WHY I DON’T TEACH “THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE” ANYMORE

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As I begin writing this essay, my head turns toward the window above my desk to see the beloved blue sky of a warm fall day in Jerusalem where I live. I am wondering if the familiar whirring and grinding sounds I hear are the police helicopters hovering once again over the area known as the “Old City” due to unrest, riots, stone throwing, and bloodshed. I live a mile or so from that ancient section. It is encircled by massive walls built by the Ottomans in the sixteenth century. Compacted inside its one square kilometer are some of the holiest sites of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: the Temple Mount, Western Wall, Dome of the Rock, Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Via Dolorosa, and more. I have heard those helicopters often over the past months, a summer of war and lethal conflicts between Jews and Arabs.

Late last night, I heard them again when two funerals were taking place near the Old City—one for a twenty-three-year-old recent Catholic convert to Judaism from Ecuador killed in a terror attack, and the other for the Palestinian terrorist who murdered her as his car intentionally careened into the commuter train stop where she waited. All of which is to say that in my life, the Bible is not just “literature” or a “text,” and not even a “sacred text.” It is the locus for the collision of people and religions that make up this city. It is a landscape that surrounds me. It is the wind and air around and inside of me. It fills the sky, hills, rocks, streets, and stones. I am caught up in literal life-and-death battles about how the Bible is read and taught.

In this essay, I wish I could provide helpful advice and practical solutions to the questions raised by the editors of this forum. What I really have to offer here is just an account of my experience and aspirations as a teacher, my collisions with reality, and my continuing readjustments. Teaching the “Bible as Literature” in Israel was quite different for me from teaching it in America. I have been challenged, humbled, and learned from both experi-
Before moving to Israel in the fall of 2000 to take my current position as professor of English literature at Bar-Ilan University near Tel Aviv, I taught for twenty-five years at the University of Maryland, College Park where I offered “The Bible as Literature” course several times. After moving to Israel, I taught the course only once. The experience was so different and jarring that I decided to leave it to the various official professors of Bible in Bar-Ilan’s large Bible department. I have not gone near it since and have no plans to do so. Before explaining why, I want first simply to pose the question of why we—or more specifically “I”—am teaching at all. I cannot discuss the Bible as literature course or its role in the university unless I ask the question that nags at me about the relation of spirituality and education in all my literature courses.

I have included this quotation from Annie Dillard’s *The Writing Life* on the first page of all my syllabi over the last several years.

> 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?...Why does death so catch us by surprise, and why love? We still and always want waking.

Despite the eloquence of that passage, I know many of my colleagues would argue that “spirituality” is not part of an academic education. Stanley Fish, for example, would be among the most prominent in his aptly titled *Save the World on Your Own Time*. Others would assert that what we really need is to “demystify” students’ beliefs and drill in them “critical thinking” rather than immerse them in more “mysteries.” The word “spirituality” is also clichéd; I am not happy with it. But it does afford me a non-denominational, non-ideological way to express my conviction that education is not just to help students master disciplinary practices, acquire tools for critical thinking, accumulate information, or develop job skills. Frederick Buechner put it best when he wrote of needing to find “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” Thirty-five years after beginning my academic career and somewhat battle-wearied, I still cling to the conviction that my ultimate role—somehow or another—is to help my students discover who they are and what they can give to the world.

If pressed, I would categorize myself as an “Orthodox Jew,” but I do not like labels. I am always probing and questioning my own beliefs. The surroundings of my daily life also constantly challenge them (see above: “helicopters”). I resonate with the famous saying attributed to the physicist
Niels Bohr that profound truths are "recognized by the fact that the opposite is also a profound truth." Jews study not only the Bible, which we call the "written Torah," but also the thousands of years and endless volumes of interpretation, questioning, and analysis called the "oral Torah." As somebody once put it, when studying their holy books, Jews argue and pound on them; when they put them away, they kiss them. I became able simultaneously to pound and kiss, venerate and question, seek answers and solicit uncertainty after years of study and life experience.

When I began to teach Bible as literature to undergraduates at Maryland, however, I was afraid of futile debates between believers and nonbelievers, theological warfare between different religious groups, or fundamentalists torpedoing the class. On the first day of class, I would tell my students that we would all "check our beliefs at the door." A formalist-aesthetic approach of close reading, I thought, would be my model, along with essays in gender studies, and psychology. As one of my brightest students in one of these first courses said to me, "You professors take the rug out from under us, and we never even had a floor." He furtively confessed that he had been reading *Dark Night of the Soul* and Meister Eckhart on his own. Robert Alter and the documentary hypothesis were not addressing his real concerns. Another student said at the end of a semester, "It was an excellent course, don't get me wrong, but we cleverly avoided really talking about God. Didn't we?" He then added, "And He is a major character in the book!" There is a famous rabbinic saying: "Much have I learned from my teachers, even more from my colleagues, but from my students most of all"; that also means, I found, painfully learning from these kinds of resistances.

For this reason, early in my career I developed a pedagogy involving students writing letters to the class and to the author, reading them aloud and discussing them in class. It was a kind of "blog" before there was such a thing. After reading this "resisting" letter, I understood why this student was very quiet in class:

The Bible should be read as a "piece of literature," they say. In other words I should distance myself emotionally, 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 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 advised me to do just this. "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 is not 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 an intelligent and
That last sentence especially stung; she was right. As Kafka once said: "A book must be an axe for the frozen sea within us." Wasn't that my own fundamental belief and the reason I became an English major and then an English professor—and the reason why I too love the Bible?

Another kind of resistance surfaced when I taught this course at Bar-Ilan University after moving to Israel. Going over the syllabus on the first day, I mentioned we would be reading the Book of Job. A young woman in the front row loudly and dismissively sniffed, "We already did that in high school!" The student's tone clearly meant, "Why are you bothering me with this? Why should I have to read it again?" That comment was a taste of what was to come. I was abruptly reminded that I was now in another country with an entirely different style of cultural discourse, set of ideological conflicts, and student body. My classes at College Park had been a mix of different religious backgrounds and ethnic identities, but we all existed politely together in the tolerant, multi-cultural atmosphere of the 1990's American public university within a nation of strict separation of church and state. Bar-Ilan was founded in 1955; its mission, by contrast, is to achieve academic excellence while fostering commitment to Jewish identity, ethical and spiritual values, and Zionism. Today it is a multicultural mix of Jewish-Israelis and Arab-Israelis; religious and secular Christians, Muslims, and Jews; and immigrants from all over the world. In a given class, family backgrounds can range from Russia to Yemen, France, Morocco, India, Iraq, Canada, and Argentina, and all live inside the political cauldron of the contemporary Middle East. They deal with terror attacks and wars in which they have been directly involved as soldiers, citizens running to bomb shelters, or bereaved family and friends. Nobody in Israel can "check their beliefs at the door"; religion is an explosive issue on the public agenda and in daily life.

So there I was—to quote Zorba the Greek—with "the full catastrophe." Most of the students who had come from religious high schools had their guards up and either argued with or detached themselves from approaches that asked different questions. Non-religious students were often uncomfortable with the religious students' comments and not sure what to make of the material. They seemed to empathize with Mark Twain when he said, "It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me; it is the parts that I do understand." I felt the class never really gelled, never "caught fire," no matter what pedagogical tricks I used. Teaching it exhausted me. After the semester ended, I decided to just let the subject remain in the Bar-Ilan's large department of Bible. I concluded that in the Bar-Ilan English
Department I could strive toward those goals I mentioned at the beginning of this essay by not directly teaching any "religious texts"—or, to put it another way, teaching by indirection, the way that the greatest spiritual guides themselves usually have taught.

Parker Palmer describes teaching as "creating a space in which the community of truth is practiced." He bases his postmodern spiritual notion of "truth" on its cognate "troth":

a covenant with another, a pledge to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship, a relationship forged of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks. To know something or someone in truth is to enter troth with the known, to rejoin with new knowing what our minds have put asunder.7

I see myself now as offering this kind of "space" in my classroom. In Israel, different cultures, communities, and religions are always colliding. Sometimes in a Shakespeare course or literary theory class, I think to myself, "Maybe it's enough that today an Arab-Israeli Muslim student performed in a creative class exercise with an Orthodox Jewish student; that they laughed together; that they read and heard each other's letters; that they had a chance to exchange personal existential anxieties in this classroom space."

Like Annie Dillard, Marcel Proust wrote eloquently about the "spiritual" meanings of literature, but also noted its limits:

It is one of the great and wonderful characteristics of good books...that for the author they may be called "Conclusions," but for the reader "Incitements." We feel very strongly that our own wisdom begins where that of the author leaves off, and would like him to provide us with answers when all he is able to do is provide us with desires....Reading is on the threshold of the spiritual life; it can introduce us to it: it does not constitute it.8

That helps me more delicately define the relation between "Bible as literature" and "literature as Bible." As I mentioned above, Jews study and venerate the "oral Torah" as much as the "written Torah." The Torah used in the synagogue is handwritten by specially trained and pious scribes according to detailed ancient laws and traditions. One is that the letters must not be allowed to touch each other and that all the letters need to be surrounded by white space.9 The great twentieth-century Talmudist and philosopher Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik understood this law on a deeper level: "Much more than what is written is what is not written; and around each written letter of the Torah, there is much that is not being written. The surrounding white spaces symbolize the entire oral Torah that is not able to be written."10 For Soloveitchik those blank spaces also signify the inevitable frustration of teaching: one can never convey all that she or he
knows and wants to give over to the student.

So in conclusion, I might call what I have written here some of my "oral Torah." Blank spaces remain. There is much I would like to give over to my students and cannot. I have not offered any "solutions" to the questions our editors raised; I simply stopped teaching the Bible as literature at Bar-Ilan. But I still believe that the student at Maryland who asked, "Isn't reading supposed to change us and the world in some way?" was right, and I work "indirectly" toward that goal. If, as Proust said, "reading is on the threshold of the spiritual life," then I work on the "threshold" of Bible as literature / literature as Bible, trying to create "blank spaces" for my students in which to find themselves and what they can give to the world. At the end of my last honors seminar on the Bible as literature at Maryland, a brilliant student wrote this final letter to our class. It represents everything I would hope to achieve in all my courses.

Dear Class:

We've chatted long and hard about the Old Testament and discovered more ways than I thought possible to look at it. We talked of good and evil and love and humanity, and almost all of creation. We've looked at families and gender and cycles of forgiveness. And perhaps some of us are in agreement with Jan's statement about the Bible, that "it is not supposed to make sense." But that's exactly why it does make sense. We can look at it from any angle and see a semblance of ourselves in its reflection of the world. We find connection (and in a small way, comfort) by that recognition. And that's the marvel. That's why so many millions of people have turned to it, and continue to turn to it.

While I started out the semester asking, "What is the meaning of life?" and I'm not necessarily any closer to the answer, I've learned more ways to search for it ... it comes down to us to judge ourselves. We may all be "tools" in a master plan. Or there may truly be free will. We may all be doomed to isolation and failure — no character in the entire Bible exists without suffering, and an occasional mistake. Even the "upright and blameless" Job must bear his share.

Whatever the truth of reality is (which we have no way to ultimately determine) it is only ourselves that we can hold accountable ... We lose things when we lose track of ourselves. The Bible is one way of finding ourselves. Our connections with the characters, our instincts to fill in the spaces by relating what we would feel or think, that is what provides meaning, what unifies us all as humans.

We often cannot make sense of the data of our lives ... we cannot always see past our present knowledge to the changes that are occurring in our being. We can only take Pam's interpretation of Eve to heart and realize that not just the serpent, but God and ourselves are "necessary to the realization of our purpose: to live."

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NOTES

1. Dillard, Writing Life, 72–73.
2. Buechner, Wishful Thinking, 119.
4. Talmud, Ta’anit, 7a.
6. Twain, Wit and Wisdom, 24.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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