

What Is (And Isn't) the Torah, and Why We Study It
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INTRODUCTION

There's a famous story in the Talmud about Hillel and Shammai, the two Jewish sages who lived about two thousand years ago. A gentile comes before Shammai and tells him that he's prepared to become a Jew if Shammai can teach him the entire Torah while he stands on one foot. Shammai drives him away. So the fellow goes to Hillel and says the same thing. Hillel says, "Fine. I'll teach you the entire Torah while you stand on one foot. Here we go: *Don't do to others what you wouldn't want done to yourself.* That's the entire Torah; all the rest is commentary. Now, go and study."

We ourselves studied Torah this morning: As we do every Shabbat and Yom Tov, with great reverence and honor we took a torah scroll (today, two torah scrolls) out of the ark and then we opened it up and read from it, publicly.

Why do we focus so much of our communal attention, devotion, and even *love*, on the Torah?

In order to answer that, we have to talk about what the Torah is, as well as what it isn't.

Think of the part of the Torah we read this morning. It is called "the *Akeidah*," the "Binding of Isaac."

There are different kinds of questions we could ask of a story like this. First, there are questions like, "Exactly when is this supposed to have taken place?" or "What food did Abraham and Isaac eat on their journey?" or, "What were they wearing?" You get the idea.

We don't dwell on these questions because deep down inside we know that Bible stories aren't like newspaper stories; they aren't necessarily factual accounts of things that happened to particular people at particular times in particular places; instead, they are "*sacred stories*," stories that Jews have held to be holy and precious for thousands of years, stories that we read as Jews to tell us about ourselves and where

we came from, and how to live our lives. They are stories that, in an important sense, are as much about *us* as about the people who appear in them.

The questions we ask of a *sacred* story are different. Concerning this story, for instance, we might ask questions like, “What kind of a test is this?” “What kind of a person is Abraham for submitting to such a test so willingly?” and “What kind of God subjects human beings to such a test?” These questions are far deeper—and frankly more interesting—than, say, “What happened in the Land of Canaan on a particular fall (or was it spring) day in the year 2,018 before the Common Era?”

The *Akeidah* and our other sacred stories that form the written Torah, and later works like the Talmud that form what we call the “Oral Torah,” address those larger questions about what it means to be a human being and a Jew in the world. We study the Torah to explore those questions—which is ideally a source of great joy and fulfillment. (After all, before studying Torah we recite a blessing in which we pray that our study will be pleasant.)

But not everyone takes this approach to the Torah.

When I was in tenth grade, I remember reading the play, *Inherit The Wind*, by Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee. *Inherit the Wind* is a fictional depiction of the 1925 trial of John T. Scopes, a high school teacher in Tennessee, who was indicted for teaching Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. The prosecutor is a bombastic, Bible-thumping blowhard named Matthew Harrison Brady, modeled after the great American orator, politician and religious leader, William Jennings Bryan. The attorney representing the schoolteacher is the agnostic Henry Drummond, modeled after Clarence Darrow, one of America's most famous criminal trial lawyers and civil libertarians.

At first, Drummond is stymied. He is prevented by the judge from introducing any testimony about Darwin's theory of evolution. But then he shocks the crowd by calling none other than Matthew Harrison Brady to the witness stand as an expert on the Bible.

The two giants face off against one another. After trying this way and that to pierce Brady's armor, Drummond finally opens up a rock and takes out a fossil, and shows it to Brady:



“Look,” he says. “These are the fossil remains of a pre-historic marine creature which lived here millions of years ago, when these very mountain ranges were submerged in water.”

“I know,” says Brady. “The Bible gives a fine account of the flood. But [you are] a little mixed up on [your] dates. That rock is not more than six thousand years old.”

“How do you know?” asks Drummond.

“A fine Biblical scholar, Bishop Usher, has determined for us the exact date and hour of the Creation. It occurred in the Year 4004, B.C. In fact,” he continues, “he determined that the Lord began the Creation on the 23rd of October in the Year 4004 B.C. at—uh, at 9 A.M.!”

At this point, we, the audience, know that Brady has been defeated.

“Is that Eastern Standard Time?” Drummond asks. “Or Rocky Mountain Time? It wasn’t *daylight-saving time*, was it? Because the Lord didn’t make the sun until the fourth day!”

Drummond demolishes Brady in this scene, and yet, ... he isn’t really mocking the Bible itself, or even religious faith. He is mocking the anti-intellectualism and self-righteousness of those who would seek to suppress free and critical inquiry.

(At one point, Brady accuses Drummond of contempt for holiness, and Drummond reacts indignantly. He *does* have a sense of the holy, he says. “The individual human mind,” he says, is holy. “[T]he advance of man’s knowledge is more of a miracle than any sticks turned to snakes, or the

parting of waters!" Now, as Jews, our understanding of holiness is broader than Drummond's. There are, after all, holy days, holy objects and holy behaviors, but Maimonides, the great medieval thinker, would have agreed with Drummond regarding the holiness of the pursuit of knowledge and understanding.)

I recall reading this play as a kid and feeling relieved to realize that, as a Conservative Jew, as a member of a Conservative synagogue, my religiosity didn't require me to make a choice between my brain and my heart. I could study Torah, and also study biology and chemistry and physics—or, for that matter, history, sociology and anthropology—and not feel as though the two were in conflict. To the contrary, I felt that they reinforced one another.

That wasn't everyone's experience. A friend, who went to yeshivas during her youth, told me the other day that she remembers something that happened to a friend of hers in his first grade class in yeshiva. *First grade!* The class was studying the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, when one student cried out, "What do you mean? Everyone knows a snake can't talk!" He was thrown out of class. *Thrown out!*

So the conflict dramatized in *Inherit the Wind* is not theoretical. It's very real. It isn't a conflict between "religion" on the one hand, and science and history on the other hand. Rather, it's a conflict between *fundamentalist* religion, the religion of Matthew Harrison Brady, and *post-Enlightenment* religion. What is post-Enlightenment religion? It's any religion that recognizes and values the power of the human brain to figure out, among other things, how the universe works or how the books in the Bible came to be written, ... and that is willing to defer to reason when it comes to figuring out those questions, indeed when it comes to *any* questions subject to critical inquiry, to reasoned investigation. It's a religion that sees the incorporation of scientific and historical truths into our overall understanding of the universe to be a *good* thing rather than a threat.

A few years ago, I heard Harvey Cox, a professor of religion at Harvard, speak at an event sponsored by JF&CS, the Jewish Family & Children's Service. He talked about how religion has evolved in the last fifty years or so. The first observation that he made is that, contrary to all expectations, religion didn't disappear. Fifty years ago, many people in

America thought that religion was on the way out, that it would soon cease to have any influence on people, and certainly on the public square.

But religion didn't disappear. One important reason it didn't is that liberal religious alternatives—like Conservative Judaism—claimed the loyalty of many people who would never have remained religious if their only choice was to remain fundamentalist. We who are sitting here today are testifying to the vitality of such religious options.

The other reason religion didn't disappear, though, is that pre-Enlightenment fundamentalism didn't disappear. It has continued, tenaciously, to maintain footholds in every major faith. Indeed, one of the courses that Professor Cox teaches about the contemporary scene is entitled, "Comparative Fundamentalism." Between fundamentalist Christianity and fundamentalist Islam and fundamentalist Judaism, Professor Cox has more than enough material for his course.

In the introduction to *Inherit the Wind*, Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee take pains to point out that their play is not historical. Yes, the

Scopes trial is the “genesis” of the play, but it has a life of its own.

Indeed, the play is not set in 1925. The authors write that “The stage directions set the time as ‘Not too long ago,’” and, they explain, “It might have been yesterday. It could be tomorrow.”

There’s a lesson there. We cannot simply assume that people will continue to believe that free inquiry is a good thing, and that it can be consistent with, and even reinforce, a religious way of life. “*B’chol dor va-dor*,” “in every generation,” we have to teach our children that critical inquiry is a good thing—and why it’s a good thing—as well as teaching them how to lead a Jewish way of life. We can’t simply assume that a liberal religious perspective like ours will continue on after us. We have to explain its meaning and value; we have to promote it, and we have to teach it to the next generation.

A few months ago, there was an election in Israel, and many new legislators entered the Israeli Parliament, the Knesset. One of them is a woman named Ruth Calderon. A few days after being sworn in, she, like all the other new M.P.’s, delivered her inaugural speech. *Unlike* all the other speeches, hers was almost immediately posted on Youtube, and

within a few days had already been viewed by hundreds of thousands of people. Why? Let me explain.

Ruth Calderon grew up in a secular home in Israel. Like other secular Israeli kids growing up then, she never doubted her Jewish identity, but she never felt that the Torah, the Talmud, and the rest of the Jewish religious literary heritage belonged to her. After all, those books were considered the exclusive possession of Orthodox Jews. They were the only ones studying them and claiming them as sources of insight, wisdom and holiness. Ruth Calderon wasn't Orthodox. She was educated in secular schools. What did those books have to do with her?

But then one day, she encountered the Talmud and she fell in love with it, and “its language, its humor, its profound wisdom, its methods of debate, its practicality, its humanity, its maturity.” And then it dawned on her: Why should I allow what *other* people think the Talmud is to define how I'm going to read it? And so she set out to *reclaim* the Talmud for herself. She earned a doctorate in Talmud and created not one but two *yeshivot*—or, study academies—for secular Israelis to study Torah.

On the day of her inaugural speech, Ruth Calderon stood before her colleagues and did something that had never been done before in the Knesset: she shared and explicated a story from the Talmud to illustrate who she was and what she was there to accomplish. This was unheard of. Never before had a woman, a secular woman at that, taught Talmud—certainly not in the way that she did, looking at a Talmudic story for its psychological insights, for what it teaches us about what motivates people to behave the way they do, (rather than for what it purports to say about a particular person at a particular time and place)—in other words, *looking at the story as a sacred story rather than a historical tale*.

It's hardly surprising that Ruth Calderon's speech was so electrifying. (I urge you to watch it; you can view it with English sub-titles here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8nNpTf7tNo> .)

Ruth Calderon's story is a remarkable one, and it is emblematic of what is happening not only in Israel but here as well. Many Jews are realizing that you don't have to be a fundamentalist to appreciate, indeed, to love

and to embrace, the Torah, the Talmud, and the rest of the Jewish religious library.

We study Torah to understand who we are, where we came from and where we're going. As Ben Bag Bag put it in Pirkei Avot, "hafoch bo v'hafoch bo d'khulah bo:" "Turn it around and around, for everything is in it." The study of Torah links us to our fellow Jews, past, present, and future, and it also inevitably gets us thinking about the fundamental questions of life. To us—that is, to us non-fundamentalist Jews—Torah isn't about what happened *then* and *there*, to *them*; it's about life. It's *our* story—or, it can be, if we read and study it with an open mind and an open heart.

It shouldn't surprise us that the story of the Binding of Isaac, which we read today, is complicated and troubling. *Life is like that.* The Torah isn't like a comic strip. It isn't even like a novel. With a novel, there's a beginning, middle and an end. But with Torah, we never get to the end. When it looks like we're about to finish, we just roll it right back to the beginning and start all over again: what better proof that we aren't meant to experience it as an *historical* epic but as a constant companion.

I think we can take a cue from a book written by a scholar named Marcus Borg. It's called, *Reading the Bible Again As if for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally*. We can do that. We can—and should—re-read the volumes in the Jewish religious library as if for the first time, and bring them alive in our homes and communities.

CONCLUSION

Toward the end of *Inherit the Wind*, we learn something very interesting. Not only is Henry Drummond a smart lawyer; he's also a *mensch*. As one person puts it when he sees him demonstrate compassion and respect even for those who disagree with him, he might even be more religious than Matthew Harrison Brady.

He also embodies our approach to our sacred literature. As Drummond prepares to leave the courtroom, the arena where he vanquished Brady, he packs up his belongings. He's about to put his copy of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* in his briefcase, but then he stops. He sees a copy of the Bible on the bench. He weighs the two books against each

other, pensively. Finally, he brings the two together, puts them both in his briefcase, and heads on his way.

That's us, isn't it? Unlike Hillel's student, who wanted to stand on only one foot, we have two feet on the ground, planted in two different worlds. We are the heirs to a great civilization that over three millennia has produced a rich and brilliant literature that is ours for the taking. All we have to do is dip into the wellsprings of Torah and drink deeply. At the same time, we live in a world that would boggle the minds of our ancestors, a world in which free and critical inquiry have brought us miraculous advances in science and medicine and also brought us outstanding discoveries in the field of religion.

We needn't give up one to have the other. On the contrary, it's *because* our minds are fully open to the historical, scientific and ethical insights of the modern world that we can also be fully open to the beauty and wisdom in the Torah.

Let's follow Hillel's advice: Like Ruth Calderon, let's go and learn.

Shanah Tovah u'm'tukah—may all of us be blessed with a year of Torah,
a year filled with goodness and sweetness. Amen.