocaust, Ladino Jews); aspects of Jewish observance (kashrut, comparing denominations, elements of Humanistic Judaism); historical and current events in Israel (biblical criticism, Israeli-Palestinian conflict); and aspects of Jewish identity (interfaith and interracial experiences, genealogy discoveries, intersectionality). (To see the range of topics that have been researched, or to read some presentations, go to <https://citycongregation.org/bar-and-bat-mitzvah-major-project-papers/>)

In their final papers, the students reflect on their experiences going through their B Mitzvah preparation, and they often comment on the sense of accomplishment they feel having delved deeply into a topic and becoming an expert. They can achieve a surprising level of mastery and, indeed, become our teachers that day. 🌟

PHOTO BY KATE MILFORD



B Mitzvah of Isabel Lubinsky at the City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism.

COMMUNITY NEWS

MINNEAPOLIS, MN | OR EMET MINNESOTA CONGREGATION FOR HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

Volunteers Honored at Or Emet

Or Emet held our annual meeting and end of year picnic in person on June 5th for the first time in two years. It was great to be able to socialize with so many members in-person after so long.

At the annual meeting, our membership approved the budget for 2022-23, re-elected the Executive Committee, and honored volunteers, including Arty Dorman who is retiring as the Jewish Cultural Sunday School (JCSS) director. All of our volunteers received cards featuring beautiful artwork by long-time member and volunteer Jane Katz, as well as pollinator-friendly wildflower seeds for planting. It is telling that over forty individuals were honored for their volunteer efforts, representing close to two-thirds of our member households. And a volunteer recruitment

push resulted in even more new volunteers signing up to assist with our many committees.

At the gathering, we also welcomed Molly Phipps, the incoming JCSS school director who will be taking over this summer, and we heard from Rabbinic Candidate Eva Cohen who shared about her progress towards ordination in 2023 and plans for the coming year.

This summer we will celebrate five B Mitzvah ceremonies in three months (some postponed from last year) and hold a mid-summer Havdalah ceremony at the end of July. Our regular program year will resume after Labor Day with a new round of monthly Shabbat services and Jewish Cultural Sunday School sessions.

– Allan Malkis



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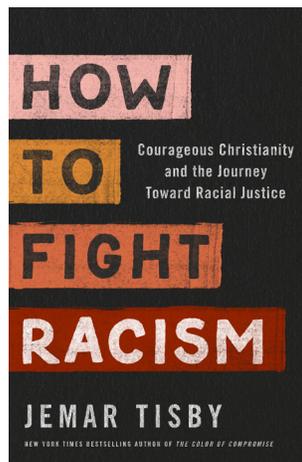
Molly Phipps, Ralph Busby and family at the annual meeting

Journey to Social Justice

Well-aware of societal inequities, we at CHJ of Fairfield County CT continuously strive to make a more just world. To that end we held a 3-part program to educate ourselves about the history of racism in America and the search for racial justice. Although entire courses and a wealth of books cover this topic, our program offered the chance to begin a journey, so we called it, “CHJ Journey to Social Justice.”

The interactive program loosely followed a framework called the “arc of fighting racism,” by historian and author of *How to Fight Racism* Dr. Jemar Tisby. Each part included learning and breakout discussions.

In part 1, entitled “Awareness,” we scratched the surface of the history of racism and its impacts. We also watched a video called “Segregation by Design,” that focused on the American history of housing and banking discrimination against Blacks, which perpetuated the wealth gap (video



available on YouTube).

In part 2, “Relationships,” we engaged the storytelling group Ubuntu in a performance that showed what it’s like to face discrimination. Hearing their complex and emotional stories put a human face on racism and gave us deeper empathy for people.

In part 3, “Commitment,” we pondered what each of us might do to make a difference. CHJ members spoke about what commitment looks like in their workplace and lives. We also watched a free training from RightToBe.org called

“Bystander Intervention,” which taught us 5 things anybody can do when they see harassment in public places.

And finally we discussed next steps as individuals and a community; we intend to keep learning about systemic racism and our role in it to do better.

– Rachel Dreyfus

CHJ Sarasota seeks FEMA Grant

Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Sarasota, Florida is working with the Unity Church we rent from, to secure a national FEMA grant for building security hardening, requesting cameras, better lighting, better doors, and security film for glass doors and windows. Our request goes in next week, with some reply expected in the Fall of 2022, with construction in 2023, we hope.

We are also planning for live High Holiday services, Covid permitting.

– Margo Moore,
CHJ-Sarasota President



New Monthly Listing of Events in Our Movement

The Society for Humanistic Judaism is publishing a new monthly bulletin, *This Month in Humanistic Judaism*.

The focus of each issue will be a list of scheduled events for the upcoming month from SHJ-affiliated congregations and organizations, but we will also be sharing news headlines, recent blog posts, Jewish holiday resources (including recipes), action alerts from Jews for a Secular Democracy (JFASD), B Mitzvah essays and presentations, as well as other content from the movement of Humanistic Judaism, and the broader worlds of Humanism and Judaism.

Each issue can be found online at: <https://shj.org/tag/this-month-in-hj>, with new issues being available on the first of each month.

If your community has an upcoming event that you would like to see featured in This Month, please email humanisticjudaismmagazine@gmail.com. Announcements need to be received no later than the 25th of the preceding month; for instance, if you have an event scheduled for November, we would need the announcement for it no later than October 25th.

Society for
**Humanistic
Judaism**

To Have and to Hold?

Torah Scrolls in Humanistic Judaism

BY RABBI ADAM CHALOM

When I began work as a rabbinic intern at the Birmingham Temple (now Congregation for Humanistic Judaism of Metro Detroit) in 1997, while Sherwin Wine was still the rabbi, one of my responsibilities was giving the building tour. A prominent and consciously-chosen design feature is the sculpture of the Hebrew word *ahdam* [humanity] where a Torah ark might have been in the meeting room (aka “sanctuary”), and a special niche in the Temple Library opposite the meeting room where the congregation’s Torah lived. The Torah’s cover also had the word *ahdam*, and no ornate breastplate or crown. The message was clear: while an ancient and important book, the Torah was written by human authors and thus belonged in a library rather than as a central focus of worship. While I agreed with the general premise, I also realized that, having grown up at that same congregation, I could not recall ever having seen the Torah scroll moved from its place or be opened. Having attended Sunday School and Hebrew school from kindergarten through 12th grade, had I really never seen the inside of a Torah scroll? Birmingham Temple B Mitzvah students focused on heroes rather than Torah readings, and even if their mitzvah Hebrew reading was from the Torah, the text was placed in their speech rather than read from the scroll. And then I noticed the cobwebs on that scroll in the library.



Torah in the library of CHJ of Metro Detroit.

When I began working as Rabbi of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in 2004, that congregation had a markedly different approach to the Torah scroll. Kol Hadash is a successor community to Congregation Beth Or, which had been Humanistic under Rabbi Daniel Friedman since 1969. At both communities, the Torah scroll was a regular feature at High Holiday services, including readings from the scroll itself, and Kol Hadash B Mitzvah students could choose either a topic or a Torah reading and commentary, including reading from the scroll, for their presentation. The congregation did not parade the scrolls around or kiss them or bow to them during services (all traditional rituals seen from Reform to Orthodox congregations), they did stand when the

scrolls were removed and stood again after the reading for their return to the ark. One year early in my tenure, I simply *forgot* to ask people to stand as we returned the scrolls, and multiple people shared their concerns with the change after the service!

Both communities were and are fully committed to Humanistic Judaism: they agreed that the Torah was written by people, that it does not command obedience beyond the rules and practices that already agree with our values and lifestyles, and that symbolic behavior matters so we do not perform ritual practices for the sake of Jewish tradition if they conflict with our beliefs. They agreed that parading or bowing or kissing the scrolls felt like “Torahlatory,” worshipping the object like an idol. Where Birmingham Temple and Beth Or/Kol Hadash diverged was over the appropriate intellectually-consistent use and Jewish experiences.

For over a decade until his untimely death in 2007, Rabbi Wine led a regular Bible study class in that same Birmingham Temple library with the Torah scroll. My father was amused to perplex his more religious friends, aware of his theological skepticism, by telling them he couldn’t play tennis on Saturday morning because he had Shabbat Bible study! For Rabbi Wine, the Hebrew Bible and the Torah specifically were rich sources of historical evidence for when specific passages were written and different ideological trends in Judean life (see *A Provocative People: A Secular History of the Jews* by Sherwin Wine, A. Chalom ed., chapters 1-3), but they were problematic as literature and downright objectionable as moral sources. For example, given that he rejected the Torah’s dietary, slavery and ritual purity laws, he did not feel it honest to claim to follow “love your neighbor as yourself” *because* it appears in Leviticus; he lived that ethic because it was morally right in and of itself and *not* because it appeared in the Torah. For those reasons, the Torah was not seen as a symbol of knowledge or positive values and was better left in the library. One result of this was a generation of Humanistic Jewish youth that never saw what the inside of a Torah scroll looked like, or felt how heavy carrying the scrolls could be.

At both Beth Or and Kol Hadash, on the other hand, limited use of the Torah scroll as symbolic of early sources of wisdom was accepted. Here is a common B Mitzvah passage by Rabbi Friedman, read before the Torah was removed.

The Torah symbolizes many things: the wisdom of the ages; the struggles and successes of generations of Jews in their search for meaning and purpose in life itself.

No person can give wisdom to another. Wisdom and meaning must be discovered by each of us in our own time, in our own way.

We can encourage one another in this sacred enterprise. Family members especially give the gift of encouragement and love. One generation passes the gift to the next. Each one of us receives the gift with thanks and love.

The family of the mitzvah student are then invited to join the student at the ark, where the Torah scroll is handed from rabbi to parent, and then from parent to child with the lines:

Family: *We give you this gift with love and encouragement.*

B Mitzvah: *I give you this gift with thanks and with love.*

While the content of the scroll is read from the scroll every week, it is brought into Sunday School classrooms around Simchat Torah for “Torah show and tell” so students can see what it looks like up close, so no cobwebs on this scroll.

This is not to say that every member of each congregation has consistently preferred that congregation’s practice! I am sure there were members of The Birmingham Temple who might have liked a Torah transmission moment, and I know there are members of Kol Hadash who are still uncomfortable standing for the Torah scroll as “too religious.” In fact, when Kol Hadash formed in 2001, there was a serious debate as to whether they would even have a Torah scroll at all!

Just as the doorpost *mezuzah* is slanted to compromise between one rabbi who wanted it vertical and another who wanted it horizontal, I honor my roots and lived experience in both Humanistic Jewish Torah scroll for B Mitzvahs and High Holidays, but we also place other books of Jewish wisdom and literature, both traditional and modern, inside of Torah ark to demonstrate wider than only our five oldest books. Our ark also holds the Chan and those other volumes—once, when reading from an e-book I placed my Kindle e-reader into the ark and took it out to read from Nathan Englander’s *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*.

Our students can still choose a Torah Mitzvah presentations, but in either case the ark is not a place of blessing, and that one to time I choose a High Holiday Torah passages so the congregation does not have to use an older technology for the cultural experience: a *shofar* instead of a trumpet, Hanukkah candles instead of LEDs or a smartphone.

Here is a B Mitzvah passage I wrote for Kol Hadash to be read before removing the scroll from the ark:

The Torah is but one symbol of humanity’s ongoing quest for knowledge.

Service to our ancestors is not servitude to their authority. Celebrating modern insights is not betrayal of the past. In its highest forms, human knowledge has always balanced traditional wisdom with new ideas. Insight without memory would re-create the wheel in every generation. Tradition without new ideas is a prison of the past, blocking growth and development and freedom for the sake of predictability.

We celebrate inherited wisdom with the awareness that it is our starting point, not our conclusion. Just as many different species may have a common evolutionary ancestor, so too do today’s Judaisms look to the Torah as a symbol of their origins.

Some years ago, a member of an online discussion forum asked for ideas for a traditional synagogue in place of the traditional text. I suggested, recited from Reform to Orthodox practice, reflects the traditional ideology of divine authorship of the Torah. With such a belief, the ritual practices I call “Torahlatry” might make some sense.

Baruch atta Aedonai, eloheinu melech ha-alam, asher ha-char-banu mee-temam lanu et torato. Baruch atta Adonai, notein hatorah. Blessed are you YHWH, our god King of the world, who chose us from all the nations and gave us his Torah. Blessed are you YHWH, giver of Torah.

To reflect both our abiding connection to our ancestors’ cultural creativity and our own beliefs about the Torah, I suggested this adaptation instead:

Baruch Atah Yisrael, ameinu mikol bnay Adam, asher horish lanu tarbut uzmanim v’natan lanu et torato. Baruch Atah Yisrael, notein hatorah. Blessed are you, Israel, our people from all humanity that bequeathed to us culture and festivals and gave us its Torah. Blessed are you Israel, giver

If a Humanistic Rabbi can use a Torah passage to explore Jewish history, their own values (in agreement or in contrast), and Jewish storytelling, so too can nascent Jewish adults. After all, they are heirs to Jewish culture, and the Torah scroll, both content and form, is part of their inheritance. If the Jewish people created the Torah, then our balanced use of it for our own purposes is entirely appropriate. ✨

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Thank you for your interest in Humanistic Judaism!

Torah as Myth

The two great mistakes

BY RABBI JONATHAN R. COHEN

For those who do not hold prior religious assumptions, it is not hard to conclude that the Torah is, in all likelihood, ancient myth rather than accurate history. Perhaps some of the Torah's stories have historical kernels behind them, and some of its laws may well have governed ancient Israelite life at certain points, but for many reasons, it is doubtful that the Torah's narrative storyline possesses what scholars call "historicity" – that the events described in the text actually occurred as described. Unlike certain later parts of the Hebrew Bible, which also include the Prophets and Writings, there is essentially no archeological evidence supporting the Torah's narrative. Even more basically, the Torah's storyline involves numerous supernatural acts, such as God creating the world in six days (contradicted by modern science), God sending the angel of death to smite all of Egypt's firstborn in a single night, the Earth opening to swallow a group that rebelled against Moses, and a donkey who speaks. There are other reasons to be skeptical of the Torah's historicity as well, such as parallels between parts of the Torah and ancient texts from other cultures, the mythic naming of characters, and, quite significantly, insights from the scholarly field of biblical criticism indicating that Torah was very likely redacted from multiple antecedent sources.

The question then arises, "So what?" What difference does it make if the text is

at root ancient myth rather than history? There are many ramifications, both for Judaism and for our world in general. Such ramifications range from religious matters of observance, belief (e.g., theology), liturgy, and scriptural interpretation to contemporary policy debates throughout our world, especially but not exclusively within the State of Israel. Must a Jew observe the Sabbath? Should capital punishment be legal? Should insurers pay for transgender medical treatment? Many look to the Bible to answer such questions. As the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and to a lesser extent Islam, were built atop

the Torah (e.g., Christian Bibles start with the Pentateuch), it is not surprising that whether the events the Torah describes happened does matter, both for Judaism and for our world as a whole.

I cannot here examine at length the many ways the Torah's historicity makes a difference (in a book I am now writing, *If the Bible is Fiction*, I take on that task), rather let me describe what I would call the two great, intellectual mistakes that arise if the Torah is at root fictional rather than factual: the first is taking the Torah as literally true, the second is dismissing the Torah as merely myth.

If the Torah is myth, what is wrong with

PHOTO BY TONY BAGGETT / ADOBE STOCK



Sculpture of Moses
by Michaelangelo

Women in the Bible

Remembering their names and stories

BY RABBI JODI KORNFELD

Women in the Bible are generally referred to, not by name, but by their status as someone's wife, mother, sister, or daughter - if they are mentioned at all. According to one analysis "that looked at the Hebrew Bible and also Hebrew inscriptions, the total [number of names] came to 1426 names, with 1315 belonging to men and 111 to women;" women's names, therefore, represent between 5.5 and 8 percent of the total.

When a woman is named in the text, the reader should take notice because it is an exceptional and uncommon situation. While the Bible can be frustratingly short on details, particularly where women are concerned, there nonetheless are several who play significant roles in demonstrating leadership, resourcefulness, and wisdom, not only in the time that the biblical writer wrote of them, but illustratively for readers today. Three are identified as prophetesses, and two others are examples of problem-solvers who are also inter-textually related by the reference to the *beit em* or "mother's house."

Miriam is mentioned seven times in the Bible by name, and once more by implication. Her story arc begins as a child or perhaps a young adult as she watches her baby brother Moses traverse the Nile River in a basket until he is retrieved by Pharaoh's daughter (another woman without a

name). (Ex. 2) Miriam has the audacity and foresight to approach her in the interest of ensuring Moses' safety and security. She next emerges at the Sea of Reeds (Ex. 14:2) following the Israelites' departure from Egypt and the drowning of the pursuing Egyptian army. There, Miriam identified as a prophetess *ha-n'viah*, leads the women in song and dance in the victory song thought to be one of the oldest pieces of biblical text. The age of the text is relevant here, for the evidence it provides of the significance of a female leader in ancient times. When Miriam is next referenced, it is in the wilderness as she asserts her authority as a prophetess, challenging the apparent exclusivity of Moses. Something in her formal status seems to have changed from the express recognition as a prophetess in Exodus, and the need to reclaim that title in Numbers. Both Miriam and the collective recognize her authority and importance. Miriam's formal story arc concludes with her death. (Num. 20:1)

From her childhood through her death, Miriam is portrayed, albeit sparsely, as influential, active, and important to her community and the development of the nation. She is willing to confront authority, first in the form of Pharaoh's daughter to further both the value of family relationships and the future nation, (Ex. 2:4), and then in the form of Moses and God, in support of

the community and her relationship to it. (Num.12) It is not hyperbolic to suggest that Miriam is the character who acts to ensure the very survival of God's own prophet and the emerging nation. In Numbers 12, "Miriam is challenging Moses for some very powerful authority: The right to speak to the people on behalf of God." Her importance to the community and her leadership position is evident in the text itself, as demonstrated by the closing line that "the people did not march on until Miriam was readmitted" (Num. 12:15) from her punitive seclusion due to the infliction of leprosy. Likewise, when she leads the women in song and dance, "all the women went out after her." (Ex. 15:21) Carol Meyers suggests that this incident of playing, singing, and dancing at the Sea of Reeds demonstrates that Miriam occupied a position of leadership not fully described in the text. "If Miriam in fact was a dominant figure in such a [women's] performance group, her leadership abilities would easily have transcended the female context and exerted themselves in other community settings."

Deborah too is a prophetess whose story is told in Judges 4:4-10 and the Song of Deborah in Judges 5. Though described as the "wife of Lappidoth," the Hebrew *eyeshet lapidote* can be translated as "fiery woman," rendering her marital status unclear. Deborah's story arc lacks narrative



details. In a spare six verses depicting strength and influence, the text tells that “she led Israel” and that “the Israelites would come to her for decisions.” (Judges 4:5) She is depicted in dialogue with Barak whom she summoned to tell him that, at God’s command, he is to go into battle and when he is to do so. (Judges 4:6-10, 12-16) The Song of Deborah, like Miriam’s Song of the Sea, is considered one of the oldest biblical texts. This again evidences the role women played in ancient times that could not be written out of the text. Susan Ackerman’s leadership model, noting that “later Israelite tradition remembers Deborah foremost as having gifts in counsel,” and her prosaic biographer in Judges 4 describes her primarily as a leader and a judge for the Israelites “who sought her under her palm in Ephraim (4:4-5) . . .”

The third prophetess is Huldah about whom the text tells little. She has both a name and a title, although the text does not mention her as a woman. Her story relates to the need for authentication of a newly discovered scroll that will affect the future of the nation. The scroll of the Teaching is brought to her for validation, and she is consulted by the priest at the request of the king, Josiah. This sequence of transmission is significant from a gender perspective. Neither the priest nor the male king has the experience or authority to do so themselves. Huldah responds in 2 Kings 22:16-20 (and 2 Chron. 34:24-28), conveying God’s message that His wrath will be poured out on Judah for having strayed from the law. She lived in Mishne (2 Kings 22:14) in Jerusalem known as a place of education and was a teacher. The task she is given indicates she was literate and able to read. Huldah’s leadership depicted entirely by implication, is the result of her reforms, and with them the advancement of the national and collective agenda.

Rebekah’s story is contained in four chapters of Genesis, 24-28, three of which are relevant here. In Genesis 24, Abraham’s servant, who has been sent to find a wife for Isaac, spots Rebekah. She proffers water not only to the servant, but to his camels as well. Rebekah engages the servant in conversation, displaying no reticence to speak. She accepts the gifts he has brought, offers home hospitality to

him, and relates all that has happened in this interaction to her mother’s household, the *beit em*. After deliberating there for ten days, Rebekah gives her explicit assent to his explicit request that she go with him to be a wife to his master’s son. She receives the blessing that is parallel to that given to Abraham but whereas Abraham’s blessing comes from his community. (Compare Gen. 12:2, 24:60) In Genesis 25, Rebekah receives a prophecy direct from God that she will become pregnant with twins who will form the younger. Unlike the three prophetesses, the text makes Rebekah the only woman to be named in the text.

The final episode in the Rebekah narrative is found in Genesis 27 and 28. The plan, often derisively referred to as a deception, to insure that Jacob, not Esau, receives the birthright given to the first-born from Isaac, she will prepare a meal for Isaac, and have him wear goat skins on his arms so he can feel hairy like his father. The goal is to trick the first-born, bringing the meal, and receiving the blessing. Once Jacob receives Isaac’s blessing, Rebekah again acts decisively to make sure Jacob is protected. She is the character that advances the narrative (as seen through the use of many verbs in her story) and ultimately the plan to ensure Jacob’s safety and security.

Ruth’s story tells of her leaving her home in Moab with Naomi on a journey that will be fraught with danger. Two women traveling alone were inherently at risk at that time. Arriving in Bethlehem with Naomi, it is left to her to find a place of refuge. She appears to take her instruction from Naomi, but with careful wordplay when reporting on events back to her, it is clear that she is protective of Naomi and has made strategic decisions of her own. When dealing with Boaz, she asserts herself, making it apparent that she is not going to be just one of his servants. (Ruth 2:13) She will not put herself down and ultimately will use him in order to acquire the land coming to Naomi. Her leadership skills on a micro

level led to Naomi’s safety and security, and her place in Israelite society. She made the male system for land ownership work for them both. On the macro level, her skills have national implications. She becomes the great-grandmother of King David so she is the character who is closely aligned with the national narrative. Ruth demonstrates that she possesses great loyalty not only to Naomi, but also to her legacy as a Moabite woman. Through industriousness and resourcefulness, she redefines what it means to be a Moabite woman, who thought of herself as “productive, and dangerous.”

Rebekah and Ruth also share two of the same characteristics as Naomi: they both live in the *beit em*, or mother’s house. (Gen. 24:28; Ruth 1:8; the other two being in Song of Songs) The *beit em* is the place where Rebekah (actually) and Ruth (implicitly as she was urged to return there), spent time in relation to a life passage, where one generation of women likely taught the next. The text speaks of making and making one’s way in the world. Carol Meyers writes:

“The appropriateness of ‘mother’s house’ being associated with the woman who teaches can be justified on the basis of anthropological paradigms considered in relation to biblical data, as well as by recognition of the relevance of certain wisdom texts in Proverbs. The readings of ancient and modern biblical scholarship should not be allowed to blur the way in which woman/mother, household and instruction are linked in the MT [Masoretic Text].”

The importance of this intergenerational sharing of skills and wisdom stands in stark contrast to a home without a mother that is the story of Jephthah’s daughter shows. (Judges 11)

Women’s voices are represented in the Bible; one only needs to listen for them. Their names when given should be remembered. Their stories not only teach something about women’s leadership, resourcefulness and wisdom in the ancient world, but they can educate and inspire our own. ✨

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Understanding Ancient Texts

The things that you're liable to think about the bible ain't necessarily so

BY RABBI JEFFREY L. FALICK

My favorite articulation of biblical skepticism is not found in any essay on religious belief. It's a product of the American stage, a song performed by the character Sporting Life in George and Ira Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*. "It ain't necessarily so," he intones in the opening stanza. "The things that we're liable to read in the Bible, ain't necessarily so." I only recently realized that – while the story may be set in a 1930's Black community in South Carolina – the Gershwins quite purposefully set those words to a common melody for the Jewish blessing over the Torah. Before embracing Humanistic Judaism, I chanted it uncountable times. Now I can't help musing over what would have happened if just once I would have substituted its pieties with my own chanted announcement that what we were about to read "ain't necessarily so!"

This little flight of fantasy does not spring from a disregard for the Bible. I am both a student and teacher of its texts, dismayed by how much of what people are learning about the Bible "ain't necessarily so." As a Humanistic rabbi, it's not my place to tell religious Jews to disregard their attachments to it as a source of eternally relevant wisdom. Yet I can't help being concerned that their claims about its enduring values are a big part of what turns people like us away from

it. We are, after all, the rebellious ones, and claims about the Bible stand very much at the center of our dissent.

Though I don't frequently attend conventional synagogue services, on the odd occasion when I do – and especially during the Torah service – I become intensely aware of this. That's when the congregation lovingly removes the scroll from its ark, raising it reverently for all to see. It is, for them, an *Etz Chaim* – a Tree of Life. For Jews like us, not so much. Consequently, we head off in the opposite direction, often rejecting it entirely. Yet when we do, we perform a disservice to our Jewish journeys and ourselves because the Bible does not belong to the God-worshiping segments of the Jewish people alone. It is our inheritance, too.

Though our ways of approaching it will not include pious veneration, the Bible remains as central to our Jewish heritage as it is for all committed Jews. It is the founding document of Jewish history, the singular body of literature that we all share, and the nexus of all Judaisms past and present. And, somewhat delightfully, when we explore it with our secular sensibilities, we are exposed to layers of meaning only recently uncovered by modern scholars who are discovering long-untold stories behind the Bible's tales (and laws and teachings

and more). For all these reasons and more, I have committed myself to the goal of increasing biblical literacy among Secular Humanistic Jews.

One of the challenges that comes with this undertaking has been figuring out just where to begin! Sadly, even after they clear the hurdle of accepting its significance to our Jewish lives, there remains the problem of biblical ignorance. Though there are some Humanistic Jews with a good background in the literature, most know very little apart from barely-remembered and out-of-context Sunday school stories. For this reason, I always choose to begin with the most basic question: What do we mean when we talk about the Bible?

Though people tend to speak about it as a unified text, it is absolutely not. It is an anthology, a collection of twenty-four books with texts that may date as far back as 3,200 years. These books feature a variety of styles. Much of it is prosaic narrative, but a great deal of it also consists of poetry, proverbs, exhortations, and legalisms, to name just a few. Not one of the books is the work of a single author. And many – notably the five books of the Torah itself – contain multiple sources that underwent years of supplementation and editorial revisions before reaching their final forms. All the Bible's books were altered or modified in one way or another as they passed through editorial and scribal hands.

For most of Jewish (and Christian) history, few people recognized the complexities of the Bible's composition, failing to notice that there had been any serious editorial process at all. In the Torah, for example, they saw only a well-organized chronological account opening with the creation of the world and concluding with the death of Moses on the eve of the Israelite conquest of the Promised Land. Tradition generally ascribed authorship of the Torah to Moses himself. In the 17th century, Jewish philosopher Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza challenged this claim in the first truly critical analysis of the Torah's authorship. Others would follow in time.

What motivated the academics who studied of the Torah (and the entire Bible)

was a desire to explain its many irregularities, including numerous contradictions and repetitions and chronological aberrations. In fact, these issues were well known to pre-modern scholars of the text. Spinoza even cites some. Yet far from inviting earlier interpreters to treat the text as a human-created document that, like us, they saw in its anomalies a divine invitation to explore deeper secrets.

Even today, when many believers (including some Modern Orthodox) have finally accepted human authorship of the texts, religious Jews prefer to take a dualistic approach to the text. They want to consider the Bible to be divinely inspired and wholly human. This is the old Yiddish saying *goyt un tuchus* – are attempting to dance at two weddings with one tuchus. This allows them to continue to search the Bible for modern divine guidance even as they also acknowledge the text's immoralities clearly reveal the flawed moral reasoning of the ancient human beings who wrote it.

Humanistic Jews (and other secular people) are united by a different two-fold approach. We do not deny that the Torah and rest of the Bible are a product of Israelite-Jewish unholy hands. We simply reject the idea that we must continue treating them as a “living text” to which we can turn for guidance. This is why we reject the practice of “kasherizing” it through clever interpretative tricks that jam meanings into any lessons we desire.

However, I should note that the idea of divine provenance does not make the text entirely irrelevant to modern discourse. Even as a Humanistic rabbi, I use it all the time. For example, when I advocate for immigrant rights, I talk about the text’s injunction upon treating strangers with kindness and love. I offer those texts not as a moral anchor or imperative, but as a reminder that those who recorded the ancient Jewish experience valued the acceptance of newcomers.

When it comes to that issue, I’m grateful to have evidence that our forebears hit the correct moral mark. Frequently they did not. Had the Torah instead abhorred the stranger, I would advocate for immigrants just the same. Still, when modern values do correspond to the ancient teachings of

to the long story of our people is one of the most important. I hope that the completely worldly approach that I’ve outlined so far will answer, in part, questions of the Bible’s relevance to Humanistic Jews. My unfamiliarity with the text continues to be a challenge, but I’m determined to make it as understandable as possible. And, if anything, modern secular scholarship has made it more so. Today it’s no longer just a matter of finding the text’s meaning, but of understanding its multiple voices, editorial manipulations, and the ongoing archeological discoveries that – as often as not – cast entire segments of its narrative in a new light. Fortunately, there is today a cottage industry of introductions to the Bible, from online lectures to introductory texts.

Like many who grew up in a largely secular Jewish home, my own background in biblical texts was pretty sketchy when I

simultaneously) to the critical approach at the Reform rabbinical seminary. There were enough Cliff’s Notes-type summaries for me to become familiar with the narrative, but after that, it was the critical approach that excited me the most, because once I had a better grasp of the stories, I wanted to know just why the stories were told! Take for example the story of the exodus from Egypt. Most rational people can easily see that the biblical story is mostly fiction. What I wanted to know was why a people so clearly rooted in Canaan/Israel – most scholars accept that the Israelites were indigenous to the land – would have been so excited by conquering a land that they already lived! Is there a grain of truth to the story?

As I consulted the ever-evolving evidence produced by secular scholarship, I felt the earliest rays of my then-nascent Humanistic Judaism breaking through. Yet even as I gained more proficiency at discovering how the texts came together, my rabbinical seminary professors clamped down on my enthusiasm, admonishing me that it was not my role as a rabbi to teach their academic approach. That was the job

of the scholar, not the rabbi. I was told that my role was to teach the people the values of the text, not to question its authenticity. I was told that my role was to teach the people the values of the text, not to question its authenticity.

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of professors. My task was to eke life lessons from the text, to teach (indoctrinate?) Jews about the “living Torah.”

Ultimately, Humanistic Judaism set me free to teach the texts as I see fit. Since joining the movement, I’ve given talks, lectures, and lectures about the evolution of God, the authors and sources of the Bible, and the real stories behind its stories. These have been popular at my own congregation and in the wider community. I’ll share just two short examples of the kind of material I cover.

Long before I ever learned about secular and academic approaches to the Bible, back when I was a teen, it was the story of Noah’s Ark that bothered me the most. It wasn’t the narrative about God’s destruction of all life – though I’ve always been disturbed by that – it was the fact that I didn’t seem to fully understand it! Why would God tell a story that they (the rabbis, kabbalists, young children?)

Though we’re told that the Torah is easily comprehensible to a child, the Torah’s account of the flood is overly complicated and internally contradictory. You can experience this for yourself by reading Genesis 6:5 – 9:17 and attempting to answer the following questions: How many pairs of each animal does Noah bring aboard the ark? Where did the water come from? How long did the flood last? Why are there two endings to the story? While you’re contemplating these questions, you might also notice how needlessly repetitive is the whole thing. The flood starts with the ark, the ark is built twice, multiple birds are sent out to do the same job, and more. Why would any author write a story that way?

Biblical criticism supplied the answer. The account of Noah’s ark is not one text, but two versions of the same story written many hundreds of years apart. Rather than present them separately, the final editors chose to blend them into one another. They did this despite the fact that the writers of each version had very different ideas about

the deity and much else. Though I’ve taught this many times now, I never cease to revel in my students’ excitement when they discover the multiple voices in the text and see for themselves the evolution of ancient Israelite religion. This supposedly simple tale lies complex transformations of our people. Additionally, the story also provides a great introduction to the Documentary Hypothesis, a prominent theory of the Bible’s composition. The four principal sources – originating in

different times and places – that contribute to the bulk of the Torah’s texts. The Golden Calf found in Exodus 32. Tradition regards it as the Israelites’ (the Jews’) single greatest rebellion against God. And yet, those who look past the Torah to narratives of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (1 Kings 12) know that none other than King Jeroboam, the first leader of the secessionist northern kingdom of Israel, built not one but two golden calves. He conveniently located them at two easily accessible worship spots within his new kingdom, doing so with the

idea that this would keep the people loyal to their new king.

Most Biblical critics believe that the Exodus story about the sin of the Golden Calf was invented by writers who were opposed to the secession of the northern kingdom. It was their way of shaming King Jeroboam, accusing him of re-committing what was supposedly the worst sin in his people’s history. This critique is supported by an understanding of the iconography. Archeological discoveries, for example, revealed that in King Jeroboam’s time and earlier golden calves were all the rage everywhere. Yet outside of the fictional account in Exodus, they don’t represent a deity, but a deity’s throne. These discoveries strongly suggest that when King Jeroboam erected his golden calves it was a culturally normative thing to do and that he had no awareness of the Exodus tale, which did not yet exist. I take a great deal of pleasure in revealing to students the truth about these events in Israelite history. The real story is not that some rebellious Jews died for worshipping an idol. The real story is that a rebellious king did a perfectly normal thing in the midst of his reign and that his opponents retroactively made a similar fictional instance of it into the Great Sin.

The stories behind these and so many more open a very wide door to biblical relevance for Humanistic Jews. Together they restore the Bible to our very human hands and sensibilities. Where the assumption of divine inspiration fails to capture our imagination, the real stories revealed in so many contradictory and inconsistent biblical texts, reminds us that the Bible is, above all, the creation of our ancestors. Today we have the modern tools to understand this. I invite you to learn more. It is no less our inheritance simply because we reject its supernatural claims. In fact, it may be more so. ✨

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BOOKS

An Excerpt from *Why Abraham Murdered Issac*

BY RABBI TZEMAH YOREH

Genesis 20 begins with Abraham the wanderer arriving in the city of Gerar with his beautiful wife. This is indeed a beginning, but it is also the beginning: It is the first time E, the first author of the Five Books of Moses, ground zero of the biblical story, appears on the scene. How do we know that this is the first story?

Well, for starters, this source likes to use the name “Elohim” for the name of the deity (most of the earlier Abraham stories use the name Yhwh). This source focuses on the fear of God as a theme, and is an extraordinarily terse storyteller, as you can see from these first three verses:

20:1 Abraham traveled toward the land of the South, and lived between Kadesh and Shur. He lived as a foreigner in Gerar. 2 Abraham said about Sarah his wife, “She is my sister.” Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah. 3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night, and said to him, “Behold, you are a dead man, because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man’s wife.”

The story unfolds quickly. Abimelech must have “taken” Sarah in the physical sense, as the Hebrew verb “to take” implies (especially in contexts where men “take” women); otherwise why would God threaten him with death?

This, however, is only the beginning of the dialogue between Abimelech and God. Abimelech answers God’s accusations and proclaims his innocence of malfeasance. It is quite an occurrence, to be able to answer our all-powerful accuser in court and win the argument. This dream dialogue is unique in the Bible. There is literally no other occasion

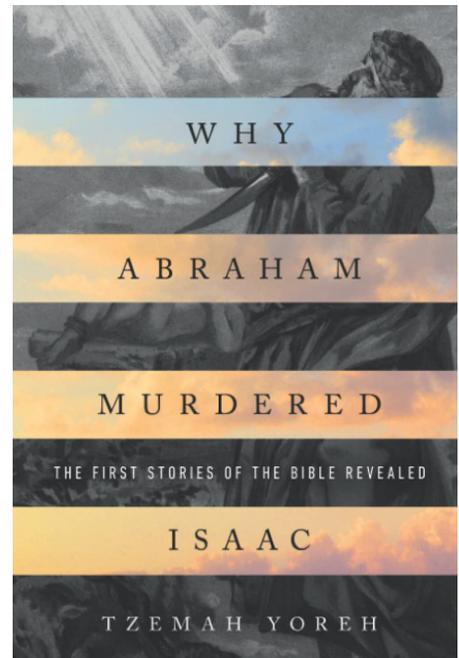
of such give-and-take between the deity and humans in a revelation such as this; it is almost as if Abimelech were on the stand instead of snoring away:

20:4 Now Abimelech had not come near her. He said, “Lord, will you kill even a righteous nation? 5 Didn’t he tell me, ‘She is my sister?’ She, even she herself, said, ‘He is my brother.’ In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands have I done this.” 6 Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also withheld you from sinning against me. Therefore I didn’t allow you to touch her.”

The editor, cognizant of this anomaly, conscientiously reminds the reader that Abimelech is still in a dream (vs. 6, “Then God said to him in the dream”). For this reason, it seems likely that this legal dialogue was added on by a second author for reasons we’ll get to shortly. This means that the story probably originally went like this:

20:3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night, and said to him, “Behold, you are a dead man, because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man’s wife. 7 Now therefore, restore the man’s wife. For he is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you will live. If you don’t restore her, know for sure that you will die, you, and all who are yours.”

Without vv. 4–6, the potential for debauchery is great; according to this version of the story Abimelech took Sarah, as we say, in the biblical sense. Such



scandalous conduct is indeed implied in the parallel tale in Genesis 12:10–20, in which Pharaoh takes Sarah into his house. It is highly unlikely that Pharaoh remunerated Abraham simply out of aesthetic appreciation of Sarah’s beauty. In fact, the reason for the likely addition of vv. 4–6 in this chapter is specifically to exclude the possibility of sexual relations between Sarah and Abimelech in today’s Bible.

It is only if Abimelech had “taken” Sarah sexually that he would have had reason to be so afraid, as is mentioned explicitly in v. 8.

20:8 Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told all these things in their ear. The men were very afraid.

“Afraid” is the key word: Abimelech was afraid, his servants were afraid, even Abraham himself was afraid, as is implied in vv. 10–11.

20:10 Abimelech said to Abraham, “What did you see, that you have done this thing?” 11 Abraham said, “Because I thought, ‘Surely the fear of God is not in this place. They will kill me for my wife’s sake.’”

BOOKS

Abraham, however, was afraid for all the wrong reasons. He was worried that “there was no fear of God” in Gerar, instead of trusting in God’s helping hand. Abraham’s fears were baseless, as is borne out in the story. Abraham was not a trafficker, and were he judged in a court of law today, he would have been liable for human trafficking; the punishment for this offense, even in the Bible, is death, as is implied in Exodus 21:16: “Whoever sells a man, whether that person has been sold or is still held in possession, shall be put to death.”

Now we come to the end of this part of our tale:

20:14 Abimelech took sheep and cattle, male servants and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and restored Sarah, his wife, to him. 15 Abimelech said, “Behold, I have returned you and your female servants, and they bore children to you. Dwell where it pleases you.”

17 Abraham healed Abimelech and his wife, and his female servants, and they bore children to him.

Abimelech follows the same pattern as he returns Sarah to Abraham. He also provides Abraham with remuneration, though this detail echoes Genesis 12’s account and is quite likely an allusion to that tale. As God promised, Abraham and Abimelech is cured of a problem that he did not know he had—his sexual impotence and the infertility of his wife. Did Abimelech’s impotence occur before he slept with Sarah or afterward? The text does not tell us.

In E’s Original Bible, the birth of Isaac immediately follows the return of Sarah to Abimelech’s house, where it’s implied, though never stated explicitly, that she and Abimelech had sexual relations. Thus, the text’s statement that Isaac was Abraham’s son asks the reader to swallow the bait of gullibility hook, line, and sinker—at least until the next chapter, when our gullibility is to be yanked out hard, leaving us aghast. The editors of the Original Bible didn’t think we were stupid, so they made sure to emphasize

no less than six times in three verses that Abraham was Isaac’s father:

21:3 Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son who was born unto him when he was circumcised. 4 And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. 5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

Abraham, who survives in the vicinity, is making a pact of nonaggression with him and his son. What is left unsaid here is that Abraham and Abimelech are now reluctant relatives. Abraham’s bastard son Isaac is Abimelech’s son, and so the pact is ironic. But that is the deeper of Chapter 22:1–2 is God’s “just” response to

to preserve Isaac’s life (Chapter 20) and handed his wife over to the local ruler (Chapter 21). *22:1 And it came to pass after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” He said, “Here I am.” 2 And he said, “Behold, I have offered you my son, your only son, whom you love, even Isaac, and go into the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I will tell you.”*

It’s an enactment of the most brutal poetic justice in God. His sin may (or may not—we as readers are not privy) have led to Sarah’s impregnation and the birth of Isaac. With Abraham not having trusted in God once, the birth of Isaac is a consequence of his previous lack of devotion. It does not matter that Isaac is innocent. In this text Isaac is no more than God’s chattel, just as Sarah was Abraham’s. His life is inconsequential when God’s purpose is to teach humans proper respect.

Now we know why Abraham/Abimelech’s child was named Isaac. Isaac means “he laughs” or “shall laugh,” since

a laugh is so ephemeral, it bursts out of the throat and then is gone forever. This particular laugh only lasts until Genesis 22:12, when Isaac is sacrificed.

But not according to the Bible as we have it:

22:11 Yhwh’s angel called to him out of the sky, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” He said, “Here I am.” 12 He said, “Behold, I have offered you my son, your only son, whom you love, even Isaac, and go into the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I will tell you.” 13 Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and saw that behind him was a ram caught in the thicket by his horns. Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering instead of his son.

Chapter 22:1–2 is God’s “just” response to a slightly different version of events:

22:9 So Abraham returned to his son Isaac, and they rose up and went to Beer Sheva. Abraham lived in Beer Sheva.

Where has Isaac disappeared to? Was he not supposed to return together with Abraham? Vv. 6 and 8 certainly emphasize that the two walked together:

22:6 Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. He took in his hand the fire and the knife. They both went together. 7 Isaac spoke to Abraham his father, and said, “My father?” He said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” 8 Abraham said, “God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they both went together.

Had the previous verses (22:11–12) not said anything about an angel and a ram, it would have seemed obvious that something had happened to Isaac, something involving a knife and hot fire. The juxtaposition between vv. 6 and 8 on one hand and v. 19

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on the other certainly suggested a grisly tale to the earliest Jewish commentators, and quarts of blood and Isaac's ashes feature rather prominently in their retellings.

Vv. 11–12 are part of the earliest version of the story, according to the original source, but this is not as straightforward as may seem from this general summary. It ignores the fact that v. 11 uses Yhwh (the Lord) for God's name, in contrast with vv. 1–10, which consistently employ Elohym. This provides a solution to the contradictory evidence (the use of two different names for the deity in the same revelation) is that the text adapted the originally "Elohistic" formulation in vv. 11–12 and created a new revelation in which Yhwh's angel instead of God/Elohim.

I suggest that the reason for the rewriting of this verse is that according to the original story, Isaac, the tiny wisp of Sarah's laughter, is sacrificed by his zealous father, Abraham, to atone for his past sins. The addition of v. 12a (Do not raise your hand against your son, your only son) according to my analysis:

with the "missing" words "and he killed his son" implied. Hence, they need not be written since they would basically have been no more than a rhetorical flourish providing a repetition of the extant clause "to kill his son." In other words, v. 10b could conceivably be translated: "And [Abraham] took the knife to kill his son (and he killed his son)."

The omission of such tiny but important clauses is well documented in the Bible, and is not at all anomalous. In fact, the story of the very first murder of the Bible is missing a snippet of vital text. In Genesis 4 it says, "And Cain said to his brother Abel. And when they were in the field Cain arose against Abel and smote him dead." But what did Cain say to his brother to get him to come? Did he promise him candy?

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22:9 They came to the place which God had told him, and Abraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order, bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the wood. 10 Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to kill his son. 11 Yhwh's angel called to him out of the sky, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" He [the angel] said, "Don't lay your hand on the boy, neither do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." 13 Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and saw that behind him was a ram caught in the thicket by his horns. Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering instead of his son.

22:9 They came to the place which God had told him, and Abraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order, bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the wood. 10 Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to kill his son. 11 [God's] angel called to him out of the sky, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" He [the angel] said, "now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." The preceding analysis would seem to have one small weak point. There is no explicit mention of Isaac's sacrifice! In my opinion, however, there is no need for a fancy reconstruction. In fact, nothing is really missing. V. 10, "And [Abraham] took the knife to kill his son," can be understood as elliptical,

We shall never know. Because Abraham did not believe Elohim would protect him, and thus lied to Abimelech and doubted his rectitude, Elohim punishes Abraham with the death of "his" son, just as he punishes all those who do not fear him. But that is not the sum total of his punishment, unfortunately. We have been so focused on Isaac's fate that we kind of forgot Hagar the handmaiden. We should not forget him, though he is kind of forgettable because the Original Bible doesn't mention his name! He is inferior in birth, but he has something that Isaac never had for certain: legitimacy. And to add a twist to the red-hot irony, Abraham sends this legitimate son into the desert to die in Genesis 21, right before God has him kill Isaac. Abraham is thus left completely alone; but don't worry for him, he has his God. 🙏

POINTS OF VIEW



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a legitimate role for the government. This includes insisting that religious schools provide a basic secular education. Rabbi Nosanwisch talked about the Jewish value of asking questions, saying “any learning environment that makes conversations and ideas off limits is toxic, dangerous and [displays] deeply anti-Jewish values.”

Rabbi Gutmann explained that the concept of *kvod habriut* is about being able to “respect each person for who they are; that the one who is honored is the one who honors others.” He added, “from the Jewish tradition, there is no valid argument for denying another person their identity.” Rabbi Lopatin went on to talk about the principle of *b'tz-elem Elochim*: Our commentators say that each individual has an individualized image of God and that it's not all the same. Each one is their own image of God and should be different and we should celebrate that.”

Rabbi Nosanwisch called on everyone to ‘stand up.’ She said, “I want to get away from the thought that the leaders need to do something. We are all impelled to act, and we are all capable of acting.” She explained

that “our interpersonal relationships are what matters the most” and implored us to focus on local issues, and on how we can use our relationships to create change. Rabbi Gutmann agreed, emphasizing the need to educate others about these topics. He said, “Judaism is not impartial when it comes to these issues. Judaism has a voice, and we should not be bashful about sharing that perspective.” Rabbi Lopatin observed that although the three rabbis on the panel represent different denominations, “we agree on a lot” and urged other leaders to “wake up” and to “prioritize abortion rights.”

The entire conversation can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1KrdomVCJY>. 🙏

Nomi Joyrich is the Michigan Director for Jews for a Secular Democracy (JFASD). Jews for a Secular Democracy is a pluralistic initiative for Jews of any or no denomination, and friends and family members, who are deeply concerned about the growing influence of religious fundamentalism on government policymaking. For more information and to sign up as a volunteer, visit our website at <https://jfasd.org>.

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