



Rabbi Matthew Soffer

Rosh HaShanah Morning, 1 Tishrei 5783 / 2022

## **How to Be an Anti-Fundamentalist**

### *Psalm 151*

A Psalm of David...

I was small among my brothers,  
The youngest of my father's sons.

I was shepherd to his flock,  
Tending to his sheep.

My hands made a harp;  
my fingers fashioned a lute,  
And I gave glory to God.

I said to myself: the mountains do not proclaim me,  
The hills do not speak for me,  
nor the trees to my words, nor the flock to my deeds.  
Who, then, will announce, speak, and recount my deeds?  
The Ruler of all saw, the God of all heard and listened.  
God sent the prophet Samuel to anoint me,  
To make me great.

...anointing me with holy oil,  
God made me prince of God's people.  
ruler over the children of God's Covenant.  
I went out and saw a Philistine, threatening us from the ranks of [his  
people]. And I... the...<sup>1</sup>

That's how it ends. *Anochi...et* – "I...[something...]"

Well? What did David do? The Septuagint, the first Greek Bible, finishes it off:

I went out, saw a Philistine threatening us from the ranks of his people,  
and I chopped off his head.

Psalm 151 is the hardest Psalm to read in the Bible – mainly because it's not in the Bible. There are only 150 Psalms. So...what was Psalm 151 doing in a cave near Qumran, as a part of the oldest, largest collection of ancient Hebrew texts ever discovered?

Many of us are familiar with the discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Perhaps you visited these scrolls on a trip to Israel. In short, the Dead Scrolls are the most significant discoveries of ancient Jewish texts, ever. We're talking about 981 texts, dating back to the 3rd century B.C.E. 60% of these are *not* in what we know to be the Hebrew Bible, the Tanakh. 40% of them are included in our Tanakh– in fact, they comprise the oldest manuscripts of nearly every biblical text. And the wild thing is, *this just happened* in 1947!

<sup>1</sup>*The Dead Sea Scrolls: Study Edition*, vol. 2. Ed. Martinez and Tigchelaar., p. 1178-79, 11Q4.



In biblical studies, the Dead Sea Scrolls were “game changers” – the strongest proof of how the Bible evolved over more than a thousand years, taking different forms from place to place.

Consider this for a moment. Our Hebrew Bible has spent more time in “production and development” than it has in circulation. We could also say, “our people” have spent more centuries re-telling and amending the Tanakh than studying it as fixed Scripture. What do we make of this?

For most of us, in our daily lives, not much. Let’s be honest, how many of us really dwell, on a day-to-day basis, on the ancient historical development of Scripture, the process of canonization, etc.? But as it turns out, *how we read* really matters. Some of the most important issues in our lives and our world today come down to how we read, or misread, or don’t read the Bible.

\* \* \*

On July 1st 2022, Yair Lapid was sworn in as the Prime Minister of Israel, “caretaking” the government until the next election in 5 weeks from now. Lapid’s party, Yesh Atid, is considered centrist in the context of the Knesset. In his first televised address, seeking to unite the State, he said this:

The deep Israeli truth is that on most of the truly important topics – we believe in the same things. We believe that Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people. Its establishment didn’t begin in 1948, but rather on the day Joshua, son of Nun, crossed the Jordan and forever connected the people of Israel with the land of Israel, between the Jewish nation and its Israeli homeland.

How we read our Bible matters. How we read Joshua and the Conquest matters. The Conquest of the Land that unfolds in the book of Joshua did not happen in history. As Dr. Carol Meyers, Professor Emerita of Religious Studies at Duke, in her introduction to book of Joshua, writes:

...The intense archeological investigation of virtually all the places mentioned in Joshua that can be identified with current sites reveals no pattern of destruction that can be correlated...with the period of early Israel.

Rather, she adds:

Most scholars now speak of Israelite settlement in the land, rather than conquest...because archeology has also shown that earliest Israel consisted of scores of new villages...previously unoccupied...rather than rebuilt towns on destroyed Canaanite strongholds.<sup>2</sup>

Now, this is quite good news. Because if the Conquest were historical then it would have been, as she writes, “a project of genocidal proportions.” Reading the book of Joshua as “history” is not only spurious, it’s harmful to our relationships with others and harmful to the moral character of our People. Reading it as “myth,” on the other hand, helps us appreciate how our ancestors treasured this Land and saw their relationship with God through its beauty and power. As my friend Rabbi Dr. Jeremy Morrison teaches, “Myths are true, just not literally so.”

<sup>2</sup>Jewish Studies Bible, JPS p. 463



Of course, Lapid's statement on Joshua was not his primary message. He focused much more attention on condemning political extremism. He said, "it flows like lava from politics to the streets." A few weeks prior he called out the settler movement, who believe not only that the Conquest happened but that it's their job to make it happen again.

It's easy to criticize fundamentalism among fanatics; easy to see fundamentalism in its most toxic form— violence, terrorism. It's harder, and perhaps riskier, to see it when it's implicit, and closer to home.

When I say "fundamentalism" I'm referring to the religious ideology of treating a sacred text with "supreme authority," literally and infallibly, with disregard for other forms of information, especially scientific.<sup>3</sup> Fundamentalism doesn't just live among extremists. Like most "isms," it can sneak around, seeping into our own ideas, often implicitly.

I lift up Lapid's words, in fact, because he is not the mouthpiece for the settler movement. I lift up Israel because wrestling with religious fundamentalism is what Liberal Zionists, like myself, have to do. Personally, I see the State as the dynamic center of Jewish life on earth, where the character and future of Judaism is unfolding. I also believe it is a guarantor that there will be no second Shoah. We have a stake in this future. How *we* read, as a progressive non-fundamentalist Jewish community, really matters.

\* \* \*

Still, it's easier to criticize what's far away, and Israel is 5,000 miles away. It's harder to call out what's closest to home. So here is an example that is as close to home as can be. The past year was devastating for reproductive rights in the United States. Since the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the health and safety of people who are pregnant has gone from bad to far worse. In our congregation, many of us are on the front lines, trying to mitigate this government-sanctioned abuse.

It's easy to see religious fundamentalism where it's most virulent, among anti-abortion activists; tougher to see it when it's implicit in our own advocacy. Following the ruling, most Jewish leaders condemned the decision. Countless rabbis have lifted up why we support abortion rights— and, as always, we engage our texts. That's what we do. We consult the Tanakh and Rabbinic literature. I heard many voices across the country using these texts to declare, "Judaism is pro abortion." As we've made clear on this pulpit, our Jewish *values* do support abortion access, as does Jewish law. We are proud of that; we share that in public discourse. Yet, to be honest, it concerns me when we rely solely on Jewish law to justify our Jewish positions.

We know our texts and Jewish laws were developed and created by men, in rooms where women were shut out. What do we make of this? What if the generations of men who shaped Jewish law had arrived at a different conclusion. Would we, as Reform Jews, then find ourselves having to choose between Jewish law and our Jewish values?

<sup>3</sup>I've chosen to employ the definition of Psychologist of Religion Ralph Hood, when a group "elevates the role of the sacred text to a position of supreme authority and subordinates all other potential sources of knowledge and meaning." *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism*, R.W. Hood. Chapter 1.



It strikes me, therefore, as disingenuous to say, “I support abortion rights primarily because of Jewish law.” Staking our positions on literalist readings comes at a cost to adherents of Reform Judaism: the authenticity of our relationship with Torah. It matters how we read.

\* \* \*

I wouldn’t dare claim to have written the manual on how to liberate ourselves from implicit religious fundamentalism. This work is challenging and disruptive. It raises tough questions for us.

How do we teach the Bible to our children? Surely, I wouldn’t preface a reading of *Where the Wild Things Are*, by lecturing a 3-year-old on why “myths are true just not literally so.” Last year I showed my then 4-year-old daughter a video of Adina Menzel singing “Let It Go.” She looked at me and said, “c’mon, Daddy, where the *real* Elsa?” Our stories are like trees, and as we grow, they grow. So...when do we teach our youth that “myths are true, just not literally so.”

Another challenge, not just for children: biblical literacy is already impoverished, especially on the Religious Left. How can we ensure that the Tanakh is not further dismissed, as irrelevant, as mere *bubbe-meise*? And from there, how do we assert our own authentic Jewish positions on modern issues?

What does it really mean to be a Religious Anti-Fundamentalist? I’d like to suggest three practices:

1. **We study our texts with reverence for myth and metaphor.** This involves an awareness of genre. As educated readers we do this with every other type of literature. How much more so is it warranted with ours? We read for historical context, the kernel of historicity beneath these works; read poetry as poetry; myth as myth– with utmost honor for our ancestors who creatively composed and lovingly preserved this magnificent literature of ours.
2. **Engage in the world with Jewish Values, unapologetically.** Our practice of Judaism is *informed*– not *governed*– by the scrolls of our past, embracing Torah as a *Tree of Life*, not an artifact. We take our faith seriously when we serve as co-authors who craft a *living* Judaism. Our life stories are sacred, too.
3. **Practice Humility. This is the hardest one (especially for clergy).** Practicing humility. Above all, it’s good for the soul, but also: it’s the only way to invite others in open minded conversations. Scholar Jonathan Haidt in his book *The Righteous Mind*, lifts up what he calls, “the rationalist delusion,” referring to how a group of people can make something sacred and in so doing, “lose the ability to think clearly about it.... Once people join a political team, they get ensnared in its moral matrix.”<sup>4</sup> When we are humble enough to start our interaction with “the other side” with a friendly conversation, sharing a story, we actually have a shot at opening minds; and if not, then at least building trust.

<sup>4</sup>Haidt, J. *The Righteous Mind*, p. 28



On Yom Kippur morning, we will read from the famous words of Parashat Nitzavim. The parasha invites us into the final speech of Moses to the Israelites, as they prepare to enter the Land. Moses shares God's words to the people, saying:

*Atem nitzavim hayom*, you all stand here this day, before the Eternal your God, to enter the Covenant with God, established right now. I make this Covenant... not just with you but also with those who are not here today.

Surely, this Instruction is... not beyond reach.

*Lo vashamayim hi* - it's not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us...so we may do it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross the sea and get it for us so we may do it?" No, the thing is close to you.

It's in your mouth, it's in your heart, and you can do it.<sup>5</sup>

These words are true; not literally so, but they are true.

The Torah is not in the heavens.

It is not overseas.

It is here, in this room.

It is here, in our mouths.

It is here, in our hearts.

*Eitz Chayyim hi*, it is a Tree of Life.

And it is upon us to give it water.

*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam,*

*asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.*

Blessed are you, Eternal God who sanctifies life with our embrace of

Torah. *Amen.*

<sup>5</sup>Deut 29:9-15, 30:11-14