

**Part I: STRATEGIES - Text and Context:  
The Disciplined Interpretation of Torah Text**

**Chapter 3- Text and Historical Context:  
Entering a Time Machine - The Torah as a Historical  
Document**

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## Introducing the Historical Approach

*What does it mean to use a historical approach to the study of the Tanakh?*

The text is a window into the past and the past is a window into the text, and the historical perspectives makes us aware of changing associations of words and the sociology, archeology, geography, economics and politics behind the text. The historical method teaches us to suspend prejudices and to strive towards objectivity as we bridge the historical gap between the text of the past and the presumptions of the present. The Torah is not only an historical document but itself an attempt to write a history - an ideological history reflecting the authors' interests and worldviews.

History is a multifaceted discipline using different techniques and focusing on different aspects - social history, political history, intellectual history, nationalist history etc. The Tanakh can be approached historically in many different ways:

- 1- **National-origins History.** The Tanakh is always bidding its readers to remember the unique foundational events of the past that shaped our identity as a people. Remember the day you went out of Egypt. Remember the manna and place a sample in a jar preserved in the Mishkan. Here **history is a foundational saga of national origins.** This is the style of national history writing typical of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and it is the rationale for studying American history in America and Israeli history including Joshua to Kings in Israel. Nietzsche calls this "monumental history" because it seeks to honor the past as glorious. Young people are initiated into their own national identity through a dramatic story of its birth. For the Jews, the national autobiography is also the biography of God and the tale of the foundational legal document that created Israel as people at Sinai, that defined its institutions and that recognized God as its sovereign.
- 2- **Family Saga** a. genealogies (Gen. 4, 5, 10, Exodus 6, Numbers 1-4, Chronicles I 1-4, Matthew 1) b. places of journey (Numbers 33) c. family album (X-rated)
- 3- **Didactic History of Human Error.** Uniquely Biblical history is often filled with **self-criticism since the Jewish survival depends on learning from our mistakes** that led Israel into exile. Heroes are subject to criticism, so history is told with a didactic purpose (What does the Torah teach us for the future, not only what happened in the past to make us whom we are). We learn the past not necessarily to cherish it but to make sure it never happens again. For example, Judges 19 on national life without a king leads to moral anarchy of rape at Givah.
- 4- **Heilsgeschichte, Sacred Tale of God's Redemptive Acts: Prophetic or Messianic History.** Many Biblical stories are about the fulfillment of Divine promise or punishment that works itself in unexpected and yet expected ways over time. For example, God predicts in Genesis 15 that Abraham's descendants will go into exile and be enslaved but will eventually emerge with great wealth. For example, **typological history** where *massei avot siman l'banim*, where events in life of ancestors predict events in the life of the descendant, such as Abraham's descent to Egypt and the plagues on house of Pharaoh. Sacred

history is contained in a nutshell in **liturgical credo** (Gen. 26:1-10 and First Fruits Confession according to Gerhard Van Rad)

- 5- **Political history.** Modern historians often regard the books about the dynasties of David and Saul as **the first political history** describing a natural concatenation of causal events without decisive Divine miraculous intervention. Character development, political interest, institutional growth and political-religious idealism are all involved. Overlaid on the Joshua to Kings history is the strong editorial hand of a **historiographer** seeking to explain and the destruction of the First temple and exile as a moral and natural result of the political leadership and the people's violation of it founding covenant.
  
- 6- **ANE Cultural-History.** Contemporary historians use our newly rediscovered Ancient Near Eastern context (19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century discoveries) to **illuminate the Biblical contexts of institutions, laws and language** (for example the wife-sister relations in Nuzi). Rashi and Rambam did the same in their era, though with less reliable and less plentiful data. The use of various **documents from the ancient near east** world enhances our understanding of the Tanakh. The assumption here is that the Tanakh is a product of the world in which the stories are set or at least God sought to speak a language that the people would have understood. Without these documents the full significance of places, language and events might be lost to us. (For example, the "covenant of the pieces" (Brit haBetarim), Jacob and Rachel's stealing of the family household gods from Lavan and the passing of Sarai as Avram's sister, all become more understandable when seen against the background of parallel documents discovered in ancient cities such as Mari or Nuzi. In addition, we can learn a great deal about the land and society of Canaan into which Israel would make its entrance in the Tanakh from the study of the Egyptian Amarna texts. We can learn about the Canaanite belief system from a close examination of the documents found at Ugarit in Syria. We can see pictures of the Philistines in archaeological finds in Egypt and we can learn much about their way of life from excavations in Israel.)
  
- 7- **The Bible as a historical source for reconstructing Ancient Israelite history.** The Bible itself may serve as a **window** to the external historic world in which it was written. Some view that window as naively **transparent**, then the study of the Bible historically teaches us ancient Israelite history. We may therefore study Bible not for its own sake, not for its religious or literary value, but for the picture of what happened. Students must be taught objective investigative tools for the text must be treated as evidence, to be sifted critically. Teaching critical perspectives is part of the adolescent growth of thinking. Realizing that there is a **historical gap** between the world of the past and of present allows us to discover new values, not merely reiterate the perennial ones. Some documents or artifacts challenge the text by offering alternative explanations for phenomena talked about in the Tanakh. (For example, the ziggurats of Babylon make sense out of the tower of Babel and we find a parallel flood story in the ancient Epic of Gilgamesh. Also some schools of archaeology have challenged the conquest stories of the Book of Joshua from them digs in Jericho or the Ai. More radical are those archaeologists who disclaim the whole of the early Biblical picture up to at least the middle of the first Temple period).

**8- Ideological History.** The Bible may be a window but it is a **tinted window** presenting the world outside in an ideologically self-conscious manner. (For example describing the Canaanites as despicable gang homosexual rapists along with Ham as Canaan's ancestor who peeked at his father's nakedness - Gen. 9:18-26). Rabbi Yitzhak is quoted by Rashi on Gen. 1:1 as viewing the Torah as a propaganda tract defending Israel's right to its land as a gift of God, not accusing Israel of theft of other people's land). History writing understood as a construction that serves political and religious interests of the authors and the readers inevitably presents different pictures that are not merely objective. Contemporary historians and archeologists construct their own history which are sometimes corroborative and sometimes at odds with the Biblical ones. Here it would be wise not to judge the Bible's truth by the latest school of archeological hypothesis but to compare and contrast reconstructions of the past - Biblical and contemporary reading each view has its own agenda. Being self-critical, being aware of our own perspectives which are almost impossible to shed can produce a more sophisticated understanding.

**9- Modern historiographical theories** use the Bible not only to illuminate history but to write a history of the Biblical text as a human rather than a Divine work, a multivalent set of texts by different people and eras and institutions rather than a single harmonious word of the constituent God. They see different parts of the Bible as products of different human groups and strata in society, often very much at odds with the picture that the Tanakh presents about itself. (for example, the claim is raised that not all the Psalms are Davidic, nor did Solomon necessarily write the three books that are presented by the tradition as his). The **Documentary Hypothesis** sees the Torah itself as a multi-layered human text, written by different groups in different circumstances and brought together into its final (present) form by one or a series of 'redactors' or editors, with no reference to revelation. Related to this last set of issues are the **internal contradictions** in the text itself. (For example, there are variant stories of David's appearance in the Saul saga - as a musician or as a challenger of Goliath- or the identity of the slayer of Goliath himself - by David or by Elchanan?). Others contradictions raise larger historical questions such as the clear contradictions between the conquest traditions presented in the book of Joshua and the details of the early chapters of the book of Judges. Yet others are essentially historiographical rather than historical such as the different version of Israelite history told in the Book of Chronicles as compared with the other historical accounts in books like Samuel or Kings. Let us now turn to some curricular examples of the historical approach

## **#1. Using Ancient Near Eastern Legal Background: Sarai's Right or Sarai's Wrong? A Double Perspective from History**

In the story of Avram, Sarai and Hagar, we gain a wider perspective for the assessment of Sarai's action in giving her slave girl Hagar to Avram, in order that she should bear children and "build up" her mistress through bearing a child to her master. In this exercise, we try and assess the legitimacy of Sarai's actions in her own time by bringing examples from the Tanakh and from the contemporary records of the time.

### **A. The Biblical Perspective**

It is relatively easy for us to assess Sarai's actions in giving Hagar to Avram in order to be a child bearer, from our own contemporary point of view. We can critique her actions from the standpoint of our modern value system (which does for example, not accept slavery as a moral action).

But how would the society of Sarai's time have assessed this action. Let us examine this question through two sets of lenses, those of biblical society on the one hand and those of Near Eastern societies in the Biblical and pre-Biblical age. In the Torah, we have a number of references that can help us.

In Genesis 29: 24 and 29, we hear that Lavan gives his slave girls Zilpah to Leah, and Bilhah to Rachel. In the next chapter, (Gen. 30: 3 and 9), we hear not just that Rachel gives Bilhah as a wife to Ya'akov, but that Leah gives Zilpah as a wife to Ya'akov after she herself has produced a number of children but can produce no more. This is at least indirectly connected with the law that appears in Shemot 21:4, when we hear the following.

*If [a slave's] master gives him a wife, and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to the master and only the man shall go free.*

From this last piece it seems clear that children of a slave marriage belong to the master. In other words, the cases of Bilhah, Zilpah and Hagar are all examples of a normative accepted situation in biblical society. Within the conventions of slave society, with all the Bible's "liberal" treatment of slaves, nothing problematic is seen in the case in question where Sarai makes her offer to Avram, in many ways at the expense of Hagar.

### **B. The Ancient Near East Perspective**

Now let us move to a larger circle of context, that of the ancient near-east. There are a number of extant legal texts that have been discovered from the region which have strong parallels to the situation in the Hagar and Sarai story. Let us see the three closest examples:

In the famous Hammurabi law code of the early second millennium B.C.E., we find the following case.

*If a man marries a priestess [who is not allowed to have children] and she gave a female slave to her husband and she [the slave] has then borne children, if later that female slave has claimed equality with her mistress because she has borne children, her mistress may not sell her, but she may mark her with the slave mark and count her among the slaves. If she did not bear children, her mistress may sell her.*

It might be argued that this is a special case since the priestess is not allowed to have children and therefore the case in Hammurabi is not relevant to the Sarai case. Nevertheless, it is extremely revealing regarding the potential tensions that can develop between the two women after the birth, which of course parallels the later part of the Hagar story that we have not yet examined. There is a still closer parallel in the Nuzi documents dating to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries B.C.E. Unlike the Hammurabi document which is based on a general idea from a law code, this tells of an actual legal agreement from local case law.

*If Gilimninu [the wife] bears children, Shenima [the husband] will not take another wife. But if Gilimninu fails to bear children, Gilimninu shall get for Shenima a woman from the Lulu country [i.e. a slave girl] as a concubine. In that case Gilimninu herself will have authority over the offspring.*

Similarly, a document of about seven centuries later in the later Assyrian period tells of the marriage between two people from Tyre in Lebanon.

*Tzuvito is given to Malkiram as a wife. If Tzuvito does not get pregnant or give birth, she will take a slave girl in her place. The slave girl's children will be considered her [Tzuvito's] children...if she [Tzuvito] hates her [the slave girl after the birth] she can sell her.*

What is clear from all of these documents is that not only can we assume that Sarai was within her legal rights to do what she did, but that she was acting according to the socially acceptable norms of her own society (the Biblical examples) and the region as a whole. These documents enable us to see the society of the early Hebrews against the background of the times which produced them. The question that we must now deal with together with the students is whether or not such a historical perspective affects - or should affect - the way that we read the story.

### **EXERCISE: Gaining Perspective - Sarai on Trial**

- Begin by asking the group to vote regarding whether they think that Sarai has treated Hagar wrongly by making the offer to Avram at her (Hagar's) expense. Vote. Tell each person to write themselves a one or two sentence note explaining the reasons for their vote.
- Now let Sarai be put on trial. The charge against her is that she was cruel in her treatment of Hagar and she had no right to make the offer

to Avram at Hagar's expense without consulting with her or getting permission from her.

- Sarai denies the charges against her and defends herself saying that she was well within her rights. She calls two expert defence witnesses to support her argument. One of the two experts (both of whom have also been prepared in advance) should defend her from the standpoint of the biblical norms of the Torah as expressed above. The other should defend her from the point of view of the general Near East social norms as expressed in the documents brought above. The cases should be pointed out for everybody.
- Other students (not prepared) should of course join in but the only ones who can speak in Sarai's favor are those who voted for her in the earlier vote. Those who voted against her can only speak against her here.
- At the end of the trial (which should not be too long) a vote should be taken regarding the condemnation of Sarai for her behavior, by the jury (the class excluding the main participants).
- The issue to be examined is whether any people changed their vote based on the perspectives of Biblical and extra-Biblical norms. If anyone is found that has indeed changed their vote (presumably in favor of Sarai - it's hard to imagine that the opposite can happen!) ask them to explain why.

Let this lead into a concluding discussion regarding the weight to be given to historical context as we assess the actions of Biblical characters.

## **#2. Challenging the Bible with an outside source: The Tower of Babel.**

Now we have come to a much more difficult use of an outside text. We will here illustrate the use of an outside text which comes to challenge the truth of the version of a Biblical story. The most famous example of this approach is found in the ancient flood story of Utnapishtim, taken from the last part of the Epic of Gilgamesh, a story that dates back to at least 2000 B.C.E., and a story which moreover, gives a very similar story to the story of Noah. In this part of the story, the great King Gilgamesh, having encountered death, goes in search of Utnapishtim, the man who has beaten death and has been granted immortality. This is Utnapishtim's story.

Before we get to the exercise itself, let us point out that it is possible to make a completely different kind of analysis of the flood story using the historical approach of internal criticism, examining the potential points of contradictions in the Tanakhic story (numbers of animals, numbers of days on the water). This would produce the sort of exercise that we will refer to next in our examination of internal contradictions. Richard Elliot Friedman has produced a very interesting suggestion in his "Who Wrote the Bible" that divides up the Biblical story (Beraishit ch. 6 v.5 - ch. 8 v. 22) into two internally consistent versions both of which are complete in themselves but which are, according to his approach, written by two different authorities and intertwined in the Biblical account that we have. One exercise could certainly be to examine this idea and the credibility of this approach from the point of view of the students and to examine the implications of this approach.

However, here we want to briefly examine the other classic historiographical approach concerning the flood story which seeks to place it in an ancient near east context by comparing it with the classic Sumerian-Akkadian version of the flood brought in the Gilgamesh story.

### **EXERCISE: Comparing Floods.**

- Ask the students to read the Noah story which will presumably be familiar to many of them.
- Now explain the background to the Gilgamesh story (including the fact that the version we have comes from the early second millennium B.C.E. - many hundreds of years before the purported date of the Sinai revelation).
- Give the group the text of the Gilgamesh version of the flood - Utnapishtim's story.
- Ask the class in pairs or small groups to read the Gilgamesh story and to make a list of all the similarities that they see between the story and the Noah story.
- Put up all the similarities on the board.
- Ask the students what they think of the list. What conclusions do they draw? Does it invalidate the Noah version? See what kind of points are brought up: if the



students focus on historical truth, it will be hard to defend the biblical version as a historically true text, given the relative dating of the two texts. Difficult but not impossible: there might indeed be students who will suggest that the Gilgamesh story is a wrongly remembered version while the "Jewish" version is more reliable, with a more reliable chain of transmission, either Divine or human. There might be students however, who will suggest that the essential question of truth is not historical but philosophical or theological and will defend the text as a "true" text from those points of view.

- At a certain point, cut the discussion, wherever it has reached and sum up the points made.
- Now, ask the students to make a list of the *differences* between the two texts. Put these on the board.
- Quiz the students about the differences: for example, what are the reasons for the flood? Why were Noah and Utnapishtim seemingly chosen? Why has the Utnapishtim boat got a tiller and a steersman while the Biblical version makes no mention of this? What is the purpose of the sacrifice in the two stories? Why do the gods gather like flies above the sacrifice? Why does Utnapishtim become immortal? Why does Noah not get the same privilege?
- Suggest that the Noah story is the same basic story (the similarities!) recast in the mode of ethical monotheism that characterized the early Hebrews. Ask how the students react to this idea? What does this do to their understanding of the story? Does it detract or does it enhance? If we were to know for sure that the Biblical story is indeed a recasting of the Gilgamesh story, should "our" story be included in the Biblical text even if *historically* it does not reflect a true occurrence?
- Perhaps finish with a piece by Nahum Sarna, Richard Friedman, or Neil Gilman that argues for the value of texts such as these even if they are not historically true.

### #3. Internal Contradictions in the Tanakh

We now move away from the use of external sources and turn to the subject of Biblical historiography which brings up the subject of the many internal contradictions in the Biblical text. We have already mentioned in passing, the text of the Flood story as a potential basis for an exercise around the different possible sources in the Biblical text, what is called the Documentary Hypothesis. But there are other places in the Tanakh where interesting and thought provoking studies can be made which open up important questions without resorting to the controversial subject of the historiography of the Torah. In these other areas of the Tanakh some of the most interesting exercises come from a comparison between the different Biblical books, enabling teachers to point to the idea that each book reflects a specific point of view, reflecting the opinion of specific writers who lived at specific times in specific places representing specific ideas and ideologies. This, it can be suggested, is a particularly important and interesting point to put over and can often help to undo the alienation of some students from the sheer bulk of the Tanakh: if they can start to break down the Biblical text, understanding it not as a monolithic bloc, but as a series of discrete and contrasting books, it can seem much more approachable. It is to this that we now turn.

One of the most interesting examples comes from a comparison between the book of Chronicles and the books of Samuel and Kings. All these books are examples of what appear to be historical writing, but there are many contradictions between them. Let us take as our example, the story of David. We have two biographies of David in the Tanakh: one in Samuel (with a tail end in Kings) and the other in Chronicles.

We suggest taking one of the stories of David and examining it in both sources.

A particularly good one for example is the story of the period that comes after the death of Saul on Mt. Gilboa. Let us give a suggestion of how to explore this.

#### **EXERCISE: Which King was David?**

- Ask the class which king was David? Most of the class will presumably say that David was the second king after Saul. Confirm this with them: Saul was the first king, David was the second king - is this right? When they confirm it, tell them that they are wrong and that they have been hoaxed! But explain that you are going to show them the origins of the hoax.
- Ask them to turn to First Chronicles 10:11- 11:1. This tells the story that Saul dies and the people of Israel go down to Chevron and accept David as king. Indicate to them that you do not believe the Biblical author here! Explain that rather than use your own authority to discredit the Biblical text, you are going to use the Biblical text itself.
- Ask them to turn to Second Samuel 2: 5-11. Read this together and try and understand it. This gives a very different picture with the spiriting away of one of the sons of Saul, "Ish Boshet", from the battlefield at Gilboa by Saul's general

Avner who proceeds to set Ish Boshet up as ruler over Israel. David meanwhile is king of his own tribe of Judah.

- Proceed to develop the story through parts of chapters 3 and 4, so they understand that this is a whole detailed and developed version of events, which involves a whole civil war between the two sides before Avner ultimately switches his allegiance over to David and starts to swing his northern supporters round to David's side.
- Finish this part of the story with the first verse of chapter 5, a verse that they will already have met as the last part of the piece that they read in Chronicles.
- Now ask them to go back in Samuel to a piece before the first piece that they read there - First Samuel ch. 31 vv. 11-13, which represents the *first* part of what they read in the verses from Chronicles.
- Ask them to read those verses and then to add the first verse from chapter 5 and see if there is anything familiar to them about the verses.
- Now reread the piece from Chronicles and ask them what has happened. Point out (what is obvious), namely that Chronicles has completely missed out the story of Ish Boshet and the civil war and has a direct and smooth succession of Saul by David.
- Explain that this could be thought of as coincidental if it weren't for the fact that it forms part of a consistent pattern in which anything from the Samuel biography that is potentially embarrassing to the memory of David has been missed out of the version in Chronicles. Among other things the following things have been missed out: David, Uriah and Bat Sheva, Avshalom's rebellion, other rebellions, Amnon and Tamar and the fight for succession after David's death between Solomon and Adonijah. All of these things have been missed out. Point out that this is clearly part of a pattern aimed at presenting a perfect "inspirational" picture of David for the readers of Chronicles.
- Explain that Samuel is an earlier text and ask the students what motives they think the authors of Chronicles might have had for their "censorship" of the David story.
- Explain that this appears to be a late book written either in Babylon after the destruction of the first Temple or in the first generations in Eretz Israel as the returnees struggled to rebuild a society.
- Conclude by making the point about each book reflecting a specific point of view and being written by a specific writer or group of writers for their own reasons.

## **#4. Are the Biblical books fact or fiction – and does it matter?**

The following examples are taken from two approaches to the Book of Job and Megillat Esther. Both examples, it is important to stress, come from the end of the two programs. The two books have already been examined from a number of different points of view before we bring in questions relating to the historical approach. In other words, in neither case do we ask the historical question until the text has been examined in depth. We bring the two exercises and their introductions, in the original wording, indicating indeed that they come at the end of a process.

### **A. The Book of Job – Fact or Fiction?**

As we introduced the book of Job at the beginning of the section, we said that the author was unknown, as was the time when the book was written. It does not mean that there have been no contending opinions regarding the author of the work, the time when Job lived and other aspects of his identity.

In the major Talmudic discussion on the subject in Baba Batra 15a and b, a number of opinions are brought. The first suggestion is that the author is Moses who lived at the same time as Job. Various proof-texts are brought to support the contention but it does not take long before all sorts of other ideas are brought. The major dispute regards the assertion that Moses and Job lived at the same time. Different ideas are put forward for the location of Job in time and place. Job is said to have lived in Canaan during the time of Jacob, in Egypt at the time of the Israelite sojourn there, in the period of the spies, in the time of the Golden Calf, at the time of the Judges, at the time of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, at the time of the Babylonian exile and in Ahashverosh's Persia. All the later ones of course would deny the possibility of Mosaic authorship.

There is another major argument as to whether Job should be considered a Jew or not. There is substantial agreement that he should be seen as a prophet but the question is whether he should be with Bala'am, a prophet *of* the nations or one of the Jewish prophets, a prophet *to* the nations. Thus although the traditional point of view has Moses as the favorite contender, the truth is that there is no unanimity on this point.

Modern commentators are also thoroughly divided when they come to try and place the book in time and place. Some believe that the original story was not a Jewish story but was adopted and adapted by the Jews. Others see it as an authentically Jewish text. Some would place the book in an early period of Israel's history, while others place it after the Babylonian conquest and even well into the second Temple period. Just to make it even more complicated, as we have hinted in a number of places, there are many scholars who believe that the book of Job is a composite book that was composed, layer by layer, in different periods by different authors to produce the book that we have today.

In short, nobody really knows who wrote the book or even when it should be dated. But perhaps the most interesting part of the whole debate regarding the writing of Job is

connected with another point completely. Is it a work of fact or a work of fiction? The question is already raised in the name of a "certain scholar" in the debate in Baba Batra.

*While a certain scholar was [in a study session held] before R. Shmuel bar Nachmani, he said Job never lived, he was never created: rather it was a parable.*  
(לא היה ולא נברא אלא משל היה)

Resh Lakish is also quoted as having said that Job is an essentially fictional work, ascribing torments that never happened to a person of great character who was known to have been capable of acting in the way described in the fictional work.

Among modern scholars there is almost unanimity regarding the essentially fictional nature of the story. There is no knowledge at all regarding the author, although there are those who suggest that the author - if he was indeed Jewish - might well have been acquainted with some rather vague parallels that exist in other ancient Middle and Near East texts.

The essential question is, of course, whether it matters to us whether Job is the story of a real person who underwent tremendous suffering or whether it is in fact a work of fiction written to raise certain issues and to teach certain lessons. Let us now examine this issue with the students.

### **A SUMMARY EXERCISE: The Book Of Job - Fact Or Fiction?**

- Ask the students whether they have any idea as to who wrote the book of Job or when it could have taken place historically.
- Explain that there is an old tradition that the author was Moses, and get their reactions. Add to Moses' name on the board the list of other times when Job is suggested to have lived and explain that all of these opinions are taken from a debate recorded in the Talmudic tract Baba Batra. Now add that there was one minority opinion:

*While a certain scholar was [in a study session held] before R. Shmuel bar Nachmani, he said Job never lived, he was never created: rather it was a parable.* (לא היה ולא נברא אלא משל היה)

- Ask for initial reactions.
- Discuss the following question: would it make any difference to our appreciation of the book if we were to know that the book was a piece of fiction rather than the record of a real incident that happened to a man named Job? We suggest the possibility of turning this into a full-fledged debate with proposers and opposers, before opening it up into a free discussion. Bring up the question of the messages that were suggested by the class in the context of the previous exercise. Write them on the board and ask whether these messages and "morals" become invalid if the book is "only" a piece of fiction.

## B. Megillat Esther: and if the story is not true...?

Up to now we have assumed that the Megillah was telling a real story in his own words, and that the text has historical validity. But what happens to our understanding of the text if we question the "truth" of the story? Does this threaten to undermine our understanding of everything that we have said up to now? It is to this important question that we now turn.

To clarify that question we introduce the distinction between two notions of truth - what happened and what happens, **historical truth and philosophical truth**. Both these conceptions assume that truth in words and beliefs must correspond to reality but the historian is usually interested in what actually happened in a particular past age whether or not events of that type that still occur today. The philosopher or anthropologist is concerned about general patterns of human behavior that repeat again and again. In this sense a novel may describe people and events whose type occur often while the particulars of the story - plot, names, incidents - never happened in exactly that way. This is fiction but it teaches us to look at truths of our world.

The question of the **historicity of the Megillah** has been argued back and forth over the last century or so. Archaeology, history, anthropology, cultural studies and literature are just the central disciplines that have contributed to the discussion. Every argument has brought forth a counter-argument, but recent years have found the traditionalists very much on the defensive in their attempts to save at least some of the historicity of the text. At the present time and with the present state of our knowledge, it seems as though the vast majority of scholars question the historical value of the majority of the text. They see it as a great literary creation which is at best built around some very vague historical episode that contributed the inspiration for the book.

Essentially there are three positions that have been - and continue to be - taken.

1. The book is **historically true**. It tells of an actual incident that happened in the life of the Jews of Persia around the fifth century B.C.E. It was written down fairly close to the events themselves and reflects the real experience of the Persian Jews and possibly of the author himself. The universality of the Purim festival means that it could not be merely a book of historical fiction as the "detractors" claim.
2. The book is a work of **fiction** that was written quite possibly to justify the celebration by Jews of a local Persian pagan festival, and to give the celebration a Jewish "spin". There is no historical evidence to support the book and there is a great deal of circumstantial evidence that undermines the claims to historicity. Moreover, the story of the book is so fantastic, and so packed with exaggeration, hyperbole, comedy and coincidence that this is clearly a literary creation. Some of the themes of the book (the Cinderella type girl who rises from rags to riches, the wicked vizier etc.) are well known from popular literature and folklore. We do not know who the author is, but he clearly had great familiarity with the atmosphere of the

Persian court, either through personal experience or through second-hand reports.

3. The book itself is a fictional creation, but there might well be a core of historical truth underneath the text. All sorts of central aspects of the story have been changed as have various "identifying" details. Therefore it can not be profitable to try and place the story in a specific historical context, but there is a "core story" that really happened in one way or other. Around this story an inspired author wove his fantastic tale, as a moral parable for Israel. It is a great **historical novel**.

An open-minded observer would have to arrive at the conclusion that positions number two and three are, at the very least, serious possibilities. We might therefore be left with the distinct possibility that the book of Esther is actually...a historical novel. Before we go any further we should remind ourselves that the term historical novel covers a number of different categories. There are many kinds of historical novel:

A- At one extreme we have works which are totally fictional whose characterization and plot are based on nothing tangible but whose authors have done good historical research into the period to provide a convincing background for their stories.

B - In the centre, we have works like Shakespeare's historical dramas (such as Henry the Fifth), which weave fictional plots around real historical figures, often basing themselves on genuine incidents from the past. In these cases, the speeches and much of the detail is the author's own creation but there is some kind of historical truth in the story itself, not just in the background.

C - At the other extreme, we have some historical works which try and stay very close to a particular historical incident which the authors have researched very carefully. Here there is an attempt to keep as close as possible to the actual story that happened at a certain time and place. The author stays as close as possible to her or his original sources to bring alive the actual historical incident and figures. Imagination is used, primarily, to fill in the gaps between the historical sources.

Even if we accept that the Megillah might well be a historical novel, we have absolutely no way of knowing into which category or sub-genre it falls. As mentioned, we cannot be sure that it is a novel at all. Nevertheless, intellectual honesty should demand from us the recognition that the Purim story might never have happened - at least in the form that we now have it. The question that we now have to contend with, in the present context, is whether or not it matters.

So far, in this chapter, we have suggested that despite the surface secularity of the book, there are some deeply theological and philosophical ideas that the book raises up for us. We have talked about the idea that there is a basic pattern of events, a meaning to the seeming randomness and arbitrary nature on the surface of human life. We have suggested that there is a guiding hand behind the scenes. We have examined issues of religious faith in a seemingly God-less world. These are profound human themes which

have been developed out of a close reading of the text itself. Do all of these become invalid if the story becomes a human invention rather than an accurate portrayal of real events? Can we find meaning in the text if the whole thing is a human creation? This is the issue that we wish to examine.

### **Identifying Lasting Lessons (Philosophical Truths)**

- With the help of the class, list as many as possible of the lasting lessons of the Megillah that have been brought out in our study of the text. Collect all the ideas on the board and ask three people to answer the question: In your opinion, name the most valuable insight offered by the Megillah for today.

**Or**

- In groups of three, the students must come up with three **slogans** that express, for them, the message of the Megillah. The messages must be catchy, and must not have more words than can comfortably fit on to a poster size piece of paper. They can certainly be amusing but they must have a serious intention.
- When they have prepared their slogans, each student should take one of the slogans and make a poster which expresses the idea artistically and emphasizes the slogan itself. Then the posters should be put up on the walls and desks of the classroom, and when the room is ready, one by one they present their posters, explaining their slogan and showing the connection to the text of the Megillah.

### **Confronting Historical Doubts**

In both cases:-

- Now present to the group the above ideas about the possible fictional character of the book. Explain that we can believe what we want but objectively it is entirely possible that the work is a historical fiction. The question to be dealt with now is: if we were to know for sure that the book was not a record of a real historical event, would this invalidate all the value that people talked about previously? Can the lessons of the book still be valid lessons if the book is a human invention?

### **Preparing a Debate**

- Divide the class into two parts and sub-divide each group into sub-groups. All the sub-groups on one side have to come up with reasons supporting the value of the Megillah as a source of ideas even if the text is fictional. The sub-groups on the other side have to come up with reasons why the validity of the text is dependent on its historical character. If the events never happened, we have no good reason to celebrate this holiday and to read the Megillah annually.
- After a few minutes in small groups, open the floor up to a debate on the subject. Have the two groups sitting at different sides of the room. They



are only allowed to speak for the side that they represent (whether or not these are their real ideas). Let someone open up from one of the sides and let anyone who wants to speak raise their hands and go on to a name list. Try and ping-pong the debate from one side to the other.

### **Class Discussion**

- When the arguments are more or less exhausted, ask the students to take their chairs and sit on the side of the room that most represents their real opinion. People who are undecided should sit in the middle between the two positions of "certainty". It is possible to sit nearer to one side than the other. Continue the discussion. If people change or develop their positions, they should take their chairs and move to a place which reflects their opinion.

### **Summing Up**

- Bring things to a close and sum the discussion up. It is very important in summing-up a debate such as this to reflect on what really happened in the discussion and to go over the various major arguments that were made. Having done this, we suggest that you make the following observation (to which the students will have a chance to respond in the next exercise). Suggest that whether or not the text is historically true, the text has moral and theological significance - (psychological truth, philosophical truth, theological truth - namely that the picture that it presents, indeed "rings" true for us). Of course, whether or not we believe the text to be historical, changes our perspective. If we believe the text to be historically true, we can see the Megillah as presenting an objectively true picture of how the world works both on, and underneath, the surface. If we see it as a human creation, the product of a subtle and creative mind, we are left with the author's belief statement as to how the world *possibly* works.

### **EXERCISE: Keeping The Megillah**

The aim of this exercise is to sum up the work that has been done in this section regarding the philosophical and theological insights that we can gain from the Megillah.

- Open up by reminding the class of the statement with which you closed the previous class. There you suggested that the text has validity whether or not it reflects an objectively true story.
- Ask everybody to write down their reaction to that statement. It is a complex question and enough time must be given for the task. When this has been done invite the members of the class to share their reactions. Discuss the issue.
- At a certain point in the discussion, bring up the following question. Given everything that has been discussed regarding the messages of the Megillah, the philosophy of Ba'al HaMegillah and the things that have been said so far about the value of the text by the members of the class, do

they think that the Megillah should have been included in the Tanakh among the most important and sacred texts of the Jewish People?

### **Summarizing the Historical Approach - What Have we Gained?**

We have given a number of examples of the different ways that a historical approach can be employed in the classroom. We have suggested that some of these approaches will suit some teachers and not others either for theological or philosophical-educational reasons. However, we hope that we have shown some of the potential advantages and gains that can be achieved by teachers who are willing to enrich their palette of potential approaches by including techniques drawn from the world of historical approaches.

## #5 Excavating the Bible: "Biblical Criticism" Text in its Historical Context by Joel Lurie Grishaver

Learning Torah: A Self-guided Journey through Layers of Jewish Learning,  
Torah Aura/UABC Press (p. 182-196)

We've been working with the assumption that God (in one way or another) authored the biblical text. In this module we are going to reverse that assumption and look at the kind of methodologies and assumptions which result when we assume that people wrote it. Our first impression of **archeologists** may come from "mummy" movies, where the scientist breaks into the hidden tomb and then decodes the mummy's curse; in reality, archeology is a meticulous science. Archeologists dig through soil with a toothbrush, unearth and catalog artifacts in carefully marked squares, and record the exact location of every piece they find. They are uncovering fragments of the past to reconstruct daily life in antiquity.

Scientific study of the biblical text, usually called "**biblical criticism**," works in much the same way. We use small clues found in individual passages to try to "reconstruct" the world of the biblical authors. We try to find out **when the book was written, by whom, in what context**, in an effort to understand **what the author intended the words to mean (in contrast to their meaning today)**. Just as the archeologist always tries to examine an artifact in situ (in the exact location, layer, and setting in which it was found), the biblical critic tries to understand the *Sitz im Leben* - the contextual meaning of the verse as it was understood when it was written.

In the course of this module, we will take you on four biblical excavations. Each one will teach you a different process for exploring the biblical text.

**EXCAVATION # 1: BEHIND THE BLESSINGS.**

**EXCAVATION # 2: TEXT AND ARTIFACT.**

**EXCAVATION # 3: THE NOAH PARALLELS.** (Not included below)

Then we will look at how "**critical**" **commentaries** are read.

Before we go any further, it is important to point out that "criticism" doesn't mean finding what's wrong with the text. Criticism refers to the tools used to study the text (like literary criticism). It means using a critical eye.

By the time you're done with this module you will be able to:

- 1 Explain how history can be reconstructed from biblical texts.
- 2 Describe how archeology helps us to understand the Bible, and how the Bible helps archeologists explain what they've uncovered.
- 3 Describe the similarities and differences between the Noah story and an ancient Near Eastern parallel.

## EXCAVATION 1: BEHIND THE BLESSINGS

Twice in the Torah, we find long poetic pieces in which a major figure blesses the twelve tribes. In a biblical context, blessings are used to predict the future. When biblical critics read these passages, they assume that these blessings are linked historically to an earlier prediction. Read these two blessings of Zebulun and Issachar and see if "history" emerges. (One clue: The story which we seem to be able to find isn't told elsewhere in the Torah.)

Zebulun shall dwell by the seashore; He shall be a haven for ships,  
And his flank shall rest on Sidon. Issachar is a strong-boned ass, Crouching  
among the sheepfolds. When he saw how good was security, And how pleasant  
was the country, He bent his shoulder to the burden, And became a toiling serf.  
(Gen. 49:13-15)

Rejoice, O Zebulun, on your journeys, And Issachar, in your tents.  
They invite their kin to the mountain, Where they offer sacrifices of success.  
For they draw from the riches of the sea And the hidden hoards of the sand.  
(Deut. 33:18-19)

- 1- The blessings are similar. Put them together and see what story emerges.
- 2- How do the two verses help us reconstruct previously unknown Biblical history?

## EXCAVATION 2: TEXT AND ARTIFACT

Archeology requires detective work: uncovering clues, reconstructing events on the basis of evidence, and creating theories. Biblical archeologists work in two worlds - they need to balance the evidence gathered in archeological excavations with the biblical text, each shedding light on the other. Here are a number of examples of the intersection of text and artifact. Match the archeological finds with the verses they help to clarify. Notice how each helps us to understand the other.

### FROM THE BIBLE

1 In Genesis II: 4 we read:

*And they said, "Come, let us build a city, and a tower with its top in the sky..."*

Question: What did the Tower of Babel look like?

2 In the Bible, people are always making trips from the land of Canaan to Egypt. We never knew if this really happened.

In the Bible, Jacob gave his son Joseph a coat of many colors.

Is there a historical basis for the visits and for the *coat of many colors*?

3 In I Kings 1:50 we find:

*Adonijah, in fear of Solomon, went at once [to the Tent] and grasped the horns of the altar.*

How can an altar have horns?

4 In the Bible, we find the following in I Samuel 13:20-21:

*So all the Israelites had to go down to the Philistines to have their plowshares, their mattocks, axes, and colters sharpened. The charge for sharpening was a pim....*

What is a *pim*?

5 In Ezekiel 21:26 we find a very strange passage:

*For the king of Babylon has stood at the fork of the road, where two roads branch off, to perform divination: he has shaken arrows, consulted teraphim, and inspected the liver.*

Why a liver? How can you "inspect" a liver?

6 The prophet Jeremiah curses in Jeremiah 19:10-II:

*Then you shall smash the jug in the sight of the men who go with you, and say to them:*

*"Thus said the Lord of Hosts: So will I smash this people and this city, as one smashes a potter's vessel, which can never be mended...."*

Where did Jeremiah get the metaphor of a smashed jug?

7 In the Book of Exodus 21:23-25 we find:

*But if other damage ensues, the penalty shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.*

Where did the Bible get the idea of an eye for an eye?

8 At the beginning of the Book of Exodus (I:II, 14), we read:

*So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them ...and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses. They made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks....*

Was this real history?

### FROM ARCHEOLOGY

A Archeologists found a stela inscribed with a **law code** referred to as the Code of Hammurabi. Among the inscriptions, we find statements concerning the following:  
*If a person destroys the eye of another person, the other shall destroy his eye.  
If he has broken the bone of another, the other shall break his bone.*

B Discovery of an incense altar at Megiddo shows that this altar had **horns**. It was made between 800 and 900 B.C.E.

Look up Psalms 118:27, Jeremiah 17:1, and Amos 3:14.

Then look up Leviticus 8:15, 9:9, and 16:18.

C A clay model of a **liver** was found at Megiddo. This clay liver was covered with omens and magical formulas.

It was crafted around 1830 B.C.E.

What was the purpose of this clay liver?

D In the ancient city of Ur, archeologists uncovered a temple tower.

We call this kind of temple tower by its Babylonian name - a **ziggurat**.

E Archeologists working at a place called Tel En-Nasbeh found a circular stone with the word *pim* written on it.

G Clay statue of a bound prisoner.

Curses on the enemies of Egypt covered the figure, which had been smashed.

It was made around 1700 B.C.E.

What was the significance of this statue?

1-. What did the archeological finds cited above teach us about the "truth" and accuracy of the Bible?

Who is being represented?

2- . How did the Bible help the archeologists to understand their discoveries?