

“How and How Not to Read the Bible”
Parashat Hayei Sarah
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Rabbi Carl M. Perkins
Temple Aliyah, Needham

We read this morning of our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, Sarah and Rebekah. We Jews have been reading these stories for literally thousands of years. But we haven't been reading them the same way each year. For each time we look at the text, we bring—or we *should* bring—some new sensitivity to it, some new insight that we didn't have the last time we read it.

Just this past week, I read about one particular way that the text, *this* text, was read—and of a major controversy that ensued.

To put it in context, let me first remind people that traditionally, Jews have read the text of the Bible in four ways, significant by the four letters of the Hebrew word, Pardes, which means “orchard.” The letter “peh” stands for “p’shat,” which refers to the simple, literal meaning of the text. The letter “resh” refers to “remez,” which means, “an allusion.” Remez refers to the philosophical approach to the text. “Daled” refers to the word, “drashah,” which means reading the text for moral guidance. And “samech” stands for “sod,” or “secret,” which refers to a mystical reading of the text. All have their place. All are potentially meaningful. All are potentially Jewish.

To bring this down to Earth, let me share with you a philosophical way of reading the text we read today, the story of finding a wife for Isaac. Instead of reading it as a literal story about three or four real people, we could read it instead as an allegory, a story in which the characters are symbols. This was how some Jews, under the influence of Greek philosophy, would read this text.

For example, they would see Abraham and Sarah as symbols of “form” (*tsurah*) and “matter” (*homer*), two categories of substance, according to Aristotle. The four matriachs, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah, signified....well, what do you think? Think about what you might know or might remember from how the



Greeks understood matter in the Universe. The Greeks, we might recall, understood that all matter was composed of various combinations of four elements: air, earth, fire, and water.

So, in the minds of some philosophically minded Jewish scholars in the Middle Ages, the stories about our ancestors weren't really, or primarily, about real people, they were about how these four elements ultimately gave rise to the diversity in the world as we know it today.

According to another theory, Jacob's twelve sons represented twelve aspects of the universe...can you guess what they are? They're not terrestrial; instead, they're celestial: the twelve signs of the Zodiac.

Now, if you're a little surprised to hear how medieval Jewish philosophers read and understood the Bible, think how medieval Jewish rabbinic leaders responded to these readings. They were not only shocked; they were horrified. They were terribly upset that some Jews were understanding the literal meaning of the story as simply a shell, an outer layer of clothing, to be discarded in favor of a truer, deeper meaning within. And so, not surprisingly, there were occasions when Jewish leaders would actually ban the writings of these Jewish philosophies, and would excommunicate them.

That's what I was reading about this week: the story of one particular conflict between those who would read the Bible philosophically, and those who felt it was dangerous. It took place in Montpellier, in Southern France, in the fourteenth century. This was a community that was strongly under the influence of Maimonides who, already two hundred years earlier, had argued that all references in the Bible to God had to be understood metaphorically. Now Maimonides never abandoned the simple meaning of the text. He described the biblical text as "an apple of gold, encased within a silver pedigree." Both are precious.

But some teachers in Southern France in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries went so far as to discard the surface meaning of the text and to focus almost exclusively on the philosophical kernel.

This engendered opposition. One leading opponent was a Jew by the name of Abba Mari ben Moses of Montpellier. He esteemed philosophy, but he thought

that some local thinkers, writers, and preachers had gone too far. Some, he argued, “endanger[ed] the historicity of Biblical narrative and ... even threaten[ed] the literal meaning of the Commandments.” “They have nearly stripped all the literal meanings from the Torah and displayed her naked.”

But the locals didn’t listen to him. So he turned to a leading rabbinic authority several hundred miles south, in Barcelona (213 miles, to be precise), known as Rashba: Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet (1235-1310).

Just before Rosh Hashanah in 1304, Abba Mari read out loud in synagogue a letter from the Rashba, condemning the philosophical reading of the text as “a profound departure not only from Judaism, but also from a religious tradition held in common with Christians and Muslims.”

There was resistance, and letters went back and forth. Finally, Rashba excommunicated the “allegorists” of Southern France. But his excommunication went unheeded and eventually, the controversy died out.

Looking back on this controversy today, we can see several themes that are relevant to us today. First, there is no one and only way to read the Bible. As much as Abba Mari and Rashba tried to prevent some people from reading the Bible differently, they ultimately failed, because there is no way to suppress the human mind. Second, the concerns they raised were in fact well grounded. That is, Abba Mari and the Rashba and others were concerned that if people read the Bible allegorically, they would begin to doubt the historicity of the Bible and they might begin to discard traditional Jewish observance. In fact, this happened. It didn’t happen in the fourteenth century, but it happened several centuries later. Beginning with Spinoza, Jews began to read the Bible as a literary work, which was rich and meaningful, but which didn’t necessarily have any authority over them.

And this lends me to a third insight, which couldn’t have been known to the fourteenth century generation that struggled with these different ways of reading the Biblical text. And that is this: As long as Jews read the Biblical text searching for meaning, as long as they read it with caring and reverence, as long as they—or shall I say, “we”—read it as our national, spiritual treasure—then Jews and Judaism will survive.

In reflecting on that fourteenth century struggle, I could identify with both sides. On the one hand, we must allow our intellects to go wherever they lead us. We can't suppress our minds. We know where that leads. On the other hand, such thinking then could lead people astray, just like some thinking today can lead people astray, leading them to abandon Judaism.

But if I were asked where do I come down, the answer is simple. I come down firmly on the side of freedom of thought, and freedom of expression. The suppression of thinking is too high a price to pay for the survival of any way of life.

Fortunately, it's not necessary. One can be a fully observant Jew, a fully devoted Jew, while keeping an open mind. In fact, I would argue, that's the only way to be a fully devoted Jew.

To me, it isn't praiseworthy to rest the authority of the Bible on historical or factual assertions that we know to be false. That's not where the authority of the Bible resides. It resides in the culture which has made it central to Jewish religious life over the centuries. That culture rightly understands that if we want to preserve Jews and Judaism (which I think we should) we should look to the Torah not only as a source of wisdom but as a source of proper behavior and as the basis for our collective identity. Must we see it as literally true? No. Must we see it as only properly to be interpreted in one and only one way? Absolutely not.

Looking back today, the fourteenth century conflict of Abba Mari and the Rashba versus Rabbi Levi seems rather tame. Today, we read the Bible in all sorts of ways. What's more of a threat is ignoring the Bible altogether as a source of insight and meaning. So long as we Jews read the Bible, however we read it, with affection and reverence, so long as we read it as our book, we will continue to stand in relationship with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah, however we understand them.

Shabbat Shalom!