THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
LITERATURE AND RELIGION

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Writing this chapter as the representative of "Judaism" makes me feel something like the reluctant Moses at the beginning of the biblical book of Exodus. In chapter 3, God calls to him from a burning bush as Moses, an Egyptian-Jewish fugitive, herds his sheep in the desert. Announces God: I have come to deliver the suffering Jewish people in Egypt from slavery, and you, Moses, will be my agent and messenger to Pharaoh. But Moses declines. A long argument ensues: God keeps urging and assuring Moses, and objecting. According to Jewish tradition, this goes on for seven days. Finally, God's patience wears thin, and Moses reluctantly agrees.

Each of the biblical prophets, of whom Moses is the foremost, was reluctant. In the end, they managed to carry out their mission by speaking out of their own particular historical situation to their generation, although their words carry meaning beyond their own times. I too am hesitant; I can speak only from my position as a Jewish woman and English professor in the twenty-first century. At the same time, I'm aware of standing in a chain linking me to all the previous and forthcoming generations of Jews.

I preface my discussion of "Judaism" with this remark about generations and generativity because I want to reorient our discussion of literature and religion here away from a discourse about "texts." A rabbinical student in a yeshiva (religious Jewish academy) in Israel once offered his rabbi an "interpretation of the text." The teacher responded, "It's not a text. It's your mother!" In other words, a text's relation to the sacred writings and traditions she or he lives and interprets is as intimate, personal, reciprocal, and complex as the deepest family relation—in fact, it is a family relation. Regardless of personal belief or practice, each Jew is part of the collective Jewish people, each Jew is inextricably tied up with all the Jews who came before and who will come after. And as in a family, you are always a "daughter" or "son" despite any disputes or attempts at disavowal.

To write about "Judaism," "religion," and "literature," then, I need to start by reconstructing those terms from a Jewish perspective. Terminology is important, because each English or Hebrew word carries along with it a whole train of meaning, culture, and conceptuality. Even when a certain translation might seem approximate, there can be worlds of theological, philosophical, and cultural difference. So Judaism, first of all, is not a "religion." Indeed, the common Hebrew word used to signify "religion," dat (דַּת), is Persian in origin and does not even appear in the Bible until the late Book of Esther where it signifies "law, judgment." It's worthwhile noting that in this satirical biblical book, dat refers to the laws of an especially incompetent and ridiculous king.

"Torah" is the Hebrew word used in ancient and modern Jewish sources to refer to Judaism's holy oral and written teachings, stories, laws, practices, beliefs, and traditions. It comes from the Hebrew root y-r-y (י-ר-י), meaning "to cast" or "to shoot," as in "to shoot an arrow." The Hebrew alphabet has no vowels. Hebrew builds words and verb forms out of consonantal roots vocalized differently to generate meaning and vocabulary. To make a rough analogy in English, think of the two consonants c-t. If you had to guess what word it meant, and added vowels, it could be "cat," "cot," "cut," "coat"—as noun or as verb—"acute," "act," and so forth. In Hebrew, one form of the root y-r-y means "to aim, direct toward"; in another it becomes "to proclaim, to teach" (berah, bora'ah). A teacher (moreh) both aims "at us" and "with us"—to direct us. The Hebrew word for "parent" (boreh) comes from a close root, h-r-y, meaning to conceive, generate. This little etymological exercise emphasizes the deep Jewish connection between parenting, generativity, teaching, learning, writing, interpreting, aiming, believing—and living within time and history. "Torah" is not reducible to "religion," "literature," "text," or "law." It is generative learning and living in relation to God, the word, the world, and one another, encompassing the most seemingly banal details of life, from how to tie a shoelace or behave in a party to the most far-flung cosmic speculations. On another level, for the rabbis, Torah preexisted the world, "written" in "black fire on white," and was the "blueprint of creation" (Tanhumah Gen. 1).

In sum, "Torah" is not a "book" and Jews are not, as commonly thought, the "People of the Book," a moniker given by Muslims but never used in rabbinic sources. Nor does rabbinic tradition use the word "scripture" ("writings") to designate the text of the "Bible" (also a non-Jewish word), but rather Mikra (מִקְרָא) from the root k-r-a (קָרָא), meaning "reading." Mikra signifies retaining in the act of reading the sense of an immediate oral,

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personal communication between God and the human. To make a simple analogy, you are experiencing me right now through my “written self,” but if I were to talk with you face to face and discuss the same ideas, it would be an entirely different experience, with different meaning. How could I unite the two?

Simply to “read” Hebrew writing already requires deciphering, sounding, and vocalizing the words. In Hebrew, the root k-r-a also means “calling,” calling by name or calling out (keri’ah). Reading is a form of calling out and being called, called to account and summoned to be transformed. For the rabbis, Hebrew is also the language of holiness and revelation, mediating the experience of God. So Hebrew words – even the physical shapes and numerical values of the letters – are living forms of creative power, like God’s creative “callings/namings” in the first chapter of Genesis.

I prefer to name Jews the “People of the Mouth” rather than the “People of the Book.” Mikra is also just one part of Torah, which in Jewish tradition encompasses both what’s called “oral Torah” (Torah she be’al peh) and “written Torah” (Torah she b’ktan). In a general sense, written Torah refers to the biblical corpus; oral Torah refers to the ongoing rabbinic interpretations, debates, commentaries, laws, stories, and speculations – up to the freshest insight a Torah teacher or student might create at this very moment. Collections and codifications of oral Torah eventually had to be written down, lest these teachings be lost. But as we’ll see, their rhetorical forms intentionally conserve and reenact the primary orality, a sense of immediate face-to-face personal speech and dialogue, open to change and renewal at every moment, a “living Torah,” a form of “continuing revelation.”

2.

If we return to the story of Moses in Exodus 3, we notice that it, too, is a “face-to-face” dialogue between God and Moses, a series of questions, retorts, further questions, and challenges in an intense, intimate, emotional encounter charged with ethical urgency; lives are at stake. That, too, is the kernel of how the oral Torah works. At bottom, it is about not “text” and “interpretation” but urgent personal encounter, reciprocity, argument, questioning, and continuing search.

1. And Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock far away into the desert, and came to the mountain of God, to Horev.®

2. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.
3. And Moses said, “I will turn aside, and see this sight, why the bush is not burnt.”
4. And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the midst of the bush, and said, “Moses, Moses.” And he said, “Here am I.”
5. And he said, “Do not come any closer; take off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.”
6. And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God. [emphasis added]
7. And the Lord said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows, …
8. Come now therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.”
9. And Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the people of Israel …”

Rabbinic commentary on this episode – its gaps, ambiguities, images, words, meanings – is vast. To get some sense of it, we’ll sample a form of oral Torah called midrash, coming from the root d-r-sh, meaning to “search out,” “inquire,” “demand.” Midrash is an intense searching of the biblical text for meaning beyond the plain surface sense, indeed, a “demand.” Let’s look with rabbinic eyes at a phrase in this story that is not obviously “literary” but more a descriptive afterthought, Exodus 3:6: “Moses hid his face and was afraid to look upon God.” At first glance, the verse seems to describe Moses’ emotional reaction, his sense of religious awe – a pious and praiseworthy action. What could be more obvious? But to put ourselves in a rabbinic frame of mind means to become somewhat like Sherlock Holmes, who tells Watson, “There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.” The rabbis, like Sherlock, teach us to ask questions, look for clues, anomalies, deeper patterns, hidden connections underneath the surface story. For as God is one, so too there is a larger hidden unity beneath the prolific plurality of the world. In midrashic inquiry, at bottom, we’re looking for meaning amid the fractures of the words, the world, our lives, and history. Or, to pick up the images of our biblical episode, we’re striving to “hear God’s voice and see God’s face” in the thicket, in the brambles – despite, through, and with the fire.
So what ripples of discomfort do we feel in reading verse 6 even in an English translation? The previous verses clearly state that Moses doesn't have any inhibitions about turning aside to stare at the burning bush; the story even tells us in verse 4 that God approved. So it's Moses' own idea to hide his face, not God's command. You might retort, "What is the problem? Isn't he being just naturally pious?" But if so, wouldn't it make more narrative and logical sense for Moses to hide his face out of religious awe immediately upon hearing the voice of God? That is, shouldn't it have been written: "And God called to him out of the midst of the bush and said 'Moses, Moses.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God." So we have to ask: Why does Moses hide his face, only later? Are we missing something in the dialogue or in the relationship between God and Moses? These are some questions underlying the sample rabbinic midrash below on verse 6. For readers unfamiliar with midrashic style, the questions, debates, and answers may be confusing, like suddenly falling down a rabbit hole and into Wonderland. The rabbis assume that the reader knows the entire Bible backward and forward. They do not summarize the events or footnote their references, but abbreviate in terse code. I have filled in the sources below in brackets and highlighted key words/verses/parts of verses the rabbis cite as clues to generate meaning. The rabbis here compare Moses' behavior at the burning bush with a later narrative—the story of the people's worshipping the Golden Calf (Exodus 32–34). Above all, this midrash from the collection called Exodus Rabbah poses a demanding and radical question: Did Moses act rightly in hiding his face?

"And Moses hid his face": R. Yehoshua ben Korha and R. Hoshaya [discussed this]. One said, Moses did not do right [lo 'afesh asab] when he hid his face [panaw]. For if he had done so, God would have revealed to him what is above and what is below, what has been, and what will be in the future. So when Moses later asked to behold [God], as it is said, "Show me, I beg You, Your glory" [Ex. 33:18], R. God replied to Moses, "I will come to show you, but you hid your face. Now I say to you that 'man shall not see Me and live' [Ex. 33:20]. For when I wanted, you did not want." R. Yehoshua of Sakhn in the name of R. Levi said: Even so, God did show him as a reward for "and Moses hid [ya-nester panaw] his face" [Ex. 33:6] we read [later], "the Lord spoke unto Moses face to face [paran el paran]" [Ex. 33:11]. And as a reward for "he was afraid [ya-yerei] — Ex. 3:6] we read, [later] "and they were afraid [yu-yiru'] to come close him" [Ex. 34:10]. And as reward for "he was afraid to look" [ne-habeet — Ex. 3:6] we read, "and he looks [habeet] upon the likeness of God" [Num. 12:8].

Judahim

R. Hoshaya the Elder said: Moses did right [yaqeh asab] when he hid his face. For God said to him: "I came to show myself to you [leharot lekhba panim], and you honored me and hid your face. I assure you that in the future, you will be close to Me on the mountain for forty days and forty nights, without eating or drinking. And in the future you will have pleasure from the radiance of the Shekinah [the indwelling Divine presence], as it is said, "and Moses did not know that his face [panaw] was radiant" [Ex. 34:29]. (Exodus Rabbah 31:1)

In the debate about the propriety of Moses' hiding his face, these rabbinic sages living in the Land of Israel from the late second and third centuries CE are using scriptural proof-texts from the same narratives to bolster their conflicting claims. They find subtle verbal and thematic links between the seemingly unconnected stories of the burning bush and the worshipping of the Golden Calf (Ex. 32–34). In the later story:

Ex. 32:1 And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mount, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron, and said to him, "Arise, make us gods, which shall go before us; and as for this Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what became of him.'

The Golden Calf is made; God informs Moses what has happened, says to leave him alone and descend, for he will now destroy this people in his anger, and make another nation out of better stuff—out of Moses himself.

Moses refuses the offer to become the progenitor of a new people—nor does he leave God alone. This is a reversal of the burning bush episode where it was Moses who had wanted to be left alone. Moses argues, pleads strenuously with God to forgive the people. God finally relents. Sensing an opportune time of special intimacy and grace, he seizes the moment: "Now therefore, if I have truly gained Your favour, show me now, I beg, Your ways, that I may know You, and continue in Your favor" (Ex. 33:13, emphasis added). "Your ways" here mean the secrets that guide God's dealings with humanity, how the universe is governed, the workings of good and evil and forgiveness. As he senses a further opening, Moses presses on: "Show me, I beg You, Your glory [kedokhdal]" (Ex. 33:18, emphasis added). He asks for even more: an immediate, intimate, exclusive experience of God's essence. God's response: Yes — up to a point, but then no further!

19 And he answered, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name Lord [YHVK], and I shall be gracious to whomever I am gracious [although they may not deserve it], and I shall show mercy to whomever I will show mercy.

20 But he said, "You cannot see my face [panaw]; for man shall not see me and live."
21. And the Lord said, “See, there is a place near me. Station yourself upon the rock;
22. And as my Glory [kavod] passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and shield you with my hand until I have passed by.
23. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but man shall not see me and live.”

In the aftermath, Moses ascends for another period of forty days on Mount Sinai, hews the second set of tablets, and then returns to the people. But something has happened to Moses’ face: “Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant since he had spoken with Him.” This new awesome radiance of Moses’ face frightens the people, and Moses then “puts a veil on his face” (34:30; 34). He now will take the veil off only when going to the Tent of Meeting to speak with God or upon coming out to teach the people.

3.

Needless to say, this is another very rich and complex narrative and helps illustrate why and how the rabbis in our midrash create meaning. Characteristic of oral Torah, the midrash interweaves two seemingly disparate stories to engage us in a “face-to-face” debate. One story is used to interpret the other through subtly finding linked literary themes and motifs, such as “face,” “seeing/showing,” “revelation,” “glory,” “fear.” Reading the account of the rabbis’ midrashic debate is like opening up a Russian matryoshka, a wooden nesting doll: you start with the large one, open it in the middle and inside is another one; you open that up and find another, and so on and so on . . . like Moses trying to penetrate further and further into the mysteries of God.

My ultimate aim, as we work through this material, is to consider how this classical rabbinic form of interpretation—exotic as it may first seem—may connect to the study of literature and especially to the goals of that study. Annie Dillard, in her memoir The Writing Life asks:

Why are we reading, if not in hope of beauty laid bare, life heightened and its deepest mystery probed? . . . Why are we reading if not in hope that the writer will magnify and dramatize our days, will illuminate and inspire us with wisdom, courage, and the possibility of meaningfulness, and will press upon our minds the deepest mysteries, so that we may feel again their majesty and power? What do we ever know that is higher than that power which, from time to time, seizes our lives, and reveals us startlingly to ourselves as creatures set down here bewildered? Why does death so catch us by surprise, and why love? We still and always want waking.”

I am enamored of this particular midrash, for I read it as a kind of Jewish counterpart to Dillard’s words. R. Yehoshua ben Korha is arguing that Moses’ hiding his face at the burning bush was his response to God’s offer to explain to him these “deepest mysteries.” If so, now the stakes are suddenly even greater than whether or not Moses will accept the urgent mission to save the Jews from slavery. That’s why R. Yehoshua ben Korha criticizes Moses’ behavior: if Moses had not hidden his face, he says, God would have revealed to Moses “what is above” – the deepest theological and cosmological secrets – and “what is below” – the secrets of how the world works, God’s conduct of the world. He would have revealed “what has been and what will be in the future” – the meaning of history, the secrets of redemption.

The questions underlying this midrash are those I ask myself continually about the relations among “Judaism,” “literature,” and “religion”: what and how can literature tell us about the great mysteries of life? How much can it know and reveal, and where are its limits? Do literature and criticism also have a mission in the world to redeem and save? What are the ethics of reading and writing, of knowing and not knowing, of teaching and learning? The midrash invites us to study these questions, to read between the lines, look carefully at the language of this passage and become participants in the back and forth of the debate. The rhetorical construction of the text forces us to do so; this is “oral Torah” as it searches and amplifies meaning in the gaps of the written Torah.

How does R. Yehoshua support his radical interpretation that Moses did not act rightly in hiding his face? He changes the linear narrative sequence and jumps ahead in time to the story of the Golden Calf. Why choose that particular story for proof? And why make such an abrupt juxtaposition between the two stories? Employing a formalistic literary approach, we see that the stories of Moses at the bush and the Golden Calf have strong thematic parallels and linguistic links. In the aftermath of the Golden Calf, there is another intense, intimate, emotional argument and dialogue between Moses and God: once again the Jewish people’s fate is at stake; their lives are in danger; Moses is tested in his leadership. This time, though, God is the reluctant one, not Moses. Moses pleads aggressively with God to save and forgive the people. After God finally accedes, Moses daringly presses on and asks God to reveal his “glory” and his “ways”; Moses asks for another awesome personal revelation of God, but this is a reverse mirror image of the burning bush story. At the end of the Golden Calf story, both Moses and God hide their faces. The people now relate to Moses after the calf as Moses related to God at the burning bush – fearful to look at his great radiance.
There is another reason why R. Yehoshua has juxtaposed the two stories. A main principle of rabbinic interpretation states, “There is no before or after in Scripture” (Sifri BaMidbar 9; Pesahim 6b). In other words, the biblical narrative is not written in a linear, chronological way. So deciphering the meaning of biblical episodes requires the interpreter to search in many simultaneous dimensions, including different ways of juxtaposing them “anachronistically.” The eminent Jewish historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi puts it this way: the rabbis played with time “as with an accordion, expanding and collapsing it at will.”

This is not arbitrary play; there are close literary parallels and links between the two stories. On a deeper philosophical, existential, and theological level, time itself is a flexible category. As Einstein helped us understand, “Time and space are modes by which we think and not conditions in which we live.”

The rabbis are probing the deeper meaning of history in a world that God set in motion. They are striving to catch glimpses of the face of God in history and the meaning of human suffering. The biblical word for “history” is *toladot*, literally meaning “generations,” from the root *y-l-d*, “to give birth.” What is history bringing forth? To what is it giving birth? How is it moving along the trajectory of a divine plan from creation to redemption? History is not only the record of the generations of Jewish people through their long journey in time, their dispensations, and travails; it is part of a meta-history, a universal human and cosmic drama with its terrors and catastrophes but to which there is a promised redemptive end—and for which God assigned the Jewish people a special task. Even Sherlock Holmes asks: “What object is served by this circle of misery and violence and fear? It must tend to some end, or else our universe is ruled by chance, which is unthinkable.” So R. Yehoshua ben Korha rebukes Moses for hiding his face when God was willing to reveal those secrets of history, to tell him “what is above and what is below, what has been and what will be in the future.” He reads the biblical dialogue of God and Moses after the Golden Calf as a direct continuation and response to their earlier dialogue at the burning bush:

> So when Moses later asked to behold [God], as it is said, “Show me, I beg you, Your glory” [Ex. 33:18], God replied to Moses, “I came to show you, but you hid your face. Now I tell you that ‘man shall not see Me and live’ [Ex. 33:20]. For when I wanted, you did not want.”

Moses did not do well, should not have hid his face at the burning bush—because later on, when Moses did want to see and know the deepest mysteries of God and the universe, God was then unwilling. Case proved? Elementary, my dear Watson?

Judaim

Not quite. R. Yehoshua of Sirkhîn, in the name of his teacher, R. Levi, and R. Hoshaya have a comeback. In a characteristic move of oral Torah, they argue the opposite, using the same scriptural parallels. Moses’ behavior was indeed right; God did reward him for it, and did reveal Himself more deeply.

Even so, God did show him as a reward for “and Moses hid [va-yaster] his face” [Ex. 3:6] we read, “the Lord spoke unto Moses face to face” [Ex. 33:11]. And as a reward for “he was afraid” [va-yarei – Ex. 3:6] we read, “and they were afraid [va-yerei] to come close him” [Ex. 34:30]. And as reward for “he was afraid to look” [va-mehabeet – Ex. 3:6] we read, “and he looks [mehabeet] upon the likeness of the Lord.”

To sum up this counterargument: our original verse from Exodus 3:6, “And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God,” has been parsed here as three separate actions: (1) “hid his face,” (2) “for he was afraid,” (3) “to look upon God.” These three acts of Moses, this opposing argument goes, were actually meritorious. They are what led later to his three rewards: (1) for “And Moses hid his face” [Ex. 3:6], he was rewarded with the radiant illumination of his face [Ex. 34:29–30]; (2) for “he was afraid” [Ex. 3:6], he was rewarded with the illumination of his face [Ex. 34:30]; and (3) for “to look upon God” [Ex. 3:6], he was given a vision of God’s glory, “The likeness of the Lord he beholds” (Num. 12:8). Here—in a reversal of the previous critical reading—Moses’ hiding his face at the burning bush was the very act that led to his being given the greatest prophetic powers and the special illumination of his own face.

What do we do with these two opposite interpretations which the midrash, in another characteristic of oral Torah, leaves perplexingly unresolved? I would suggest that each allows a glimpse of a “different face of God,” as it were, a God who indeed reveals and conceals himself in so many different ways and times in our lives, in the world, in the Bible, in history, and in “literature,” a God who is always larger than our grasp. Moreover, the effect is seductive; the play of revelation and concealment in the midrash, as in the biblical narrative, draws us in, whets our desire to probe further. Like Moses who presses more and more for God to reveal himself in the aftermath of the Golden Calf, we seek more and more to know, to penetrate the mystery. We return and reread, circle in again, look between the lines, over and over. We, too, get a tantalizing glimpse from the cliff of the rock, and then it goes dark; we search again. In this desire to know and see more, there is also an energy of “eros,” and in the process we become more and more part of, “united with,” what we read; it becomes ours. This is “knowledge” in the sense of the Hebrew word *da‘at*, as in the
famous verse from Genesis, “And Adam knew (yada) Eve” (Gen. 4:1). As Elyakim Simovici puts it, “You know something, da‘at, when it is no longer a knowledge you possess, but has become an integral part of your very self, your identity.”

4.

Here we have moved beyond the analogy of Torah to a detective story. The fascination is not just that of Holmesian intellectual play in solving a mystery. It becomes a relation of love. We sense a depth of meaning glimmering between the gaps, a hidden face... like the concealed face of a beloved. “Knowledge” is the ostensible goal of the Academy. But what relation is there between knowing, interpreting, living, loving? Can we ever really know without eros, the energy of wanting and drive for connection? Can we ever deeply understand a work of literature without somehow loving it, let alone another human being, or God, or Torah?

There is a famous parable about this eros of learning and interpretation in the Zohar, one of the classic texts of the Jewish mystical tradition (Kabbalah). The speaker of the story is a hidden holy sage, disguised as a donkey driver:

[Torah] may be compared to a beloved maiden, beautiful in form and appearance, concealed secretly in her palace. She has a single lover unknown to anyone - except to her, surreptitiously. Out of the love that he feels for her, this lover passes by her gate constantly, lifting his eyes to every side. Knowing that her lover is constantly circling her gate, what does she do? She opens a little window in that secret place where she is, reveals her face to her lover, and quickly withdraws, concealing herself. None of those near the lover even sees or notices, only the lover, and his inner being and heart and soul go out to her. He knows that out of love for him she revealed herself for a moment to arouse him.

So it is with words of Torah: she only reveals herself to her lover. Torah knows that one who is wise of heart circles her gate every day. What does she do? She reveals her face to him from the palace and beckons to him with a hint, then swiftly withdraws to her place, hiding away. None of those there knows or notices - he alone does, and his inner being and heart and soul follow her. Thus Torah reveals and conceals herself, approaching her lover lovingly to arouse love with him. (Zohar II:99a “Saba d’Mishpatim”)

Only the lover earns the right to see more and more of the beautiful maiden, who in turn reciprocally arouses him in increasing intimacy.

At the same time, this intimate relation to the Torah grows through struggle, as we see in the conflicting interpretations over Moses hiding his face. In a famous talmudic passage, “R. Hyya bar Abba said: ‘Even the parent and child, the teacher and disciple who study Torah at the same gate become enemies of each other. And they do not move from there until they come to love each other’” (Kiddushin 30a-b). In rabbinic language this conflict and struggle to understand the Torah is known as the “war of Torah.” But how can war lead to love?

A contemporary talmudist and Jewish thinker, R. Yitzhak Hutner (1906-1980), explains this “war of Torah” not just as another method of study but as the essential foundation of generative, creative Torah. The “love at the end” comes, he writes, not despite the conflict but because of and through it. That love flourishes on the very soil of the conflict (makhlket), for “all love reaches its apex at the time the two sides are partners in creating.” This type of love is a non-Freudian and nonromantic eros; it is not about dissolution into the other, possessive conflict, or an act of theological “grace” but about partnership in generative creation. It moves even beyond notions of “reciprocity” or “dialogue” and puts “love,” “generativity,” and “fecundity” at the center of the reading, interpreting, learning, and teaching relation. It may also be a model, I would suggest, for the ways we might read and teach literature.

But we are not quite finished with our midrash. Yet another understanding of Exodus 3:6 comes from R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993), who bases his reading on an expanded version in the Talmud Berakhot 7a, which fills out God’s response as: “When I wanted, you did not want; now you want and I do not want.” When God first calls out to Moses at the burning bush, he is ready, says R. Soloveitchik, to reveal himself in the fullness of absolute truth. This was Moses’ chance to penetrate the depths, to comprehend clearly the ways of God, of good and evil, and to find the answers to all the great questions of life. But instead, Moses hid his face. R. Soloveitchik suggests the reason why: he did not want all the answers to be known, all the secrets to be revealed. He chose to remain in the darkness of human finite understanding; he feared to become an “all-kower.” But why make such a choice? Answers R. Soloveitchik, Moses understood that if he were to “know” everything in the absolute sense, he would lose his ability to feel compassion and love for his fellow creatures, those still bound by the limits of human understanding, those who still suffered. Had Moses understood everything, he would have seen that from the ultimate, divine, “nonhuman” perspective everything that appeared as negative in the end was ultimately patterned for good, including death, poverty, suffering, loneliness. And then he could not have performed kindness, felt compassion, or protested against God. R. Soloveitchik poignantly writes, “Loving-kindness comes to humanity at a heavy price: lack of knowing.” Moses gave up the most precious and
elevated human desire: to know the all and to know God ultimately; he sacrificed this for the sake of love for his fellows, to be able to suffer with and do good for them.

This, R. Soloveitchik continues, is the deeper meaning of God's telling Moses after the Golden Calf, "you cannot see my face and live," but see only a glimpse of "God's back" from a fissure in the rock where God places him: "When I wanted, you did not want; now that you want, I do not want." That is not a petulant rejoinder. Rather, God is reminding Moses of his earlier choice: he cannot have both absolute knowledge and human kindness at the same time. Nevertheless, continues R. Soloveitchik, Moses' choice to sacrifice absolute knowledge for the sake of his relation to his people coincides with the refinement of Moses' own character and desires; it transforms Moses' own person into something purified and illuminating. That also explains the other seemingly opposite rabbinic opinion - the one praising Moses' decision to "hide his face" and affirming that God indeed rewarded him for that action. For due to this action, Moses received the highest prophetic powers and shining illumination of his own face. In sum, like any good talmudic commentator (and detective) R. Soloveitchik here also reconciles the contradiction between the two opinions and finds the deeper unity underlying them. Both positions are true: (1) Moses hid his face and that pious act granted him prophetic powers and the shining illumination later on, and (2) he hid his face and missed an opportunity that God offered to explain to him the deepest mysteries of the world, and so was refused later, when he asked again. R. Soloveitchik understands the midrash to mean that the ultimate compassion and love for one's fellows comes not from knowledge but from a certain kind "not-knowing." I'd like to suggest that an essential issue for the study of literature and religion, indeed for all academic study, is how to make that "not knowing" more than a series of negative critical gestures or an empty shell, how to make the "critical" searching light of intellect also a "shining illumination of the face" and not a place where the dizziness of the mind spins on itself. How might the university become a place where we search for knowledge and yet also nurture respect for concealment and mystery?

These are all very serious issues, but there is yet one more way to read our midrash and think about the relation of Judaism, literature, and religion: humor. When God retorts, "When I wanted you didn't want; now you want and I don't want!" it may be that the rabbis are also winking at us. Humor is a constitutive element in Judaism, found throughout the biblical and rabbinic corpus. It's helped Jews to endure through history. On a deeper level, if indeed we saw from the ultimate distance, were given absolute knowledge, we would have no more questions about good and evil, life and death, the meaning of suffering or history. If all the mysteries were finally revealed, our mouths would "then be filled with laughter," as the Psalmist puts it (Ps. 126:2) in describing the messianic redemption. This humor is not derisive or cynical. It can be the smile that comes from amazement, wonder, surprise at things unusually juxtaposed or out of natural proportion. Such humor is also an antidote for arrogance; it offers a welcome distance from one's own narrow life and ego.

So there is much in the subtle wink of God's answer to Moses in our midrash. When we wink, we hint to the other person to "read between the lines"; we might be signaling the opposite of the surface meaning ("Don't take what I am saying too seriously"), indicating there's a secret meaning here only for you and me, or emphasizing our intimate relation. It's a way of expressing certain things that can't be said directly or literally. And here I want to locate another kind of nexus of literature, religion, and Judaism. All involve the struggle to put into language so many things that are beyond" expression and require indirection. That's one of the secrets of stories, and why the deepest teachings are usually indirect, revealing and concealing at once.

Midrash plays with language in a quite "literary" way, but in the end one can't equate midrash or any form of literature with summaries or interpretation of the "ideas" found "in" them. All good literary writing, reading, and criticism, as well as good pedagogy, uses language not to "arrive at conclusions" but to create experiences in reading that are inseparable from the ideas being presented or played with. But for the rabbis, all this is in service of something more than aesthetic or creative pleasure, intellectual challenge, or psychological self-understanding. I am tempted to call rabbinic forms of interpretation "messianic" modes of reading. They create/enact an experience that moves us beyond the linear tunnels of history and our limited selves; they are "performative" in both style and content. In our sample midrash, the content is about the opportunity to know the all and understand the secrets of history; in style, its nonchronological readings, abrupt juxtapositions, and plays with multiple dimensions of words and phrases all open up depths and reveal other narratives and other "faces" of the human and the divine. This activity has an inextricably ethical dimension in helping us, too, "illumine our faces" and sanctify the ways we treat others.

To return to our opening illustration, "It's not a text; it's your mother!" Like your mother, it doesn't leave you alone; it calls you back again and again. You catch a glimmer of light, fall back into confusion, put it together
another way, see more deeply, return yet again. "Torah" is not a book, not any defined essence, not a "text," and not "religion." But it encompasses all those, because it is *shared space between you and God.*

There are complex, ancient Jewish laws still in effect about how the religious scribe (sofer) painstakingly hand writes a Torah scroll and its 304,504 black letters: there is special ink, quill, and parchment; there are laws about how to form the letters; and there are laws about the blank spaces. The letters must not be allowed to touch each other; all must be surrounded by white space (*Menahkbot* 29b–30a). If one letter of the 304,504 touches the next at any point, the entire scroll is invalidated. R. Soloveitchik understands this law on a deeper level: the white space is all the unwritten and continuing oral Torah.17

Blank space. Here, too, is where the reader and the writer become partners in literature and also in Torah. Here, too, is another way "Judaism," "literature," and "religion" themselves intersect; there is an "empty space" between them. The connections I have made in this chapter are only spaces "in between." You, my reader, will read "between the lines" and create your own connections.

Notes

1 The vowels are heard when the Hebrew words are pronounced in oral speech. But when a reader looks at the vowel-less written version, she or he already has to interpret the letters, decipher possible meanings. A given set of letters can be vocalized in different ways, as in our above example of *c*t*. This characteristic of Hebrew makes for a richness, for tonalities, harmonic resonances, leitmotifs, and plays with meaning that can't be captured in translation. You have to "hear" to read, as it were, and sense the "perpetual murmur from the waves beyond the shore" (Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976], 8).

2 The *Talmud*, redacted in the fifth century CE, is the great repository of oral Torah with 63 tractates and more than 6,000 printed pages. The word "Talmud" comes from the root *l-m-d*, meaning "learning." Learning, commenting on, debating, and analyzing Talmud is at the heart of Jewish life and identity.

3 The original Hebrew version of the Torah scroll has no numbered chapters and verses. That format of editing the Bible was originated later by Christian theologians. In rabbinic reading, this lack of chapter, verse, and conventional punctuation opens the biblical text to further interpretive possibilities.

4 There is a traditional rabbinic division of the different dimensions of Torah into four levels: *peshet*, *remez*, *drash*, *sod* — also referred to by the acronym *ParDeS* "garden," i.e., the "fertile garden of meaning." These four Hebrew words roughly translate as: (1) surface or plain, literal meaning; (2) hinted, allegorical meaning; (3) homiletic meaning; and (4) secret, mystical meaning — though the levels overlap, like skins of an onion.