The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the

Young Israel of Scarsdale Community

Sefer Shemot **Parshat Terumah** **Adar א 5784 / February 2024**

Learning to Live with Messiness*

By Steve Smith

Rabbi Joshua Berman, an Orthodox rabbi and a professor at Bar Ilan University, criticizes Biblical criticism that attempts to interpret Tanach based on the assumption that it was written for a modern audience. He argues that correctly understanding Tanach requires acknowledging and accepting its complexity and messiness. According to Berman, conflicts that arise from reading Tanach through a modern lens can be substantially resolved by considering the differences in literary techniques, literacy levels, and cultural understanding between ancient times and the present. Our parsha, *Terumah*, contains an example.

I wrote a dvar Torah in April 2022 about Rabbi Berman's interpretation of Tanach for *Parshat Vaetchanan*. In "The Biggest Number in the Book of Numbers," I explained Rabbi Berman's analysis of the Biblical census. According to demographers, the census identification of 600,000 men of fighting age extrapolates to a population of about 1.8 million—roughly the size of Houston, the 8th largest city in the US. Rabbi Berman reconciles the census report and the implication that Beni Yisrael was much larger than generally assumed.

According to Berman, our need to "learn to live with the messiness" was triggered by the work of Sir Isaac Newton.

> [Modern Biblical criticism began] just five years after Newton formulated the laws of motion and universal gravitation in *Mathematical Principles of Natural History*. Previously, nature had been widely regarded as impenetrable; Newton proposed that it was instead subject to laws that could be expressed simply and precisely through mathematical formulas.
>
> This "paradigm shift" influenced all realms of inquiry, as 18th-century thinkers sought to match Newton's science of nature with a science of what they termed "human nature," which they regarded as similarly orderly, subject to laws, and open to observation and comprehension. A key tenet of Enlightenment thought was that science consists of analysis: i.e., the reduction of vastly complex phenomena to a small number of constituent parts. In natural science, landmark advances would be achieved by the application of this notion; extraordinarily sophisticated organisms were discovered to be systematically made up of cells, ultimately leading in the 1830s to cell theory, and the atomic structure of the natural elements was laid open, allowing John Dalton to publish the first table of the elements in 1803.

It didn't take long before this new approach was applied to understanding the Bible.

> It is in this milieu that we encounter the first attempt to delineate the putative sources of the Pentateuch. In 1753, a French scientist and medical doctor by the name of Jean Astruc transferred his vocation's

new analytical disciplines to his avocation: biblical study. Like Spinoza and Simon before him, Astruc had only the biblical text from which to work. Unlike them, he lived in the confident age of the Enlightenment: all the text needed was a set of laws to explain its inconsistencies, paramount among them being the Torah's use of diverse and seemingly divergent names for the divinity.

There was one more step to this process:

> A key ancillary step in this process involved the beginnings of "history" itself as an academic discipline —and not only a discipline but, like physics, an exact science. If, in the 18th century, educated people turned to philosophy to unlock the mysteries of human life, during the 19th century they turned to the putatively "scientific" analysis of the past to provide insight and inspiration in politics, law, economics, morals, and religion.

In his analysis, Berman refers to Ralbag's approach to understanding certain passages in our parsha that puzzle many critics. Specifically, he cites Ralbag's perspective on the laws of the Mishkan, which are first given in *Parshiot Terumah* and *Tetzaveh*, and then repeated in *Parshiot Vaykhel* and *Pekudei*. This repetition has troubled many scholars, as it is not common in general literature to completely restate the same points later in a work. However, Ralbag believes that this was once a common writing convention and that Moshe wrote in accordance with it. Berman finds Ralbag's perspective particularly poignant and explains why.

> I love that Ralbag for two reasons. I wish more of my academic colleagues were like the Ralbag, because what the Ralbag is saying is, to me it seems clear that this doesn't work, but maybe my way of looking at the world and thinking of things is dependent on the time in which I live. And maybe once upon a time things were different. And so I will suspend judgment. Maybe there's something I don't understand, and that's okay. And I don't understand how people wrote in the ancient times. The second thing I love about what Ralbag says is that he is totally correct. That is, when you look in a bunch of ancient writings, you'll see stories where a king commands his servant, "Do A, B, C, and D, and E, and F." And then it says, "And the servant went off, and he did A, B, C, D, E, and F." This is all over the place, this is the way they wrote. It helped with mnemonic memory things. You can remember the composition better if you have certain things that are repeated over and over. So the Ralbag was right without even knowing any of this stuff.

As Berman concludes, "But the main point is what I said before, he had intellectual modesty. He knew you don't die from a kashya."

---

* This dvar Torah draws heavily on Rabbi David Bashevkin's discussion with Rabbi Berman in an 18Forty podcast. The podcast can be found here and the podcast summary here.
For a comprehensive treatment see, Rabbi Joshua Berman, *Ani Maamin*: *Biblical Criticism, Historical Truth, and the Thirteen Principles of Faith*, Maggid Books, 2020

The Collective Conversation is a project of the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Living Torah Fund
Learning and Growing Together as a Community • Learning as Legacy
Click here *to see past issues of The Collective Conversation*