

From Context to Text

Ismar Schorsch

American Jews are on the cusp of a spiritual sea change. Collectively and individually they are reverting to the most traditional of literary genres in Judaism: commentaries.

After a hiatus of two centuries, a spurt of new Bible commentaries and translations of the Talmud has restored the study of sacred texts to the center of their religious consciousness. Indicative of the upsurge is the striking fact that since 1981 each of the three major denominations of American Judaism has produced a modern Bible commentary for its adherents. Till then, each relied more or less on the *Hertz Humash*, which was authored by England's chief rabbi in the 1930s. Whatever their vast differences, these commentaries are part of a widespread shift in sentiment that will not be picked up by any national Jewish population survey.

Traditional Judaism has always been in the words of Derrida, "a text surrounded by commentary," even if that pagination did not become ingrained until the printing of Hebrew books. The need to interpret was coterminous with the embrace of sacred books. It began before the Hebrew canon was codified and never grew superfluous. In time, the *Tanakh* (the Bible) emerged not only as the source of national cohesion but also as the wellspring of ultimate significance and infinite meaning. Unending interpretations of both a critical and creative sort produced the arresting anomaly of canon without closure. This dialectic destined commentary to serve as the vehicle for understanding the text and expanding it. Thus from the early *halakhic* midrashim (biblical interpretations that employ

relatively complex, non-literal exegetical methods) to the Talmud and the *Zohar* and beyond, rabbinic Judaism generated a library of exegetical works in Hebrew and Aramaic, Greek and Arabic.

While the form subordinated individual authors to the text, it never quashed originality. New wine was simply poured into old bottles. In other words, the letters, words, and verses of the Torah became building blocks for the construction of daring edifices of new meaning. At the same time, this exegetical tradition never let up trying to fathom the overt or plain meaning of the text, namely the original intent of the author. A firm framework of faith kept the polarities of exoteric and esoteric interpretation in creative balance.

A text in the midst of commentaries also attained a measure of timelessness. The format externalized a deep-seated value of rabbinic Judaism. The Torah itself was perceived as oblivious to the constraints of time. Ethical or theological factors determined the order of its laws or narratives, not the external and mechanical principle of chronology. Likewise, the format drew commentators from different centuries and cultures into dialogue. Focused on the same text, they mounted a conversation unbounded by time and place.

Modernity shattered the insularity of late medieval Ashkenazic Jewry and dislodged the traditional centrality of sacred texts. Despite Mendelssohn's farsighted project to translate the *Humash* (the Pentateuch) and comment on its plain meaning, emancipated Jews invested little time in writing biblical commentaries. In Germany they often returned to translate Scripture afresh; Luther's translation was too Christian to be serviceable for Jews. But only Ludwig Philippson and Samson Raphael Hirsch produced widely used commentaries to the Pentateuch; the former with a nod to

history, and the latter ingenious but uncritical in its fervor to renew the tradition.

In contrast, a German translation of the Babylonian Talmud did not get underway until over a century later in 1896. The delay reflected the Jewish fear that a literal and unexpurgated translation would provide grist on a grand scale for the opponents of emancipation. But it also expressed the extent to which the Talmud had been devalued internally. When in 1913 the young Gershom Scholem sought to gain access to the world of the Talmud in Berlin, there were almost no options available to him. German Jews had come to disparage the study of Talmud as much as that of Jewish mysticism. Formerly the staple of Jewish piety, both disciplines had been condemned to the dustbin.

On the other hand, the practitioners of critical Jewish scholarship certainly continued to pore over the ancient texts of Judaism, but they did not write commentaries. In an age overwhelmed by historical consciousness, Jewish scholars struggled to introduce the category of time into the study of a literature that historically denigrated the category.

As I tried to convey by the title of my book, *From Text to Context*, which examined the first century of this change in mentality, the research agenda shifted in the nineteenth century as scholars sought to recover the context in which the texts were composed. Historical meaning was a function of origins. Hence the visceral repudiation of creative midrash, which had striven for relevance at the expense of historical meaning.

In consequence, scholarship turned synthetic. Texts were now plumbed to solve historical problems with data drawn from many quarters. As a literary form, commentaries tended to be disjointed, analytical, and too narrowly focused. But the quest for context

also demoted the text to a secondary role. Even when H.N. Bialik and Louis Ginzberg refashioned the lore and legends of rabbinic Judaism into captivating Hebrew and English anthologies in the early decades of the twentieth century, they still wrenched the narrative specimens from their original exegetical setting.

The point of my historical digression is to illuminate the unappreciated novelty of our own day. The sea change of which I speak marks a return from context to text. Not that synthetic, historical scholarship has suddenly ceased. With Jewish studies firmly ensconced in the American university, it continues unabated. Young scholars with new sources, better tools, and fresh perspectives formulate research projects undreamt or beyond the reach of their predecessors. However, such continuity should not obscure the discontinuity in the resurgent centrality of the text.

The Babylonian Talmud, for example, which was translated but once in its entirety in Germany before 1933, is currently appearing in the United States in three different translations by Jacob Neusner (completed), Adin Steinsaltz, and ArtScroll (both still in progress). The latter two are accompanied by helpful commentaries that render the text accessible to serious learners. Gone are the inhibitions engendered by an inhospitable environment. Today Jews regard the uniqueness of the Talmud as a source of ethnic pride and religious meaning, worthy of study in the university as well as the synagogue.

Equally astonishing is the recent profusion of biblical commentaries by Jews of all stripes. If I were to plot the trajectory of this trend, I would go back to 1964 when Nahum Sarna and E.A. Speiser published their respective commentaries to Genesis. Written in a non-technical language, both books set the biblical text within the context of the ancient Near East in a captivating fashion,

without ducking the urgent question of religious significance. In 1981 and 1985, Robert Alter weighed in with two highly readable volumes that cogently argue for the application of literary perspectives to the narratives and poetry of the Bible. Two years later, in their elegant literary guide to both the Hebrew and Greek Testaments of Scripture, Alter and Frank Kermode intensified their advocacy of shifting away from exclusively tracing the text in its formation to explicating it in its final form as a piece of literature. Thereafter, the baton was passed on to *Prooftexts*, a seminal journal that was established in 1980 and is devoted to the inter-textuality of all of Jewish literature. In countless essays over the years, it has evinced the high yield that can be garnered by treating biblical texts literarily.

By the nineties, the exegetical ferment produced the multi-volume set of *The JPS Torah/Bible Commentary*, including one on the *haftarot* (portions from the Prophets and Hagiographa read during Sabbath and festival services). This magnificent achievement combines the old and the new in an exemplary fashion. Basically historical and therefore contextual, the commentary sparkles with deep insights into the ancient meaning of the text. But this fidelity to the scholarly ethos is balanced and enriched by constant reference to the unbroken history of Jewish biblical exegesis, and not all insight is of recent vintage. In addition, the commentary extensively traces the afterlife of biblical ideas, values, and institutions in post-biblical Judaism. No less typical of its Jewish orientation, the commentary quotes freely from rabbinic literature to show how the art of midrash refashioned biblical passages for spiritual effect.

Under the tutelage of Burton Visotzky, who authored his own idiosyncratic, pungent commentaries to Genesis and Exodus in the nineties, Bill Moyers grew enamored of the age-old, freewheeling

Jewish dialogue with the biblical text. In his oft rebroadcast, ten-part group conversation on Genesis, which premiered on public television in fall 1996, Moyers introduced America to midrashic discourse. Judaism had always expressed its reverence for the canon by reading the text literally and figuratively, critically and imaginatively. Paradoxically, it was an anti-fundamentalist mindset that preserved the vibrancy of the canon as Judaism's fundamental text.

What started as a trickle in the sixties became a veritable torrent over the last decade, as volumes of commentary continue to unabatedly cascade off the press. For advanced students of Hebrew Scripture, the *Anchor Bible Commentary Series* continue to set the bar. Moshe Greenberg on *Ezekiel*, Jacob Milgrom on *Leviticus*, Moshe Weinfeld on *Deuteronomy*, Baruch A. Levine on *Numbers*, and Michael Y. Fox on *Proverbs* are models of precision, empathy, and erudition that are informed by a lively religious sensibility. Of a more popular and personal sort, the commentaries by Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, Norman J. Cohen, and Leon R. Kass on *Genesis* and *Exodus* not only span the religious spectrum, from secular to Orthodox, but abound with memorable literary, midrashic, and philanthropic ingenuity. While not a commentary, the noteworthy book by Norman Podhoretz on *The Prophets* is heavily exegetical and heroically engaging.

Finally, steering a middle course, Alter returned to the fray with two volumes offering new translations and commentaries on *Genesis* and *Samuel* that exude elegance, penetration, and literary sensitivity. In marked contrast is the remarkable assemblage of early interpretations compiled and ordered by James L. Kugel. His book reveals how Jews read *The Bible as It Was* from the third century B.C.E. to the first century C.E., namely before its final canonization.

Taken together, both authors provide resounding evidence in favor of the argument that ancient and contemporary Jews are still united in reverence for the same sacred text and in the belief that it is their right to interpret it afresh.

In sum, without pretense to being complete, my survey of the flood tide of new biblical commentaries by Jews strongly suggests a resurgence of the sanctity and centrality of the text, to which the denominational commentaries surely owe their appearance. Once again, American Jews are reverting to their traditional role as the 'people of *the book*.' In countless study groups in synagogues and downtown offices, in Jewish community centers, and private homes, they are meeting to pore over a biblical book or a Talmudic tractate. Greatly diminished is the allure of the canned public lecture on a thematic topic by a renowned academic. What serious adult learners are seeking is admission to a venerable and unbroken dialogue, some life-affirming wisdom and intimate contact with the holy. A plethora of new translations and commentaries has given them entrée to the inner resources of Jewish religious vitality.

Ours is an age that is receptive to non-rational forms of expression. The intense research into the multifaceted phenomena of Jewish mysticism in general and Hasidism in particular since the pioneering work of Scholem, along with an upsurge of interest in the nature of rabbinic midrash, constitute the intellectual aquifers that have whetted our appetite for spirituality. We prefer to experience the power of an ingenious mystical idea, interpretation, or ritual than to comprehend its evolution. The freedom to deconstruct the text has always been one of the ways to preserve it.

Nevertheless, we must beware of the proposition that spiritual meaning can flow only from non-rational fonts. Ironically, it was the painstaking, dispassionate scholarship of Scholem and not the

intuitive, partisan presentation of Buber that convinced American Jews of the unimagined appeal of Jewish mysticism. Throughout the centuries, Judaism never renounced the validity of reading the Bible critically (*peshat*) in the face of the compelling need to read it creatively (*derash*). To study the Bible in a vacuum after two centuries of excavating the ruins of the ancient Near East is to indulge in willful ignorance. Nor is it necessary. The deeper understanding that has been gained of nearly every aspect of the biblical corpus abounds with profound religious significance in its own right. By dichotomizing the realms of the holy and history, faith and reason, we imply that to slake our thirst for spiritual uplift, we must take refuge among the pietists.

I know of no more auspicious change in the profile of American Jews than this silent revolution reconnecting us with our sacred texts. The text has always been our portable sanctuary, our venue for conversing with God, our reason for being. There can be no long-term survival for the Jewish people outside the text's sacred precincts, even in its own homeland. What defines being Jewish from a historic standpoint is a relationship to a holy text whose manifest expression is an unending literature of interpretation. As long as that dialogue persists, the possibility of renewing the tradition and ourselves is a living reality. Words can repair the world.