

The Torah, TheTorah.com, and the Recent Tumult in Context

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We must assist the British in the war as if there were no White Paper and we must resist the White Paper as if there were no war.

David Ben Gurion

Background

I completed two educations as an adult, religious and academic. After spending four years in yeshiva studying gemara and chumash intensely (and teaching chumash and gemara in my early twenties), I spent one year working on *peshat* and literary readings of Tanakh, then attained my *semikha*, followed by *dayanut*. That was my religious education. I also have an academic education. After my B.A. (in psychology), I completed an M.A. in Biblical History, and following a 6 year break, earned my Ph.D. in Jewish studies with a focus on Bible.

Throughout this period, I led a bifurcated intellectual life. I understood that both the religious and academic courses of study were meaningful, and believed both in *Torah Mi-Sinai* / *Torah min ha-Shamayim*, and academic bible studies. To live with this tension, I

¹ Morethodoxy shut down, so I am posting my previously published articles as PDFs here. They have not been revised.

followed a version of the David Ben Gurion philosophy quoted above: “I kept my academics academic and my halakha halakhic.” This is still my philosophy, in essence, but over the past few years I have given serious thought as to whether I can make the two sides meet at any point, or, at least, put them in serious conversation. Thoughts were percolating in my head but nothing clear had as yet emerged.

Project TABS / TheTorah.com

The opportunity to begin to resolve a meeting point between academic Bible studies and classical religious faith emerged when Rabbi David Steinberg hired me to research and write for Project TABS’ website, TheTorah.com. Project TABS was founded by David Steinberg, a former kiruv professional, together with Marc Brettler, an observant Jewish Bible professor. According to the [about page](#),

Project TABS (Torah And Biblical Scholarship) is an educational organization founded to energize the Jewish people by integrating the study of Torah with the disciplines and findings of modern biblical scholarship.

When Steinberg and I first spoke, it turned out that we had had many of the same experiences even though we came from very different communities and backgrounds. Each of us had been contacted by people who were grappling with difficult questions. Some dropped out of the religion entirely; others stayed because they had children and spouses who wanted to, or because they enjoyed the social scene, but the fire had gone out. On top of this, it was becoming clear to me that a disturbing number of people in the Modern Orthodox world who were, ostensibly, doing well were, in fact, intellectually and emotionally checked out of Torah study. For some, the study of Torah lacked the intellectual intensity, rigor, and openness of their secular and professional pursuits. It was

almost as if they “knew” that they couldn’t possibly really believe what they were being told, so they preferred not to invest too much emotional energy in it and risk disappointment, or worse.

At a certain point, I realized that I had a choice: I could allow myself to avoid these questions, keeping whatever personal synthesis I had thought of to myself, or alternatively, I could offer my thoughts publicly and start a real conversation about the challenges academic biblical studies poses to the Orthodox Jew and brainstorm about how best to deal with it. It was *beshert* that David Steinberg and I were put in contact with each other at this time by another observant Bible scholar, since we both believed that the latter was the better course. In fact, it is part of my *emunah* that if *hotamo shel ha-Qadosh barukh Hu emet* (the seal of the Holy One is truth) that an honest search would yield a way through.

The Manifesto

In my programmatic essay on [Torah, History, and Judaism](#), recently posted on TheTorah.com, I offer my preliminary thoughts on a range of issues. No single point of my piece is novel in itself, but the overall presentation is meant to guide the reader through the full spectrum of my struggle to make sense of the divinity of Torah without denying aspects of academic biblical study that seemed to me to be correct.² Certainly, as

² In this sense I see myself as following in the footsteps of modern Torah thinkers such as Mordechai Breuer, Amit Kula, Tamar Ross, and Yuval Cherlow, not to mention the great medievalists such as Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, Rambam, Yehudah ha-Chassid, and many statements of Chazal. Certainly the particular synthesis is my own, but many others before me have attempted to reconcile traditional belief with science and philosophy, as they understood these disciplines in their time-periods.

some have pointed out, some or many of the conclusions of academic Bible study or archaeology could, in theory, shift over time in a very different direction and be disproven, but that point does not help the religious person stuck in a quandary today. We need to understand the world, including the Bible, according to the best tools we currently have.

Do the worlds of tradition and academic biblical study need to contradict? Does it have to be one or the other? Can a person feel like he or she can engage in honest inquiry about the Torah and still keep his or her faith intact?

I will note that, throughout this process, my own faith has remained intact, albeit its hue has altered as my understanding of the issues matured. To be clear: I believe in *Torah Min Ha-Shamayim*, that the Torah embodies God's encounter with Israel. I believe in *Torah mi-Sinai*, the uniqueness of the Torah in its level of divine encounter. I believe that the Torah is meant to be as it is today and that all of its verses are holy. I believe that halakha and Jewish theology must develop organically from Torah and its interpretation by the Jewish people. These are more than just words to me. My life is about studying, teaching and living Torah. The divinity of the Torah and the Sinaitic moment pulses through my veins - it's who I am. Nothing I have said or written should fool the reader into thinking that I have abandoned my deep belief in God's Torah and the mission of the Jewish people.

My own experience has taught me that it is possible to look at the issues honestly, to struggle with them, and to strive for synthesis, all the while maintaining a deep connection to Torah and Jewish observance. In fact, I strongly believe that if I had taken the opposite approach and denied myself the study and the struggle, my religiosity would

have suffered. It is for this reason that I felt it necessary to take on these critical issues, and offer a possible synthesis in the hope that this will inspire others to do the same.

A Note about the Future

In my work for TABS, I will be publishing my ideas and tentative theories to engender this conversation. Sometimes ideas might not be as fully nuanced as they should be or might be misunderstood;³ I will make mistakes, state things too forcefully or not forcefully enough, we will rethink and revisit constantly—this is the nature of the type of endeavor upon which Project TABS is embarking. I look forward to the pushback, critique, and give-and-take our website will hopefully foster. The key is to be in conversation and to be exploring possibilities and struggling together.

To be clear, my programmatic essay was not—is not—meant to be a *final* statement, but a conversation starter. If some of my essay came off as a conversation stopper, I deeply apologize; *mea culpa*, it was not my intention. I am muddling through these complicated issues like many of you. I put my thoughts on the table as a suggestion; maybe I have discovered a way through, maybe I haven't. Hopefully other people will share their

³ I would like to take this opportunity to clarify one matter. Another piece of mine, an [introduction](#) to the opening section of Deuteronomy, caused quite a stir. One of the reasons for this was the abrupt end of the original posting. This was pointed out to me by a number of friends and colleagues—well before the Rabbi Gordimer's *Cross-Currents* article attacking mine was posted—and I quickly reworked the ending to further clarify and add nuance. The reason the ending was so abrupt is because this post was originally part of a longer essay, which was divided into part 1 (the post in question) and [part 2](#), which offered a modern midrashic understanding of the differences between Deuteronomy 1-3 and the other parts of the Torah. When the two were divided, the first was left, essentially, without an ending. This was a sloppy but serious mistake, and I apologize and will strive to be more careful and precise in the future.

suggestions, but we can't just leave these issues as “a *kasha*”, “an interesting question” and end with that. The issues are too pressing, the problems are too large and too numerous, the consequences are too dire.

Our community desperately needs to have a candid conversation about Torah and faith, and the conversation must be held in a safe and open-minded environment, where there is no bullying, no threats, no name-calling, and where each person's intellectual and religious integrity can remain intact. It is my hope that Project TABS, and its website, TheTorah.com, will contribute to a greater engagement with Torah study. I look forward to continuing this conversation with the community as we all work together to find the right path in this challenging but crucially necessary endeavor.