Bibliodrama: A Form of Interpretative Play

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The Educational Challenge in Torah Study[1]

The progress of my Torah study can be summed up as follows: *From no-brain to left-brain to whole-brain.*[2]

I learned a lot of useful information in my ultra-Orthodox high school, and my mind did develop there to some extent. However, when it came to Torah learning I was short-changed. We studied Torah with bits of Rashi and Ramban, accompanied by unsophisticated explanations that changed little from when I entered at age 12 to when I exited at age 18. Hence I feel somewhat justified in terming it, for my purposes, "no-brain."

The next stage of my religious education, my post-high-school Torah study, brought a marked improvement. I was finally able to have the satisfying left-brain experience that my 18-year-old self craved. In my intellectually oriented women's yeshiva, we studied Talmud and Rambam, commentary and philosophy; we absorbed information, grasped concepts, compared perspectives, and analyzed texts. Nonetheless, I always sensed that something was missing—but I could not quite put my finger on what. It is difficult to pinpoint the absence of something when you have never experienced it or even seen anything remotely like it. One event from that period stands out—the occasion when Ilan Nov, a resident of Bat Ayin, visited our yeshiva and read to us a section from a book he was writing.[3] Although I could not fully grasp his meaning, I was intrigued and delighted: how refreshing to meet someone creating art from within his personal Jewish experience.

Moving on to undertake advanced Jewish studies at university and other institutions, I found myself increasingly dehydrating in various classes, many of them frontal lectures. Even those that involved discussion and debate did not satisfy me. I yearned inchoately for something different, but I still knew not what. In 1999, I abandoned a high-level Jewish studies program for women halfway through the year, having comprehended that high-level Talmud learning in the yeshiva/academic style was not what I needed for my growth. The wish for something else had grown urgent by now, but I still did not have a precise notion of what that should be. I had noticed a tremendous level of excitement and yearning arising within me after I stumbled across an article concerning a fringe Jewish spirituality

movement, but was not ready to relocate to the desert and live in a yeshiva-ashram with people lacking all normative boundaries.[4] I began to despair of lectures and shiurim, none of which were engaging me with the Torah to the level I desired: that is to say, fully and passionately, as a whole person. Entering a crisis of Torah, I found even my own teaching lackluster; and even the study of Hasidut and Kabbalah, which I love, did not suffice to fill the vacuum.

With hindsight, I now understand that for all those years, an entire hemisphere of my brain was being overlooked. I now know that for me, creativity and emotional awareness line up firmly alongside my intellectual and analytical modes as the channels for my experience of the world. Small wonder my Torah learning felt half-baked. Although I was blessed to study with many brilliant teachers in Israel who introduced intellectual creativity, emotional insight, and depth to the study of Jewish sources, this still ultimately represented a concession to right-brain energy within left-brain territory. Moreover it always took place within the strongly left-brain format of lectures (and, on a good day, discussion). Creativity remained in the realm of the teacher, with very little on the part of the student. When the student did offer some creative idea, in the best case scenario this would be briefly acknowledged with a word of praise; at worst, it would be misunderstood or squashed.[5]

Bibliodrama: An Introduction

I was fortunate enough to have my prayers answered. In the early 2000s, I encountered the technique of Bibliodrama, and was finally able to integrate all that pent-up right-brain energy into my Torah study and teaching. Over a decade has passed and I have never looked back. I enjoy Bibliodrama tremendously and have, to date, run over 170 workshops on many different stories. Indeed, today I sometimes find it hard to sit through a regular Torah lesson, so powerfully do I feel the vitality and immediacy of the Bibliodramatic mode bubbling up in me.

The following is my own understanding of the method's potential, based on extensive experience with it. It is something I believe extremely important to share. All of us possess right-brains. True, not all of us feel an existential need to use them; some people are happy with purely intellectual stimulation. But to force that preference wholesale onto the people whose spirituality and education are in our charge; to deny the use of one hemisphere to an entire class of students, at least some of whom would thrive with their imaginations set free, is simply wrong.

Bibliodrama was invented by Dr Peter Pitzele of the United States. Pitzele, a Jewish intellectual who has taught English literature at Harvard, is clinically trained in psychodrama, a type of group therapy utilizing dramatic tools for healing. Invited in 1984 to teach a class at the Jewish Theological Seminary, he decided to draw on his psychodramatic training by asking the students to take the part of Moses, answering his questions as if they were in Moses' shoes. Thus the technique of Bibliodrama was born. It continued with a success that astonished Pitzele. He has since run Bibliodrama sessions all over the world, trained others in the art of Bibliodrama, and written a book instructing toward its practice, *Scripture Windows*.

So what exactly is it? First let me explain what it is not. Despite its name, it is not theater. The group spends most of the time seated. There is no audience—the group serves as an audience for itself. The "script" is created spontaneously on an ongoing basis throughout the session and is not preserved for posterity. Another difference is that in theater, each part is played by one actor only, while in Bibliodrama, any given part is often played by the entire group, making for a much richer experience. Thus, Bibliodrama might best be described as a form of psychodynamic group role-play. It has been called by some "contemporary Midrash" or "spontaneous Midrash." While Midrash is more complex and far-ranging, to anyone experiencing the technique the comparison becomes quite obvious. Pitzele was not intentionally aiming at the midrashic form, but he explains that through his work he discovered

…an immensely long tradition of commentary, storytelling, and imaginative interpretation of the Bible…that sought to fill in the gaps in the narrative… Without knowing it I had stumbled into a conversation with the Bible that had been going on for thousands of years….[6]

The texts are most often stories from Tanakh, but the technique is applicable to any story, and also to historical events and even non-narratives (I once did a Bibliodrama on the Hanukkah candles with adults).

The Practice of Bibliodrama

What occurs in practice? A series of questions are put to the participants as characters in the biblical story, questions that often lack any obvious or unequivocal answer and that arise from gaps in the text. For example, “Eve, why did you immediately give the fruit to Adam?” or “Adam, we understand that Eve was enticed by the serpent—but what brought *you* to eat from the forbidden fruit?”
Participants must respond in first-person language, speaking as major characters, minor characters (named, implied or invisible), or even as objects (for example, the Tree of Knowledge). The simple transition from third- to first-person language makes all the difference; it removes the distance we naturally place between ourselves and a story that is not about us, and compels us to get straight into the heart of the story. In the absence of clear answers, the students must draw upon their emotions, experiences and textual intuitions, often astonishing themselves with the powerful insights arising from their reading of the narrative. Indeed, I have frequently presented Bibliodrama as the encounter, unique to this very moment, between the divine in the text and the divine in ourselves. As the Hasidic rebbe Menachem Nachum Twerski of Chernobyl writes in his book *Me’or Enayim* (weekly portion of *Vayeshev*):

It is known that the Torah is eternal and preceded time, but has been encased (*lit*: clothed itself) in time-bound narratives… the Torah must be (relevant) for every person and at every time.

By opening up the text to a myriad possible directions, Bibliodrama achieves the goal of propelling us beyond the obscure “clothing”/barrier of ancient language and context directly into the profound core of the story’s mystery.
Even those with very weak backgrounds in Tanakh are found to contribute many excellent ideas, for all that is necessary is a basic understanding of the text and a heart and mind willing to lend themselves to a new context and new thoughts. In fact, the people least skilled at Bibliodrama, aside from those with an academic personality, are those who arrive already full to the brim with commentaries and the “correct” way to read the Tanakh, and without the flexibility to put that aside in order to read the text with a fresh pair of eyes. Clinging to what is already known obstructs the possibility of the Bibliodramatic flow, which is what makes the experience truly enjoyable—the sudden insight, the startling *hiddush*, the ability to listen to the others in the room and build from what they say. I emphasize that it is not the prior education that is the obstruction so much as the inflexibility. I have run Bibliodramas with Jewish educators extremely familiar with the story under the lens, having taught it numerous times themselves. This population nonetheless, through approaching the text playfully and with curiosity while bringing their personal and emotional lives to the text, have managed to arrive at tremendous new insights for themselves and others.
Per the Chernobler rebbe’s call for the Torah to be relevant not only for every person but also at every time, no two Bibliodramas are the same, for no two groups are the same. A participant repeating a Bibliodrama will inevitably play it slightly differently, for people do not stand still and new thoughts arise. This ever-changing nature of Bibliodrama also makes it highly enjoyable for the facilitator, who will hear new interpretations each time and learn from them.The group experience is also vital to the Bibliodramatic process and to its dynamic character. It is the group that reflects upon and plays the story as a collective, and it is very susceptible to patterns that emerge. One individual comment (for example, Esther noting that she is an adopted child and never knew her parents) can cause the group to strongly move in a particular direction for the rest of the session. Bibliodrama could be done, theoretically, with just one or two people; but it is marvellous to hear the variety of responses to one question. A group Bibliodrama is truly an experience of *shivim panim*, the 70 facets of the Torah. It

can also serve to make a group more cohesive, especially when done over time.[7]

I have seen Bibliodrama transform ignorant students into sensitive Bible commentators, assiduously searching the text for clues to solve puzzles and difficulties, after their curiosity has been aroused by questions such as “Joseph, why do you insist on telling your dreams even after you see that it enrages your brothers?” or “Esther, what was it like growing up in Mordecai’s house?” As the participants get comfortable with the technique and each other, they speak out powerful emotions that bring the text vividly to life and fill in the gaps. For many the previously impenetrable text becomes something to identify with: truly a tree of life. The experience changes the participants’ relationship to the text. One 18 year old, a product of the religious Jewish education system, announced, “Before today I never thought of Abraham as someone I could actually identify with!” Another told me: “When we started, I could not even remember what was in chapter 1 of Ruth, even though I studied it just last week. Now there is no chance I would forget.”

Students who do not shine in the regular left-brain classroom atmosphere, deprived of the opportunity to display their creative imaginations, suddenly come into their own in Bibliodrama. Teachers witnessing a classroom Bibliodrama have been astonished by the sudden vocal participation of a pupil who ordinarily remains silent. The method works well with both children and adults, both populations bringing different strengths and weaknesses to the technique. While teenagers sometimes do not connect as well, due to their increased self-consciousness, most children and adults enjoy the group experience of building up the inner life of a story. They relish the opportunity to be playful and also to express deep personal feelings through the safe mask of the biblical characters. Bibliodrama verges on the therapeutic, and participants may be encouraged to share any personal revelations, depending on how comfortable the facilitator is with such activity. Pitzele, a trained psychotherapist, is competent to take the session in very personal directions, whereas I feel less comfortable doing so—though I do place a high value on the sharing at the end and the personal take-away.

Lying between improvisational theater, psychodrama, and text-study, Bibliodrama may perhaps most accurately be entitled an *improvisational performance of a studied text.* It is highly flexible and quite unique. It is a “performance” that is never repeated, that requires no rehearsals, is based upon text study, and can take place anywhere a circle of people may sit—from synagogue to salon to classroom. It does not conform to our usual picture of “religious activity,” and yet participants often emerge profoundly moved and uplifted. It is unusual in that it deals with sacred text, yet contains playful elements not usually associated with the sacred. As a form of “serious play,” it bears all the characteristics and paradoxes of play, whereby on one level what occurs feels very real, on another it is clear that we are all conspiring to pretend. Indeed, some adults take a short while to get into the method for fear of sounding ridiculous, but luckily there are generally a few brave souls willing to take the leap and create the suspension of disbelief necessary to start; after which the others follow. Even people who do not speak throughout the entire workshop have reported having a meaningful experience. They are grateful for the permission I give at the start that “if you are feeling shy, you do not need to speak at all.” Most intriguing though is the common phenomenon of individuals who enter the room convinced they are not going to say a word, and then find themselves talking non-stop. This, if nothing else, is a great testimony to the power of Bibliodrama.

Example

The following is an example of a Bibliodramatic “thread” (question by facilitator followed by various answers.)

The facilitator asks the group: So Cain, why did you decide to bring an offering to God? As far as we know neither your mother nor your father ever brought offerings. Where did this idea come from?

After a moment of thought, one participant answers: I had heard my parents talking about God. I wanted to speak to God too. This was my way of communicating.

Another participant says: I wanted to give a gift to someone to say thank you for all the abundance I've received.

A third person suggests: I want to see if I can get us back into the Garden of Eden—it sounds like it was such an amazing place and I am really sad that I missed being there. Maybe I can change God's mind with a bribe.

A fourth adds: My parents wrongfully took fruit, so I am repenting by giving back the fruit!

Pitzele suggests that the facilitator echo (or "double") what participants say, repeating it in other words—thus both validating and also amplifying its content. He also recommends echoing in first person language. Thus, for example, after the second participant's comment, the facilitator might echo: "In my work as a farmer, I've received so much good, and the need to give thanks arises from deep within me. Who can I thank if not this God that my parents have spoken about, who seems to run the world?" The facilitator glances at the participant to make sure that this was what was meant. On rare occasions, the participant will reply: "No, what I mean is…"

The facilitator can also encourage deepening of ideas; for example, after a remark such as that by the fourth participant above there is room to prompt:
"*And in doing so I feel…*"
"*I see—do you think it's going to be accepted?*"
"*Very interesting—so you've not only invented the notion of offerings but also of repentance! You're very creative, Cain.*"
The key in Bibliodrama is the questions—asking questions that stem from a curiosity about the text, and that will lead participants quickly to the most compelling textual puzzles and emotional textures.

It is also important to choose a story containing some interesting tension, conflict, dilemma and personal growth. Fortunately the Tanakh is full of these. Do not begin the Bibliodrama at the height of the drama (for example, the murder of Abel); it is crucial to build up to the climactic moment so that the characters and their motivations are sufficiently fleshed out beforehand.

Embodied Knowledge

In Bibliodrama, a transition is effected from studying the texts from the outside (analytical/academic activity) to studying them from the inside and getting under their skin (creative/imaginative activity). The expression of emotions in character affects one's actual emotional state; that is to say, they reach beyond a purely intellectual knowledge into the realm of the viscera. Participants bring to bear, for dramatic support to their words, inflections and volume of voice, the use of hands when speaking, and emphatic movements of the entire body which are not just "acting" but real manifestations of emotion. These physical motions in turn further deepen and embody their experience.
Other activities borrowing from forms of family therapy inspired by the plastic arts can be used at times, to "sculpt" the biblical scene. Here, the facilitator transforms into a director, and participants are asked to pose in ways that indicate the dynamics between the characters in the story—who stands next to whom? How do their bodies indicate their relationships? Pitzele notes:

Once group members are on their feet, as opposed to voicing their roles from their seats, your task as director begins in earnest, for when people stand and move they begin to create a space for play, and you have in effect a stage… The whole body becomes an expressive element; any movement may take on meaning… All such sculptings are interpretative because in fact every arrangement of bodies in space… becomes a way of seeing the story."[8]

In the Classroom and Alongside Commentaries

Two more points are pertinent to educators. Firstly, Bibliodrama may be conveniently and easily integrated into a regular class. Although a full Bibliodrama is ideally carried out in a circle, and can last for an hour or even two, a teacher may also, in the course of a class, suddenly switch into Bibliodrama mode for a brief moment, casually saying, "Now, everyone, I want to imagine that you are Moses standing in front of the burning bush. What are you thinking?" Five or 15 or 50 minutes later, after gathering first person reflections, the teacher returns to usual classroom mode, the story having been enriched and enlivened by having the students import it into their own experience.

The challenge for classroom educators—and to an extent for all who wish to run a Bibliodrama—is that as a technique it opens up boundaries in a manner that might feel threatening or frightening compared with regular teaching. The invitation to answer freely might lead to irreverence or subversive interpretations. This will be particularly challenging to Orthodox educators, though not solely to them. My answer to this issue is that firstly, it *is* an issue, and each teacher will have to decide where he or she is comfortable setting the boundaries.[9] In my introduction to Bibliodrama I ask the participants to stay with the *peshat*, with what is written in the text itself, and not to offer interpretations that overturn the text's meaning. I invite them to avoid answering flippantly and randomly but rather to answer intuitively and with respect, in a manner aligned with the text and aimed at "what might have been going on."

If an interpretation is nonetheless offered that contradicts the text or wider context, I would simply point that out to the group. For example, when a participant speaks as Abel, defending his profession as a shepherd with the words "We need the sheep for their meat," I note that humans were not yet eating meat at that point. Then there are the answers which are needlessly irreverent or silly. While occasional jokes are great for making Bibliodrama fun, in such a case I would apply Pavlovian conditioning, paying less attention to this answer while continuing to maintain my serious tone in asking questions and giving attention to the answers that are more interesting and profound. I do not like to "squash" answers or make a face. I believe—I hope, not naively—that children and adult participants alike value the permission to speak freely and even push boundaries without the facilitator becoming unduly upset; it gives them space to truly explore and own the text. If the main thrust of the group activity is a serious and respectful unpacking of the multiple layers of the text, maverick participants will often step into line, or at least not serve to ruin the experience for others while playing the text in their own unique way. For this to work, it is important for the teacher-facilitator to feel confident, open and relaxed; in short, to trust the process.

The second point pertinent to educators refers to one of the great benefits of Bibliodrama for Tanakh teachers, namely that after playing out textual and narrative difficulties Bibliodramatically, students possess far greater clarity regarding the matters with which the commentators deal. Thus for example, a Bibliodrama on Genesis chapter 4 involves the difficult question of why God rejects Cain's sacrifice and prefers Abel's. The question is posed to God, as a "character" in the story, which provides a platform also for students to air their theology and thoughts as to how God works within the world, itself a potentially significant discussion. After struggling with this question and hearing several answers, the student understands better why the Midrash decides to read "*from* the fruit of the ground" as referring to the inferior fruit, while other commentators do not choose to read it this way. In fact, God's "motivation" is unclear from the *peshat*. True, this point might emerge from an ordinary reading of the story, but might well remain in the realm of a theoretical theological-moral discussion. But when students are forced to answer as God, or experience how Cain feels after the rejection, it becomes existential and immediate, plugging them into their own questions regarding theodicy, and so forth.

A famous textual difficulty that arises from the same chapter lies in verse 8, where Cain speaks to his brother in the field, but what he actually said is missing. A gap like this one is a classic for Bibliodrama, as the question can be easily posed to Cain: "What did you say to Abel?" and to Abel "How did you feel when Cain said that?" Or, in another example from the same story, Rashi's comment on Genesis 4:1 suggesting Cain had already been born back in the Garden of Eden, and not, as the simple sequence of the text seems to imply, after the exile from there, will take on extra significance after playing out the story. Participants will be asked "How does this change the story,

compared to how we played it?" For example, the third participant quoted above might respond: "Well now I *really* want to get back—this was my birthplace and it's my birthright to be there!"

In brief, any study of commentaries after a Bibliodrama will certainly be more easily grasped than before it. As all teachers of commentary know, sometimes it is not at all clear where the commentator is coming from or what is troubling him. Indeed, teachers skilled in understanding commentators and the textual difficulties to which they are responding can in fact build their Bibliodramas from the outset based on the commentators.

Thus for example, in Genesis 24, where Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for his son, verse 2 says: *And Abraham said to the oldest servant of his household, who ruled over all that he had*. On the words *the oldest servant of his household*, Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (*HaAmek Davar*) writes: "This is a sign of wisdom," and on the words "*who ruled over all that he had*" adds "He oversaw everything that Abraham owned, and was given a free hand to command… He controlled his evil inclination…" Another commentator, Hezekiah ben Manoah (Hizkuni), writes "Abraham would not have cause to suspect him of sexual impropriety."

When training teachers, I challenge them to locate the difficulty, and the consequent Bibliodramatic question, nestling in these commentators' remarks. I am searching for a Bibliodramatic question addressed to a specific character. The teachers do not always guess immediately, sometimes suggesting that the question should be posed to the servant, but eventually someone realizes that the most obvious question is to Abraham: "Abraham—you need someone to go on a long arduous trip across the desert. Why then do you send your *oldest* servant, who will probably die on the way of a heart attack, rather than some robust young man?"

Asked such a question, any group speaking as Abraham will in all likelihood come up with responses relating to issues of wisdom and trust, and perhaps also of decreased libido. The attentive teacher studying the commentators before building the Bibliodrama will notice this point, introduce it in the course of the session as a question, and then at the end cite *HaAmek Davar* and Hizkuni. The students will see that they thought of the same answers, and will feel close to the *HaAmek Davar* and Hizkuni, as if they too were sitting in the room during the Bibliodrama.[10]

In introducing analysis, debate and study of secondary sources following a Bibliodrama, we are re-introducing left-brain activity, thus achieving the "whole-brain" experience to which I referred in my opening line. Other right-brain techniques can also be appended to Bibliodrama, for example putting on a play from within what was said during the session, or doing creative writing, art, or dance following the Bibliodrama.

Conclusion

I would love for Bibliodrama to become part of Jewish school curricula, both in Israel and in the Diaspora, alongside regular types of learning. It could do much to increase students' love for Tanakh. Teachers in several continents have responded enthusiastically to being trained in Bibliodrama, and have sometimes gone on to implement it immediately. I am aware that this method is unusual and might take many of us out of our comfort zone at first; but I believe that it meets some important needs of the twenty-first-century student. Hence I have no doubt that progress will be made, slowly but surely, like drops of water eroding a rock.

NOTES

[1] Here I pick up where I left off at the end of my last article for *Conversations*, "The Limits of the Orthodox Classroom" (Vol. 4, Spring 2009), pp. 86–93. See also my article, "If You Seek Him with All Your Heart: Nurturing Total Individual Growth in Yeshivah," in *Wisdom from All My Teachers: Challenges and Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education*, ed. Prof. Susan Handelman and Rabbi

Jeffrey Saks (Jerusalem: Urim, 2003), pp. 159–178.

[2] The terms left-brain and right-brain are used here in their popular sense, as referring to the logical-analytical mode versus the creative-imaginative mode. The actual differences between the hemispheres are more subtle and complex, but the point I am making does not require accurate neuroscience.

[3] Subsequently published as "*Shivrei Ofek: Keta me-ha-Seret ha-Gadol*" ("Fragments of Horizon: Section from the Great Movie").

[4] The article was by Ohad Ezrahi, who was at the time launching *Hamakom*, his radical group for new-age Jewish spirituality.

[5] In my article in *Conversations* 4, I indicated that Professor Nehama Leibowitz, though highly creative herself, emphasized in her classroom and in her expectations from her students the use of rigorous analytical tools and the desire for correct answers. Though valuable as a structured method of reading Tanakh texts, this approach was liable to cause more free-spirited students looking for innovation or personal meaning to feel cramped.

[6] Peter Pitzele, *Scripture Windows: Towards a Practice of Bibliodrama* (San Francisco: Alef Design Group, 1998), p. 15. In addition to that book, see Pitzele's book, *Our Fathers' Wells—Personal Encounters with the Myths of Genesis* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995).

[7] I am currently involved in a two-year EU-funded project examining the use of Bibliodrama in multi-cultural and interfaith settings. It appears that it is indeed an excellent method for such groups.

[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

[9] Here again the reader is referred to my *Conversations* 4 article, cited above, which discusses in greater detail the subject of boundary-setting in the classroom.

[10] In this, the work of Nehama Leibowitz, in helping the student feel as if he or she is sitting "around the table" with rabbis and sages of centuries past is continued (see Yael Unterman, *Nehama Leibowitz: Teacher and Bible Scholar* [Jerusalem: Urim, 2009], p. 369). Leibowitz's approach differed from Bibliodrama, but there were times when she approached it in her flair for the dramatic and the relevant (see *ibid.*, pp. 570–572).