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Emunah: the Craft of Faith

Speaking personally about “the structure of my faith” is something I’ve never done in an academic setting. In fact, I rarely do it at all. My faith isn’t really very structured, and neither is my discipline for that matter. My shyness about discussing such intimate things as one’s “faith” in public may be because — to be honest — I’m always struggling with issues of belief. The academy has trained me well in the disciplines of rigorous skepticism about all truth-claims, endless questioning, mistrust of emotional reactions, and a certain fashionable cynicism. What Blake called the “Idiot Questioner” has taken up comfortable residence in my brain, always ready to pop a “Come on, how can you really believe that?”

My reluctance to talk about personal faith in public also has to do with the nature of my religious tradition. For Judaism does not define Jewish identity by what an individual Jew may or may not believe. The definition of a Jew in Jewish law is simply one who is born of a Jewish mother. If you are born of a Jewish mother, you *are* a Jew whether you believe in G-d or not, whether you observe the mitzvot and study the Torah or not. You can proclaim your atheism in ads in the *New York Times* or join the Moonies — but you are still a Jew in the eyes of Jewish law.

The Philology of *Emunah*

Let me begin by examining the original Hebrew word for faith, *emunah*. Hebrew bases much of its vocabulary and grammar on root words of three

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letters. Varying the vowels and adding different endings to these three-letter roots yield an array of words, verbs in different tenses, inflections, and so forth. (This feature, by the way, is the source of many rich puns and ironies in the original biblical text.)

The three root letters of *emunah* are *aleph*, *mem*, and *nun*. This is a common root in Semitic languages and means “to be strong, firm, diligent.” *Emunah* is translated into English as “faith,” but more precisely it connotes “confidence, trust.” The familiar word *amen* also comes from this root and actually means, “so be it, surely.”

Vocalized another way in the verbal root form, *ihmen*, the word comes to mean to “train or educate.” From the root *aleph*, *mem*, and *nun*, we also obtain the noun *amahn* which means “artist, expert, master craftsman.” In its verbal forms, *amahn* also conjugates to mean “to foster, nurse, bring up.” With a different set of vowels and put in the passive form, it signifies “to be found true, trustworthy, firm.”

Let me clarify all these connotations with a few citations from the Hebrew Bible. In one of the most famous and poignant phrases of the Pentateuch, Moses is enduring another of the seemingly endless provocations by the people, who are now complaining about the manna of which they are sick and tired. They want meat to eat in the desert, and claim to remember how wonderful it was back in Egypt where they had fish, cucumbers, and melons.

Both G-d and Moshe are very irritated, and Moses says to G-d in Numbers 11:11ff:

Why have you afflicted your servant? And have I not found favor in your sight that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Have I conceived all this people? Have I begotten them that you should say to me, “Carry them in your bosom, as a nursing father [*ha-omen*] carries the sucking child, to the land you have sworn to their fathers?

This “nursing-father” is a marvelous phrase and the Hebrew word used for it here is *ha-omen*.

In another example, in the Book of Esther 2:7, we are told about Mordechai and his relation to Esther: “And he had reared [*omen*] Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle’s daughter,” who was an orphan.

Let me use this brief exercise in philology to reconnect “faith” and the “academy.” These examples show us that *emunah*, faith, is connected to education and training in its very root. And education and faith both require much nursing and nurturing. It’s a two-way street, of course. We need, in educating our students, to remember not only that we are “rigorously training them in critical thinking, but that we are also “nursing and nur-

turing them." To nurse or nurture is to affirm, to care for, to have faith in someone.¹

On the religious level, what can we learn about faith from this philology? That faith, too, is not a sentimental matter; it is a "craft," a "skill," and it needs to be educated, trained, nursed. It is not "blind." It is not something that some people just seem to "have" and others "just don't," as most of my students and colleagues seem to think. To them, faith signifies something wildly irrational, not subject to question, something blind and dogmatic. So naturally, they become uneasy or hostile when discussions about "faith" arise. Alas, there are all too many believers with the same simplistic notion of faith.

The example I gave above of Moses as a "nursing father" is wonderfully relevant here. Moses, after all, directly received a great revelation from G-d, led the people out of Egypt, and then had to deal with them for forty long years in the desert. And Moses had no compunction about complaining to G-d at times, throwing up his hands, even arguing with G-d. But Moses and G-d put up with this infant nation, its temper tantrums, whims and fears — and educated, nurtured, and trained it. In Jewish tradition, we always refer to Moses as *Moshe Rabbenu* — "Moses our Teacher"; we do not refer to him as "Moses our prophet." No: as "our teacher," for the teaching function is higher than the prophetic function in Jewish tradition.

Now the prophets endured a great deal — no doubt about it. But the teacher is the one who always has to pick up the pieces after all the fire and lightning are over, and when the excitement of the original revelation has worn off. The teacher has to trek through the desert with a lot of uncooperative, testy people. And the teacher often doesn't get to see the promised land either. She or he lets go of those students at the end of the semester, and often doesn't know what becomes of them.

In sum, *emunah* — or faith — is a long process of education. There will be times of abject frustration, disbelief, and rebellion. But this comforts me, for it helps me see that my skepticism and my faith are not necessarily opposites. They can accommodate each other, even though the relationship is going to be tempestuous.

Still, I have left G-d out of the equation, haven't I? All the above is very nice for a group of believers, but what difference would any of it make to the skeptical secular academy?

One of my favorite rabbis, Adin Steinsaltz, the great Israeli talmudic scholar, did not grow up as an Orthodox Jew. He was raised on a kibbutz by secular socialist parents. When asked why he became religious, he answered, with a twinkle in his eye: "Because I was a skeptic." He questioned

the truths told to him as a child. Endless and absolute skepticism, though, are destructive — and that is part of the dilemma of the contemporary academy. It's certainly one of my dilemmas in teaching literary theory. Rabbi Steinsaltz once told a story about this problem of skepticism:

The story goes that there was a time when King Solomon wrote [in Proverbs] "The fool believes everything." And the fools' world was shocked because they said, "From this time on, everybody will recognize who is a fool, and this is a very dangerous situation." So they made a World Congress of Delegates, and they debated the problem for a long time and came to the conclusion that from that time on the fools should have another maxim: "The fool doesn't believe anything."

Rabbi Steinsaltz then comments,

This new proclamation shows us that nothing has changed. The fact that fools believe everything doesn't show the folly of belief; it shows the folly of being indiscriminate. The same thing goes exactly for the new maxim. So even though the fools who now control the media proclaim everywhere that the less you believe, the wiser you are, basically this is the same formula.

"The less you believe the wiser you are" does seem to be one of the maxims of the contemporary university — at least in my field of literary criticism and theory.

A Brief History of Literary Studies

The study of English literature as a formal academic discipline is just about one hundred years old. Prior to that, the Greek and Latin classics were taught, as was rhetoric, but English literature was something a gentleman was expected to pick up on his own. When English literature finally entered the curriculum, it legitimated itself by adopting the dominant model of nineteenth-century historicist scholarship in the classics: historical philology, lower textual criticism, manuscript editing, and so forth.

These very same methodologies, of course, were also being applied to the Bible with devastating results for faith. The "documentary hypothesis" claimed that the biblical text was not an integrated whole, divinely revealed, but rather a rough pastiche, a collection by different authors at different times, put together by a final redactor. And this redactor, in the view of these biblical scholars, seems to have had the same problem as the average freshmen in English 101 — redundancy, awkward transitions, and unresolved contradictory statements.

The Bible was desacralized by historical and critical scholarship in the nineteenth century, and literature — through the efforts of critics like Matthew Arnold — itself became "sacralized" as a substitute religion. Arnold

wrote that since creeds and dogmas had now become questionable and all traditions were dissolving:

The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry. . . . More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.

It is literary criticism which will now teach us, said Arnold, "the best that is known and thought in the world." These days, the most fashionable literary critics cite Arnold's words with a tone of mockery and contempt. The following brief sketch of the history of literary study in the twentieth century will explain why.

Firstly, literary studies abandoned that older model of philological, historicist scholarship much earlier than biblical studies. The so-called New Critics, whose influence was strongest from about 1940 to 1965, reacted strongly against the previous historicism with an intense formalism. They asserted the "autonomy" of the literary text: the meaning of a literary text, they claimed, could not be determined by examining all the factors external to it — its historical background, or the biography of the author, or even the declared intention of the author. Literature, the New Critics asserted, contained a special kind of knowledge and used a special kind of language embodied in its particular aesthetic forms. To understand, say, Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" what you really needed to know was not — as one of the New Critics said — "what porridge Keats had eaten for breakfast," but the exact words of the poem on the page, their paradoxes, ambiguities, ironies, metaphors, internal structure.² The Old Historicists and the New Critics proceeded to battle it out, each accusing the other of destroying literary studies. But the New Criticism eventually won out — especially in the post-World War II university.

I finished college just as the influence of the New Criticism began to wane, but all my teachers had been trained in it, and they proceeded to train me in it. Actually, I had started out as a philosophy major, but since my college philosophy department was run by followers of Wittgenstein, "metaphysics" was a nasty word there. So I switched majors and went over to the religion department where, at last, I could read Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and others. After reading philosopher after philosopher — each of whom in turn proceeded to critique and undermine the previous great philosopher — I concluded that philosophy couldn't provide me with the "absolute truths" I was searching for. Thinking in my innocent way that I might find answers in literature to the Big Questions — the meaning of life, death, and suffering — I was told by my New Critic

professors to stuff my heady metaphysical speculations and get down to business by analyzing metaphors, symbols, tone, rhythm.

By the early seventies, a new wave of intense theorizing about the nature of language, meaning, interpretation, and textuality flooded the field: French structuralism, German phenomenology, Saussurean linguistics, deconstruction, poststructuralism, Marxism, psychoanalysis. The new names were Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Wolfgang Iser, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault. We became entangled in the thickets of philosophical and linguistic theory. *Everything* was put into question, from the definition of what a "text" is to whether there can ever be any wrong interpretations.

Deconstruction claimed to undermine any notion we might have had of finding some stable structure to literary signification, and proclaimed that textuality was an endless play of slipping signifiers without a center. Feminism then arrived in the academy, energized by its political successes on the streets. We opened our eyes and suddenly realized that the canon of works we had been studying contained suspiciously few by women. What had been claimed to be universal, value-neutral and objective literary judgments were, in fact, pretty clearly expressions of a male point of view. "The damned mob of scribbling women," as our classic author Nathaniel Hawthorne called them (they were his competition in the literary market), might indeed write, read, and interpret quite differently. And, in fact, they should be empowered to do so.

Deconstruction is now on the wane, and the most vigorous movement in literary theory today is called the "New Historicism." Yes, historicism is back. The New Historicists are careful, however, to distinguish themselves from the Old Historicists. Since history, in the wake of poststructuralism, is no longer seen as a continuous narrative, but as a fragmented discourse, New Historicists argue that we have access to the past only through texts; the past is mediated through language, and language and interpretation are never neutral but always affected by issues of power and dominant ideologies. In the mid-nineteenth century, the great historian Leopold von Ranke spoke of knowing "the past as it really was." We can never attain that dream.

As you can infer from this brief description, politics plays a large role in the New Historicism, or as it is sometimes called in one of its variants, "Cultural Materialism." Literary texts are subsumed under the larger category of "social practices." New Historicists want to remind us again and again that literary texts are material artifacts produced in a material culture; since all knowledge is connected to power relations, no one can claim to have a disinterested position. We need, they say, to unmask or demystify

hidden ideologies. And we would be hopelessly naive — like the benighted Matthew Arnold — to believe we could set up a neutral objective criticism consisting of the “best that is thought and known in the world.” Post-modern literary theorists would also scornfully tell you that Arnold’s “best that is thought and known” really reflects the taste of an elite, male, imperialist upper class, and that class’s ideologies and self-interests. Because of the relativity of all truth and its connection to social practices and power relations, this argument goes, we can never attain an objective, universal point of view.

Go try and talk about faith to these people.

In fact, one of the worst sins a New Historicist or cultural materialist can accuse you of is “an appeal to transcendence.” At conference after professional conference, I’ve heard one or another lecturer offer as the ultimate putdown: “Why, that’s an appeal to transcendence!”

Underlying much postmodern literary theory, and its attempts to unmask and demystify oppressive ideologies, is a deep desire to transform society. Criticism, many in my field now argue, should be overtly political; all this unmasking and demystifying and canon revision should help the marginalized and oppressed, empower the victimized. Here is a sample sentence or two from a colleague’s manuscript: “. . . my own teaching is concerned especially with the structures of power in which literary institutions are embedded. And with theories that question universality, canonicity, authorial hegemony, linguistic fixity, coherent subjectivity, and the status of literature itself.”

So much for the “structure of my discipline.”

Actually, the whole idea of “structure” went out a long time ago. That’s why we call ourselves *poststructuralist*. Being from Washington, D.C., I can’t resist paraphrasing Will Rogers: “I don’t belong to any structured field — I am a literary critic.”

Judaism and Modern Literary Theory

Now you can begin to appreciate the difficulty of the task. How *do* I address people in my discipline? What resources from our tradition do I bring to them? — especially when I commit the cardinal sin of appealing to transcendence just about every day of my life! And, conversely, how has my own relation to my tradition been affected by these changes in my field? Let me once again go back to my personal narrative. I hope you will excuse this nonlinear style of discourse, but as one of my students wrote in a wonderful malapropism: “G-d still demands righteousness, but allows for redemption for those who have digressed.”

After studying the New Criticism in college, I began graduate school in the mid-seventies, just as all this new literary theory flooded into my field. My background in philosophy was invaluable; these new trends in theory allowed me to fulfill some of my earlier desires to interpret literature in the light of larger philosophical questions. During that same time I was also rediscovering my own religious tradition, and spent time living and learning in Israel, and in a yeshiva for women in New York. Immersed at the yeshiva in traditional Jewish textual study of the Bible, I was amazed at the intricate and sensitive way in which the classical Jewish commentators analyzed every nuance of every word in the Bible. They were impressive literary critics. And conversely, it seemed to me that literary critics often acted like rabbis in the way they scrutinized the minute details of secular literary texts. I attempted to examine this phenomenon in depth in my first book, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*.

Let me briefly summarize the course of my research. In this book, I took postmodern literary theory head-on by looking at its prehistory and then showing how the work of some of its most admired writers — Freud, Lacan, Derrida, Harold Bloom — was inextricably connected to theological issues. In fact, I began to view much of literary criticism as a kind of substitute theology; I was interested in how rabbinic methods of interpretation and exegesis had subtly resurfaced in what superficially appeared to be the theological wasteland of modern literary theory. Conversely, I was interested in how modern literary theory might help illumine some of the past theological debates about literary interpretation.

In researching this book, I was also trying to work out my own issues of faith. How could I, a person trained in the skeptical ethos of the university, and immersed in postmodern theory, which denied any stable meaning or metaphysical center to things, which seemed to reject the logos, or the G-d of Being and presence — how could I harmonize all that with being a Jew? This, indeed, has been the historical challenge of modernity to Judaism. How do modern — or now “postmodern” — Jews address the demands and critiques of the surrounding culture now that we have been accepted and assimilated into that culture?

It didn't seem accidental to me that Derrida and Freud were themselves Jewish, and only a generation or so away from traditional Judaism. Derrida's attack on what he calls the “ontotheological” tradition of Western philosophy was also an attack on its Greek and Christian underpinnings. And perhaps, I wanted to argue, it was also a return of the “rabbinic repressed.”

Indeed, the seed of my first book was a statement I had come across by the French psychoanalyst (and Catholic) Jacques Lacan — another major figure in poststructuralist thought, who directly situated Freud within the exegetic tradition of rabbinic midrash:

For this people who have the Book, alone among all to affirm itself as historical, in never propagating myth, midrash represents a primary mode of which modern historical criticism could well be only the bastardization.

Lacan views the Jews as the interpretive people par excellence, developing their hermeneutic skills particularly in the crush of exile: “ever since the return from Babylon, the Jew is he who knows how to read. This means he withdraws from his literal utterances so as to find an interval which then allows the game of interpretation.”³ So here, it seemed, was a certificate that my project was kosher: Lacan, one of the most eminent poststructuralist theorists, had also made the connection between midrash and contemporary literary theory.

Midrash and Meaning

Before I offer some concrete examples, let me first recall the meaning of midrash. For traditional Judaism, the Torah is divided into two parts: Written and oral. Torah, by the way comes from the root *yud, reish, hay* meaning “instruction or teaching.” From this root we also get the Hebrew word for parents: *horim*. The translation of the word “Torah” as “Law” is very inaccurate and misleading.

The *Written* Torah is the part commonly known as the Bible — the Five Books of Moses, prophets, psalms, etc. The *Oral* Torah includes traditions, laws, and interpretations that rabbinic tradition considered also to be handed down from Sinai but not explicitly written into the books of Moses. The Oral Torah also contains the rabbis’ own interpretation and amplifications of biblical stories and laws, their debates over these interpretations, the commentaries on these debates, the commentaries on the commentaries, and so on. A large mass of this oral material was compiled around the second century C.E. into the *Mishnah*, which was a codification of oral rabbinic law supplementing biblical teaching. The interpretations and debates and commentary on the Mishnah were compiled into what is called the *Gemarah*. And, broadly speaking, Mishnah plus Gemarah constitute the *Talmud*. The word *Talmud* comes from the root *lamed, mem, daled*. Vocalized *talmid*, we have the word which means “student”; vocalized in the verbal form *melamed*, it means teacher. *Talmud*, then, translates as study or learning.

Now, finally, to *midrash*. The root of the this word is *drash*, which means to “search, seek out, inquire, demand.” Midrash, inquiry into the meaning of Scripture, is often formally dated back to the time of Ezra (fifth century B.C.E.) but it was collected in various works all the way back approximately to the tenth century C.E. The midrash searches Scripture to clarify ambiguities, applies it to contemporary needs, probes for deeper meanings, supplements gaps in the text, speculates about history and philosophy. Many scholars also view midrash as part of the development of Scripture itself — not simply a postbiblical phenomenon. The Book of Deuteronomy, for example, is a kind of midrash on the first four other books.

The sample midrash I have chosen will take us back to my initial discussion of the etymology of the word *emunah*. You will remember that one of the constructions of the root for the word *emunah* was *omen* meaning “nursing-father”; another had to do with being an artisan or workman, and another with training or education. The first midrash from the collection *Bereishit Rabbah*, a commentary on the book of Genesis, is the first comment on the first verse of the Bible, “In the beginning, G-d created the Heavens and the Earth.”

Genesis
Chapter I
Bereshith

1. R. Oshaya commenced [his exposition thus]: *Then I was by Him, as a nursling (amon); and I was daily all delight* (Prov. VIII, 30). “*Amon*” means tutor; “*amon*” means covered; “*amon*” means hidden; and some say, “*amon*” means great. “*Amon*” is a tutor, as you read, *As an omen (nursing-father) carrieth the sucking child* (Num. XI, 12). “*Amon*” means covered, as in the verse, *Ha’emunium (they that were clad — i.e., covered) in scarlet* (Lam. IV, 5). “*Amon*” means hidden, as in the verse, *And he concealed (omen) Hadassah* (Est. II, 7). “*Amon*” means great as in the verse, *Art thou better than No-amon* (Nah. III, 8)? which is rendered, *Art thou better than Alexandria the Great*, that is situate among the rivers? Another interpretation: “*amon*” is a workman (*uman*). The Torah declares: “I was the working tool of the Holy One, blessed be He.” In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the skill of an architect. The architect moreover does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and the wicket doors. Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, *IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED* (I, I), *BEGINNING* referring to the Torah, as in the verse, *The Lord made me as the beginning of His way* (Prov. VIII, 22).

This midrash is commenting on the words “In the beginning G-d created.” The question is: to what does the word “beginning” refer? “In the beginning,” R. Oshaya is going to show, means “with the Torah.” The Torah is the blueprint for the architecture of creation; “G-d looked into the Torah

and created the world." The Torah in this sense is the Wisdom that pre-exists the world. It's not simply a set of stories *about* the world, or a set of prescriptive laws, but the primordial design of the world. (This notion was translated into Greek in the New Testament and theologically transformed into the notion of Jesus as a pre-existent *logos*: "In the beginning was the Word.")

R. Oshaya begins his explanation by citing a verse from the book of Proverbs, chapter 8, which is a paean to wisdom. In verses 22ff of that chapter, wisdom is personified as the speaker of the verses. Wisdom says: "G-d created me as the *beginning* [*reishit*] of his way, the first of his works of old. . . ." This is the same word used in the first verse of Genesis: *B'reishit* — "In the beginning." Thus "in the beginning" means "with Wisdom" and Wisdom means Torah.

Proverbs 8 tells us something further about this primordial Torah wisdom through a word play on *amon/uman* — nursling and workman. You remember those words as variations on the root of *emunah*. In 8:30, Proverbs has wisdom describe itself at the beginning of creation as a playful nursling: "Then I was by Him as a nursling [*amon*] and I was daily His delight." R. Oshaya then notes, as we did earlier, the etymology of the word "nursling," and cites some of the verses I also quoted earlier about Moses as the nursing-father and Mordechai as bringing up Esther. He notes that *amon* means "tutor." And he also derives that it means "covered or hidden" — interpreting Mordechai's "bringing up or educating" his niece Hadassah as also his "concealing" her.

No-amon is the name of a Babylon god, and that becomes the source of another word play. And finally, *amon* is a workman, a craftsman. Through this philological play on the word *amon* and its root, the Torah is now shown to have been the "working tool of G-d" in creating the world and a form of cosmic and primordial wisdom.

But first it was with G-d, covered, hidden. This hidden aspect of Torah remains even after the revelation at Sinai which Moses transcribed into writing. Remember, too, that the verses in Proverbs talk about the nursling "playing before G-d" and being "G-d's delight." Perhaps that play and delight and concealment are the divine creative force within the words and letters of the Torah which opens them up to a plenitude of meaning, encompassing all reality. Thus, Torah continuously gives birth to and includes rabbinic interpretation in the Talmud, midrash, legal writings, and so forth.

How does this exotic mode of rabbinic interpretation relate to skepticism and to postmodern literary theory? Let me try to answer this by another

midrash. It begins with a quotation from the Psalms, "Who is a mighty one like you, O Lord?"

"Who is a mighty one like you, O Lord" (Psalms 89:9). [Rather one should proclaim]: "Who is like you, mighty in self-restraints?" You heard the blasphemy and insults of that wicked man [Titus] but you kept silent! In the school of Rabbi Ishamel it was taught: "Who is like you, O Lord, among the mighty (*elim*) (Exodus 15:11)? [Read rather] "Who is like you among the mute" (*illemim*) — since he sees the suffering of His children and remains silent! (B. Gittin 56b; Mikhilta 42b)

This revocalization of *elim* ("mighty") to *illemim* ("mute") seems almost sacrilegious. The original context of the verse from Exodus 15:11 is Moses' song at the sea after G-d has delivered the people from Egypt. It is a song praising God's power. But here it is read as a criticism of G-d's seeming silence and passivity in the face of the Roman oppression of the Jews and the destruction of the Temple: "He sees the suffering of his children and remains silent!"

Here is midrash as a deep search of Scripture trying to answer the pain and catastrophe of that historical moment. Even in this act of what almost seems like blasphemy, the rabbis were able to reopen the text, make it speak and have meaning. I say "almost seems like blasphemy" because in the end this interpretation also embodies their deepest act of faith. In spite of catastrophe and disaster, they turn back to the text, believing that it can speak. It is by no means a message of simple piety — "He sees the suffering of his children and keeps silent" — but a very complex faith that incorporates despair and questioning within itself.

What is fascinating to me is how the rabbis make these twists and turns, in what are very aggressive modes of interpretation. There is no simple literal fundamentalism here. Indeed, to some, these interpretations may appear a bit outrageous. For the rabbis seem to create problems in the simple, literal meanings of the text; they make odd and anachronistic juxtapositions of verses; they break up the flow of the narrative, atomize verses and words, fragment the canon and collapse time. These practices, however, also describe postmodern interpretation. In its critique of modern forms of reason and coherence, postmodernism delights in fragmentation, rupture, and play. These are part of its project to subvert what it considers to be oppressive notions of identity and history.

Were the rabbis postmodernists? No. But the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment form of reason has opened a path for a renewed relation with religion. By criticizing the "Dogma of Immaculate Perception" — the idea that there is a neutral, detached, observer who sees things objectively,

as they are “in themselves” — it enables us to return to the language of theology and religious texts with a new seriousness — to study how they signify and construct meaning. Postmodern science itself has abandoned the claim to be a description of nature as it is in itself. As the famous physicist Niels Bohr said, “Physics is not about the way nature is, but about what we can say about the way nature is.” Whether we are observing atoms or allegorical texts, we are inevitably participants, interpreters who make meaning rather than find facts. Reference is always a matter of the frame of reference we bring to something.

Such a position has immense consequences for the academic study of religion and for our approach to reading the Bible where the focus is not on finding the real “text” behind the text. One need no longer privilege the historical “background” as the real referent of the text. Instead, in one of the most interesting developments in academic Bible studies, one can now (once again) approach the text as having the integrity of a whole. We can take it as given to us — as a construct of the communities or editors who put it together. Here is an example of postmodern theory helping us, ironically, to appreciate the premodern view of the Bible as a unity.

What especially intrigues me about rabbinic interpretation, and midrash in particular, is that it is highly self-conscious interpretation. It recognizes — indeed even elicits — gaps, problems, questions; that is, it recognizes our distance from the text. It exemplifies an interpretive battle born of the tension between tradition and innovation, attachment to the text and distance from it. In sum, it is a kind of model for all interpretation because it teaches, as Simon Rawidowicz put it, how to “uproot and stabilize simultaneously, to reject and preserve in one breath.”⁴

The rabbis, of course, were dealing with a text they believed to be divine, and a G-d who creates the world through speech. So turning it over and inquiring into the “openness of language” was participating in that divine creation.⁵ The analogy between postmodernism and rabbinic thought goes only so far; in the modern era, the loss of religious belief also means the loss of the divine guarantee of the ultimate correlation of words and things, language and reality. “Language” with a capital L has taken the place of “God.” For literary theory, the openness in language comes from an “otherness,” but can this otherness be related to Jewish faith?

Levinas and God’s Debt

I wrote much of my second book, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Scholem, Benjamin, and Levinas*, to examine that question. In most poststructuralist theory, “otherness” is a term used to sig-

nify the notion of a radical rupture which subverts closed identities and systems. What is other is also identified with what has been excluded, marginalized, repressed by philosophy. The key question in trying to relate postmodernism to religion is whether "otherness" is the marker of the limits of our knowledge and thus the fount of endless and irresolvable skepticism — or is it the passage through which the otherness of divine transcendence crosses? Moreover, does the relation to the human other as an individual other person have anything to do with epistemological alterity?

The contemporary French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, though an important source for Derrida's critique of Western metaphysics, has sought to make the alterity — that disruption of identity and ontology — into an ethical binding to the other, and to think a G-d who is "otherwise than being" yet is still a G-d of ethics and command, though not a G-d of presence in the traditional sense.

Levinas has tried to find the intersection between skepticism and transcendence, other and Other. For me, he is particularly interesting because of his attempt to address Jewish texts philosophically and philosophical texts Jewishly. Despite its seeming negativity, I think that postmodernism can also inadvertently pave the way for a renewed relation of theology and philosophy. Since, after all, it was only a specific form of Enlightenment reason that came into conflict with faith, the postmodern critique of that type of reason can also lead to a new way of thinking about the relation of faith and reason. Or as Levinas puts it, to a "reason less hard on itself — a reason open to the other."

The aim of Levinas's work is to show that reason and freedom are not autonomous but are founded on prior structures. Freedom is justified not of itself but *by and for the other*. Reason is not an autonomous, impersonal form of logic, but bound to the interpersonal relation that language enables. For Levinas, language embodies this ethical form of reason; language is a gift and a vulnerable exposure to the other.

In other words, one of Levinas's key tenets is that language is not merely instrumental or cognitive but coordinates me with another to whom I speak. There is, he claims, a "prophetic dignity of language," which is the ability of language to say more than it says. In theological terms, we might call it revelation, but it is simultaneously that which binds me to the other and that which coincides with the moment of exegesis — of interpretation of this otherness. Furthermore, a "G-d beyond Being" would be defined relationally, not as a "thematized essence," but as G-d in relation to human response and action. And that would be one of the meanings of another ex-

traordinary midrash on a verse from Isaiah 43:10: "You are my witness, says the Lord." According to the midrash this means, "If you are my witnesses, I am G-d, but if you are not my witnesses, I am not G-d."⁶

Perhaps I can sum up some of these themes of Levinas's work by discussing one of his commentaries on another famous and striking midrash. In this midrash, G-d says, "So should it be that you would forsake me, but would keep my Torah." Levinas uses this phrase as the title for an essay he wrote about the Holocaust, "To Love the Torah More Than G-d."⁷ As postmodern and post-Holocaust Jews we especially need and desperately want to know how to reopen the Book, how to make it speak, how to hear the voice in the silence. Levinas himself endured World War II as a prisoner-of-war in France, but lost most of his family in Russia.

In this essay on the absent G-d of the Holocaust, the G-d who obscures his face paradoxically becomes the very condition of Jewish belief. The loss of a consolatory childish heaven, at the moment when G-d withdraws from the world, is the moment which calls for what Levinas describes as an "adult" faith. In this faith, the adult can triumph only in her or his own conscience and suffering, a suffering that is "no mystic expiation of the sins of the world but the ordeal of an adult responsible person," a "suffering of the just for a justice without triumph which is lived as Judaism." As Levinas puts it, "the moment of atheism [is] necessary for a true monotheism."

For Levinas, the intimacy with and immanence of G-d comes to the Jew as "a relation between spirits, through the intermediary of teaching, the Torah. It is precisely a *discourse*, not embodied in G-d, that assures us of a living G-d among us." So even when disappointed by G-d and down-trodden, one keeps the Torah: "Would that they forsake me and keep my Torah." G-d's absence and concealment is a call to humans to be responsible for everything, and that is also a great gift to and source of the dignity of the human. As Levinas says, she or he is then "capable of responding, capable of grappling with G-d in the role of creditor and not always a debtor."

The creditor retains faith in the debtor, but will not let the debtor evade his or her debts. That, for Levinas, constitutes an adult faith: love for G-d despite what G-d does. It's a difficult faith, and hard to bear without the hope of some ultimate unveiling of G-d. But, Levinas argues, "only the person who has recognized G-d obscured can demand this unveiling," and in the tension of this relation a mode of equality is established between humanity and G-d. "To love the Torah more than G-d" means "access to a personal G-d against whom one may revolt — for whom one may die."

This notion of G-d's being in debt to humanity, of G-d's having something to answer for, of having an argument with G-d, is one of the most

interesting — and for me — most comforting parts of Jewish tradition. The Book of Job, of course, is one of the prime examples in the Bible. One of the great chassidic rabbis, and one of my personal favorites, was R. Levi-Yitzhak of Berdichev [1740–1810]. The story is told of R. Levi-Yitzhak that in the middle of a prayer he said: “Lord of all the world! A time there was when you went around with the Torah of yours and were willing to sell it at a bargain, like apples that have gone bad, yet no one would buy it from you.” This refers to a midrash that when G–d was about to give the Torah he took it to various nations of the world to offer it to them — but when they asked what was in it and found out it prohibited things such as adultery, robbery, etc., they wouldn’t take it. The Jews finally accepted it. Continued R. Levi Yitzhak, “No one would buy it from you. No one would even look at you! And then we took it. Because of this I want to propose a deal. We have many sins and misdeeds, and you an abundance of forgiveness and atonement. Let us exchange! Perhaps you will say: ‘Like for like!’ My answer is: Had we no sins, what would you do with your forgiveness? So you must balance the deal by giving us life and children and food beside.”

Teaching and the Voice of Students

I have tried to outline how I have been using postmodern literary theory to read rabbinic texts, and how rabbinic texts also provide me with a model of skepticism and questioning for my own struggles with *emunah* — faith. What role does all this play in my teaching? With graduate students, I can share some of these ideas. Undergraduate students are another story. They are looking for clear, uncomplicated, absolute truths. I often find myself in somewhat of a bind when I teach undergraduate courses on the Bible as Literature, or Literature and Ethics. Most of my students are not Jewish, and even those who are have, alas, little familiarity with Jewish tradition. My average class will be a mixture of atheists, agnostics, fundamentalists, indifferent, evangelicals, Jews, Christians, Moslems, and, more recently, Asian students for whom the Western religious tradition is entirely alien. Now how do I conduct a course on the Bible without having religious war break out?

Some of the born-again students feel it their sacred duty to witness their faith, to show how there are no questions, how all is answered. The atheists and agnostics resent and deplore this and complain that they do not want to be preached to; the mildly curious are put off by the tension between believers and nonbelievers and claim we are digressing. I also confess that despite having given this long, complex, sophisticated account of how I

relate my faith to my academic field, I feel downright uncomfortable talking about it to my students.

After all, I teach in a public, state-supported university. The Constitution has mandated the separation of church and state. An English professor paid by the State of Maryland, I am not there to convert anyone or establish any one religion as preferable over another. I am not a cleric. I don't want my classes to get mired in unresolvable arguments over personal belief. Were I to be teaching a course in philosophy of religion, where students would be given sophisticated analytic tools for examining the relation of faith and reason, perhaps that would be something else.

So I tell them at the beginning of the semester of my course on the Bible as Literature that we are going to try to avoid debates about personal belief — for all the above reasons. But twenty-year-old kids are at the stage in life where these are some of the most pressing issues in their lives. What should I believe? Is there a G-d? How should I live? That's where I was when I was their age.

I don't have a solution to this problem except to admit it, and to tell you quite honestly that it is a lot easier to write books and articles for my academic peers . . . but facing my students in the classroom everyday is another matter. Let us listen to the voice of one of my students speak about this:

The Bible should be read as a "piece of literature," they say. In other words, I should emotionally distance myself and analytically examine the "text" as opposed to reading and experiencing the book. As the class progressed, I tried to read the Bible as literature, but only felt disturbed, uneasy, and distant. It was as if I was asked to detach, empty, and ignore myself. I don't know if I can put my emotions on hold and read something so emotionally charged mechanically. However, most of my English professors advise me to do the same. "Don't get too emotionally wrapped up in the text." I don't understand what the threat is. Why not get emotionally involved? Why distance myself and apply intelligent theories if the book isn't going to change me? Why am I discouraged [from trying] to experience books? Why do I have to criticize and analyze these "texts?" Why is everyone calling books texts? I've been trying to read the Bible critically. It's difficult because its language demands both an intelligent and a passionate reading. Isn't reading supposed to change us and the world in some way?

This is how I felt one month into the class. Reading was all about identification, emotional responses, interpretations. . . . The class set-up seemed to discourage this type of reading.

The class has become a class about reading and rereading. It has expanded and stretched my narrow reading habits. It takes my emotions, spirit, and intellect to read the Bible. I'm developing a balance. It's not just an emotional or spiritual thing. I come into the class with questions, and I walk out with more questions. Our in-depth readings of certain passages stir feelings but, they also provoke thought.

I was quite amazed by this journal. Very appreciative that the student felt enough trust in me to write it, yet I was also very challenged by it. It was just after the Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill hearings, and I tried to explain to her why so many of her professors stressed analytical responses to texts. The hearings, I said, were a good example of what happens when there is no distancing, no thoughtful analysis, but only highly emotional reactions. The hearings employed no criteria and no experts in the field of sexual harassment; and so there was no common ground for dialogue.

I resorted to the etymology of the Latin word *educare* as the source of the word “education.” *E-ducare* — means “to lead out.” I tried to explain critical thinking as a kind of “leading out” from spontaneous emotional responses through a distancing — to see things otherwise, to come out from where one is to positions that can be supported by reasons, to common ground with others. I talked about the difference between the modern secular university and the old medieval university.

I have recently found out that the word “education” has two Latin roots, *educare* and *educere*. The first also means “to bring up, nurture, or rear”; the second “to elicit or evoke reactions.” So I think this student is also correct: perhaps we are overdoing it with all our emphasis on “critical thinking.” After we undermine all their native beliefs, we do not do a very good job of helping students reintegrate their emotional and religious lives into their newly found sophisticated analytic minds.

Here is another journal entry by a student in my Literature and Ethics class last year after we had read the Book of Job.

This entire unit on God has disturbed me greatly because there are too many answers to choose from and I don’t know which one is right. Nobody knows. It frustrates me not to have the correct answers. Some say that there is no correct answer to whether He exists or not; that we have to decide for ourselves. That’s a very nice statement but it still doesn’t do anything for me. Does He exist or not? and if He does, is He all-powerful? and if He is, how could He let bad things happen to good people? I could ask question after question and never reach an answer.

I pity the people who fervently practice a religion because their parents practiced it. It strikes me whenever I ask people what their faith is and then ask them how they could believe in a religion when that is the only one they know. I have only met one person who has said to me that he has studied most of the religions of the contemporary world and out of those he has chosen one — obviously a wise man.

I am cynical about God and about religion. That is why I have had so much trouble with this unit and why I simply could not force myself to write another journal entry on Job.

I don't know how to solve this problem right now. Perhaps I did what I was supposed to do by exposing this student to the Book of Job, by just raising the issues, by giving her a place to think about them. She was a pre-med major and she told me she loved this course because it gave her the only opportunity in her college career to study and talk about these issues.

But I'm still not satisfied. I wish I could do more for her. On the other hand, perhaps in these great matters of faith, each of us must go along her or his own path. My answers, my readings of midrash and postmodern theory, may be entirely irrelevant to her at this tender part of her life. Faith, as I said at the outset, is "practice, craft"; it must be nursed and trained. And as we know, it changes as we change. Our notion of God at age ten is not the same as our idea of God at thirty or fifty. Or at least it shouldn't be. For all too many people, though, the problem is that they grow up without their understanding of G-d ever growing up with them. A rabbi I know tried to inspire his congregants to learn more about Judaism by saying to them: "Would you be satisfied if your entire knowledge of sex remained what it was when you were ten years old? What about, then, your understanding of Judaism and G-d?"

So finally, the question of how one actually teaches students is a difficult one, more difficult perhaps than working out one's own problems of faith on an intellectual level. But there are, of course, many other aspects to faith — the part of faith that transcends the intellect and the faith that is actually lived daily, embodied in practice. Another famous chassidic story goes as follows: Reb Leib Saras once said: "I do not go to R. Dov Baer of Mezritch [his great teacher] to learn interpretations of the Torah. I go to observe his way of tying his shoelaces."

The Academic Rooster

I will conclude with another one of my favorite stories from R. Nachman, another great chassidic rabbi (b. 1772). Like all great teachers, R. Nachman understood that you can't ever teach anything directly. A person has to absorb and learn on her or his own terms — in her or his own way. That's why all the great teachers taught in parables. The Bible itself, as I remind my students, is not a theological tract or a set of logical axioms. It's a book of stories. So here is one of the stories of R. Nachman.

Once there was a prince who fell into the delusion of thinking he was a rooster. He took off all his clothes, sat under the table, and refused to eat any food but corn seeds. The king sent for many doctors and many specialists, but none of them could cure him.

Finally a wise man appeared before the king, and said: "I think that I can cure the prince." The king gave him permission to try.

The wise man took off his clothes, crawled under the table and began to munch on corn seeds. The prince looked at him suspiciously, and said: "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

The wise man answered: "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"I am a rooster," answered the prince belligerently.

"Oh really? So am I," answered the wise man quietly.

The two of them sat together under the table until they became accustomed to each other. When the wise man felt that the prince was used to his presence, he signaled for some clothing. He put on the clothing, and then he said to the prince: "Don't think that roosters can't wear clothing if they want to. A rooster can wear clothes and be a perfectly good rooster just the same."

The prince thought about this for a while, and then he too agreed to put on clothes.

After a time, the wise man signaled to have food put under the table. The prince became alarmed and he said: "What are you doing?" The wise man reassured him. "Don't be upset. A rooster can eat the food that human beings eat if he wants to, and still be a good rooster." The prince considered this statement for a time, and then he too signaled for food.

Then the wise man said to the prince: "Do you think that a rooster has to sit under the table all the time? A rooster can get up and walk around if he wants to and still be a good rooster." The prince considered these words for a time, and then he followed the wise man up from the table, and began to walk.

After he began dressing like a person, eating like a person, and walking like a person, he gradually recovered his senses and began to live like a person.

You could interpret this story, if you like, as an allegory about the body and soul. The prince (the soul) forgets who he is (the son of a King, i.e., G-d) and acts like a dumb beast — i.e., dragged down by the body. But the wise man doesn't yell at the prince, or preach at him, or give him a lecture on the history of the human race and why it is superior to that of roosters. Rather the wise man goes and sits under the table with him. Accepts him where he is, becomes his friend. Gradually, he weans the prince away from his behavior. The wise man, like Moses, is a kind of *omen*, or nursing-father. He nurses and weans the prince by telling him he can still be a rooster, but can also do things that humans do. He doesn't deny the needs of the body, but reattaches them. Finally, the prince recovers.

Or, we could interpret the parable in another way. The prince acting like a rooster is like the academic believer in the university — who has spent so much time immersed in secular matters that he has forgotten who he is and has started acting like a rooster, scratching around under the table. The wise man teaches the prince — or princess — that he or she can still be a professor and act like a person of faith.

Notes

1. As the contemporary poet Adrienne Rich put it: "As to trust: I think that simple as it may seem, it's worth saying that a fundamental belief in students is more important than anything else. This fundamental belief is not a sentimental matter: it is a very demanding matter of realistically conceiving the student where he or she is, and at the same time never losing sight of where he or she can be" (*On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1979]).
2. There was also an implicit theology in the New Criticism. See Lynn Poland's book, *Literary Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985). She compares the project of the New Critics to Bultmann's project of demythologizing the Bible.
3. Jacques Lacan, "Radiophonie," in *Scilicet* 2/3 (Paris, 1970), quoted in Jeffrey Mehlman, "The 'Floating Signifier': Levi-Strauss to Lacan," *Yale French Studies* 48 (1972): 33.
4. "On Interpretation," in Nahum Glatzer, ed., *Studies in Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1974), 52.
5. Just what is it about language that makes it a prime medium for relationship with the divine? What is the point of intersection between divine and human language? Perhaps it is the openness of language where words can mean more than they seem to. Literary and theological language share the same paradoxical nature: we can only say what we mean by meaning other than what we say. Yet what is the source of this otherness? If openness is where the Otherness of God can enter into human discourse and existence, then for the same reason, that openness always also makes the text elusive, enigmatic — always receding as much as approaching, and escaping ultimate closure. For the rabbis, G-d speaks as much by what is left out of the plain meaning of the text as by what is put in.
6. *Sifre* Deut. 346; *Pesikta* 102b; *Yalkut Shimoni* 455.
7. Emmanuel Levinas, "Aimer la Thora plus que Dieu," *Difficile liberté: essais sur le judaïsme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1976). Translated as "Loving the Torah More Than God" by Sean Hand in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1990).