Another Face of Torah: Secular Literature and Torah Values

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The Torah emphasizes repeatedly the importance of treating those around us with kindness and recognizing their fundamental humanity. This ongoing emphasis implies the Torah's awareness that each of us is inherently self-interested and, consequently, that we require reminders and even commands to look outside ourselves and acknowledge the value and inherent holiness of others.

Often in the Torah's presentation of such ideas, individuals who are not ourselves and whom we should treat as ourselves come from within our community and need our help: the widow, the orphan, and the poor among us. And, indeed, attending to the needs of fellow Jews is central to Jewish practice in the contemporary world—although there's still significant work to be done in that area.

The sources for this mandated kindness and recognition of one's self in the other are well-known and widely varied. To offer just a very few examples, Jewish texts underscore *gemilut hassadim* (found in *Pirkei Avot* 1:2 and many other places), injunctions to care for the orphan and the widow (first in *Shemot* 22:21–23, but nearly a dozen more times as well), and the mitzvoth that require caring for and seeing oneself in one's neighbor, all of which point to Judaism's concern for other Jews, especially those who are vulnerable or lack power. Rambam's rationale for caring for the widow and orphan specifically highlights the importance of recognizing another's feelings even when we ourselves do not share those feelings; he writes that a person is required to show special care for widows and orphans because their spirits are low and they feel depressed (*Hilkhot De'ot* 6:10). He reminds us of the importance of placing oneself in the sufferer's position in order to express genuine sympathy, a difficult but necessary endeavor.

However, beyond this emphasis on those who fundamentally differ from us but, ultimately, come from among us, the Torah also insists upon an even more difficult responsibility: that we behave humanely

to those from outside our community, the stranger or the Other. This Other is also required to be treated as an equal, as we learn throughout Torah. In *vaYikra* 19:34, we read, "The stranger who lives among you should be treated as a fellow citizen; you should love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God." This common formulation—you should love another because you were strangers in Egypt—is meant to create an implicit connection between ourselves and *everyone* else. We have the imperative not only to remember the experience of stranger-ness, but to apply it meaningfully to our ongoing interactions with others. In every moment, as we see someone struggle, we are instructed to say to ourselves, "I was once a stranger in the land of Egypt" as a way to reorient ourselves to the plight of others, to see them not as separate—as fully and entirely Other—but as akin to us, sharing our own experience.

Our memory of that experience is so remote, though, and usually so fully relegated to collective rather than individual memory, that we need tools—such as the Seder—to help us flex that muscle of remembrance. That this verse ends with "I am the Lord your God" also recalls for us our shared origins with all of humanity: We were all created *beTzelem Elokim*, in God's image. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks highlights this point when he writes that "Pesa? is the eternal critique of power used by humans to coerce and diminish their fellow humans."[1] As the Mishnah in *Sanhedrin* 4:5 articulates, there was a single source for all humanity for a reason: "Because of this, humanity was created as one person, to teach that anyone who destroys one life is considered as having destroyed the whole world." While some strains of Jewish thought teach that Jews are superior to others, a significant tradition exists that negates that opinion. As Hanan Balk explains of Rambam's approach, "Maimonides emphasizes that the fundamental of free-will applies to all human beings and that every human being can achieve the highest possible rank in the realm of spirituality."[2] Balk notes Rambam's similar approach to Jews' and non-Jews' equal ability to serve God, to love God, to access divine prophecy, and even to achieve the holiest spiritual state. According to these views, all humans' shared origin and similar godly potential are fundamental to recalling every person's humanity, regardless of the person's other qualities or identities.

For all people, not just Jews, understanding the true personhood of the Other is an ongoing struggle. When we look at someone who seems different, particularly when we have been conditioned by popular representation to see that person through a lens of various stereotypes and preconceptions, we struggle to see ourselves in the Other. With few opportunities to know Others on a deep and personal level, we find ourselves in a self-perpetuating cycle of distance from the Other: He or she is unfamiliar, so we separate ourselves, so he or she becomes even less familiar.

Allowing ourselves to live in this increasing spiral of isolation has obvious practical ramifications in decreasing mutual understanding and sympathy but also has profound ethical ramifications for Torah-observant Jews, effectively preventing us from living the Torah's injunctions toward the Other. As Jews, we understandably and necessarily separate ourselves from Others in order to maintain religious community and a sense of identity that is, in some ways, part of the national and universal whole and, in other significant ways, quite separate from it. These choices put us in a logical bind, though: If we are indeed to live the mitzvoth related to the *ger toshav*, (technically, a non-Jew who observes the Noahide Laws, but now more often simply considered an ethical non-Jew), we have a responsibility to overcome certain aspects of the particularistic lifestyles we have chosen and learn to see ourselves in the Other as well as the Other in ourselves, a task made more difficult by our separation from these Others.

For high school students, just on the cusp of adulthood, the struggle may be even more pronounced. First, high school students are still young and, developmentally, are just emerging from an age at which they naturally see themselves as the center of the universe. For those who can conceive of the larger world, they may feel themselves to be relatively powerless and therefore not implicated in ethical decision-making. Perhaps most importantly, though, our students tend to have even less practical experience with people who are not like them than Jewish adults do. Especially for Jewish Day School students, whose lives revolve around an Orthodox community, the Other may be fully hypothetical or exist in their lives only as a bit player: the Haitian security guard at school, the Filipino housekeeper, the Catholic family down the block, the strangers at the mall or on the city bus.

Jewish Day School students, more than students of other backgrounds, are isolated from cultural difference. To some degree, most American school systems are broadly polarized by race, religion, and class because of historical and current realities of racial and class segregation, but the Jewish Day School system uniquely encourages a separation from others. It does so for valid and valuable reasons, including the basic practicalities of Torah learning, but also because of the strength that comes from community and from being surrounded by those with similar values and beliefs. As a minority faith, Jews have done well to separate themselves and create pockets of safety and security, something we understandably want for our children. Even as we may value diversity on certain levels, we recognize the importance of learning about one's own culture in a meaningful and ongoing way, and, for those of us with children in Jewish schools, we have determined that self-knowledge—a deep understanding of Torah, Jewish history, and Jewish culture—is more important than the diverse friendships and intimate relationships with others that would come from a more integrated education.

And yet, as the Torah teaches, we must still genuinely value understanding the experience of the other. The obvious place in the Day School curriculum to compensate for this loss of diversity is the literature classroom, and I believe that a robust literature curriculum should be considered an ethical, religious imperative in Jewish schools. Rather than being seen as a potential site of undermining or conflicting with Jewish values, as is sometimes the case, English class is a site for reinforcing the very values that may be neglected by having a Jewish Day School in the first place.

Torah teaches that we must understand and even love the Other; the Jewish Day School model removes our students from contact with the Other (and, conversely, the Other from contact with our students). Literature class, while perhaps an insufficient substitute for real-life interactions, nonetheless allows students who, in service of other necessary values, are removed from the broader community to recognize a universal humanity and therefore provides them with a complete Torah education that would otherwise be incomplete. Literature in Jewish Day Schools should not be regarded as existing in service of eventual job seeking, nor about preparing students for college or offering them Western cultural literacy, although those may be tangential benefits. Instead, the study of literature makes a fuller, truer observance of Torah possible; it provides access to the sensibilities and sensitivities toward which Torah guides us. Torah wants us not just to "do" things but to become something better than our current selves, and literature provides steps toward that lofty goal.

To fulfill the religious and ethical purpose of studying literature, we must therefore read texts that delve deeply into the lives of people who are distinct from us, whose values and experiences and choices differ profoundly from ours. Understandably, this effort may feel initially antithetical to Jewish education, which may wish to protect students in every way from too much encounter with the outside world. But we are already protecting them by providing physical and cultural isolation; too much of this sort of protection will prevent them not only from understanding the world but from fully living the Torah's commandments in regard to the Other. Our tendency toward maintaining comfortable distance is certainly understandable, especially when it comes to our youth, whom we want to protect in every way. But a true engagement with Torah consistently involves facing uncomfortable truths about the world, truths that challenge our perceptions about our own place and offer us insight into others' experiences and perspectives.

The unease that accompanies a novel such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, for instance, might make teachers want to avoid it. Fears around parents' and administrators' reactions, students' discomfort, and our own difficulties talking about the novel make it easier to sidestep. However, this is one of those foundational novels that provides students with precisely the difficult insights into our shared humanity that the Torah requires.

I have heard people wish for a more "palatable" text that still introduces us to the painful reality of slavery—one that does not include rape, vivid descriptions of beatings and scars, bestiality, murder, and the many other degradations of slavery—but that nonetheless could show students something of the slave's experience. Of course, even a cursory thought about this wish reveals its impossibility. What we need to know about slavery is precisely this reality; a sanitized version does not serve its purpose. When I teach this text, I preface it by discussing the history of slavery and the Middle Passage, about which many students are largely unaware. I also warn them about the difficulty of the text, not only in its language and use of the supernatural but also in its emotional difficulty. I

encourage students to take breaks as they read, to talk with each other about what they're learning, and to face the pain in manageable ways, surrounded by a community of readers.

But reading the novel feels absolutely necessary to me, as it exposes students to a world with which they are not familiar, in which white men are the feared enemy and every person's trauma is permanently written on his or her body. To remember what it means to have been a slave means, in this case, to face the more recent memories of slavery in America and to understand in this visceral way what slavery meant and continues to mean for black Americans, not only as Others whose experience matters to us but as human beings who *are* us. Experiencing slavery, even vicariously, helps us to think of ourselves as having been slaves; but this principle applies not only to literal slavery but to any experience of having been a stranger. We have to experience it to know it, and literature helps us to do so.

This foundational history can, of course, be taught in history classes, but hearing the voice of a character who lived the experience is both more emotionally powerful and more humanizing. Naturally, literature must be taught in conjunction with history because knowing the fuller picture of an individual's experience—its geopolitical import, how power shapes choice—is crucial to a complete understanding of any situation. But history must also be taught in the context of extended (rather than merely excerpted) narrative in order to emphasize the humanity of the individuals involved in larger historical events. In learning about slavery in history class, for instance, students are often taught that slaves were dehumanized or treated like animals. But in *Beloved*, the character Paul D talks about the experience of being held in chains and watching a rooster, Mister, strut past him:

> "Mister, he looked so… free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher…". Paul D stopped and squeezed his left hand with his right. He held it that way long enough for it and the world to quiet down and let him go on.
>
> "Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead.... I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub."

Paul D's musings offer students an entirely different insight into the feelings of dehumanization, an emotion-driven sense of what "dehumanization" means when applied to individual human beings. Hearing Paul D's voice shows them some tiny portion of his pain and, simultaneously, makes him into a real person. We can know that slaves were treated as animals, but hearing what that means to an individual who experienced it provides a more profound, more lasting understanding of what that historical fact meant to the individuals who lived it. In other words, it allows students not just to know but to *feel* that we should love the stranger as ourselves and to recognize the ramifications of withholding that love.

Interestingly, Day Schools tend not to shy away from extreme depictions of violence and degradation in one area, and that is the Holocaust. Our students are painfully aware of the physical and emotional traumas wrought on Jewish families in 1930s–1940s Europe; even very young children know about the death camps, the cattle cars, the tattooed numbers, the family separations, the starvation. Certainly by the time they reach high school, our children know about the human lampshades and soap, the piles of shoes and gold fillings left behind, and Mengele's unthinkable experiments. These inhumanities may feel more important to teach in a Jewish context because they happened to *us*; they are the stories of many of our students' own great-grandparents. Knowing these stories is a way of showing love and care for our own people. But if we believe that our students are capable of hearing these stories, just as

we believe they are capable of reading the *kinnot* on Tisha B'Av or learning about the Crusades or the Inquisition or the blood libel or anything else that was done to the Jews, so should they be able to learn about the inhumanities practiced on African Americans or Cambodians or Japanese Americans. Knowing *these* stories is a way of showing love and care for the Other. And both of these—loving both the neighbor and the stranger—are central to living a life of Torah.

Perhaps we feel that high school students are simply too young to be exposed to these issues, but high school seems to me the optimal time; if we do not reach students while they are developing their understandings of the world, we miss a significant opportunity. In particular, while they remain sheltered in the safety of a Jewish school, they are most in need of this contact with the outside world. Without it, these students, fully obligated in mitzvoth, are largely prevented from understanding the Other in any deep and meaningful way. Importantly, when we recognize that we do share disturbing images and ideas in reference to Jewish oppression but not (or certainly not as much) in reference to others' oppression, we may come to realize that our squeamishness is not only about violence or sexual assault but about whether we were the victims or the bystanders or even the perpetrators. A narrative that presents us as victims is more comfortable, if not less upsetting, because it maintains a narrative we wish to perpetuate, not of our own victimization but of our own innocence. Recognizing the ways in which white people, some of them Jews, may have benefitted or continue to benefit from racism in America is a much more difficult conversation.

Torah demonstrates for us the centrality of narrative in our understanding of the Other, and we might even begin each year's study of literature with a literary study of a biblical text. The kind of study I suggest here is what might be termed "The Bible as Literature," but in a far different way from the more controversial understanding of that term. Generally, when religious Jews hear "Bible as Literature," they think of the documentary hypothesis and a study of Torah as having human authorship. However, that definition of "as literature" only holds true if one believes that the study of literature focuses on authorial intention and the writer's role in the text. As Reader-Response Theories teach us, though, there are many other approaches to literary interpretation that do not involve probing the author's intentions or the history of the text's creation and publication. "Bible as Literature" can instead involve a close study of the characters' motivations and thought processes as well as the perspectives from which their stories are presented.

We can easily see that the Torah's reliance on complex narrative itself constantly pushes us towards these difficult conversations. One of the most impactful narratives for me is the story of Hannah, not because I affiliate myself principally with Hannah in her suffering but because I recognize myself in the flawed character of Eli, who judges too easily and believes too quickly that he understands the entirety of a situation by seeing certain behaviors that seem, wrongly, to point to a firm conclusion. When Eli critically asks, "**How long will you remain drunk?** Remove your wine from yourself" and is subsequently put in his place by Hannah, who fills in for him the pieces of her story about which he had made false assumptions, I am reminded of the many ways in which I have made similar errors. That lesson can be so powerful and important, but this biblical story is only a starting point for students (and all of us, really) to engage with the dangers of judgment and assumption. To understand the Other, in this story, is to feel Hannah's pain *and* to feel Eli's guilt, both absolutely essential to being a fully empathic, Torah-observant Jew.

One might ask, then, why *Shemuel I* or other biblical narratives are not sufficient for this sort of work since they present precisely the kind of character insight that can help readers see their own flaws and consider their treatment of others. But the kinds of Others our students encounter are broader than those discussed in Torah narratives, and while empathy and understanding may be transferrable skills, understanding the specific details of a range of experiences is work begun in *Shemuel* and continued in a vast array of texts that approach different time periods, types of people and experiences. Seeing Hannah's story as a starting point to understand more contemporary experiences of Others can

powerfully reinforce certain values: the dangers of pre- or misjudgment, sympathy for others' pain, avoiding assumptions based on insufficient knowledge, and the genuine depth of others' feelings. Similar lessons can be garnered from a range of biblical narratives, staging the groundwork for similar but more contemporary or wide-ranging approaches to narrative interpretation.

This kind of interpretive work requires recognizing that the reader's affiliation with Yaakov rather than Esav is intimately connected to the narrative voice and the perspective from which the story is presented. When we read throughout *Bereshith* Chapter 27 of Rivka's plan to obtain Yitzhak's blessing for Yaakov instead of for Esav, we remain in the home with Rivka and Yaakov. We hear their planning and recognize them as the central characters of the narrative. We become privy, in the Torah's spare prose style, to their emotions and thought processes, and we feel ourselves affiliated with them. Of course, we feel that affiliation from external factors too, including our outside awareness of Yaakov as one of the *avot* and ourselves as descended from his line and commentaries that present Esav as crafty or even villainous, but even aside from that knowledge, the narrative itself—its use of voice and perspective—establishes Yaakov as the character intended to win the blessing and demonstrates the lengths to which he and his mother go to achieve a divinely ordained outcome.

We are briefly made aware of Esav's feelings in the heart-wrenching line: "Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me too, my father." But we quickly move away from Esav's narrative and return to following Yaakov's development, making clear to readers that Yaakov was our intended subject all along and should be the focus of our interpretation. A literary reading of this story asks us to identify and articulate our affiliation and recognize the ways in which that affiliation shapes our understanding and interpretation of the narrative. Were the narrative to leave Yitzhak's house and follow Esav outdoors as he worked to hunt for his father and fulfill his father's desire, we would potentially have quite a different impression of the characters' choices and decisions.[3] By considering other perspectives as we read, we can recognize our own fallibility as readers and the ways in which perspective shapes our interpretations. I would argue that a very similar process takes place when we read any literary text, and learning how perspective functions can help us to become not only more sensitive readers but more sensitive human beings.

The point in not restricting this kind of study to biblical narratives but extending it in the broadest possible way is to take biblical narrative as a starting point and recognize that there are countless other narratives in the world that also deserve our attention. Every person has a story, and every person's story needs to be heard, not just to validate their experiences but to shape our understandings. When we learn about the experiences of someone who is like us, we begin in a small way to move outside of our necessarily limited perception of the world: other people, even those like us, interpret the same experiences in different ways. But when we branch even farther out, we begin to see that different entire worldviews exist in legitimate ways; the more of these stories we know, the more meaningfully connected we can become to all of humanity, and the more we can recognize our God-given shared humanity. Without knowing the stories of others, we can begin to believe, mistakenly, that our lives and perspectives matter in a way that others' do not. When we remind ourselves that others have compelling lives and perspectives too, we can align ourselves with this most conceptually difficult of Jewish values: that we are *all* created in God's image. Literature is a primary means of internalizing this central Jewish truth; without it, believing ourselves to be uniquely godly is far too easy and can lead us to decisions antithetical to those the Torah demands of us.

To some degree, then, the study of literature is a constant exercise in perspective. To demonstrate the value and potential danger of being absorbed into another's perspective, I often use the extreme example of *The Godfather* in my classes (although, as the years pass, I may have to choose something more contemporary). Any mafia film or text focused on the criminal's perspective, from *The Sopranos* to *Ocean's Eleven* to *Breaking Bad*, chooses to present the human side of mobsters, thieves, and criminals. Readers or viewers are captivated by the mobsters' internal politics,

relationships, sense of virtue and retribution, and views of the world. At the same time, stepping back from those texts can help us to move outside the topsy-turvy world in which these thieves and murderers seem to make ethical choices, and reorient ourselves to the disconcerting experience of having felt aligned with criminals. Accepting such narrative wholesale is potentially morally problematic, but recognizing the ways in which we can be unintentionally manipulated by such use of perspective can help us to become more attentive readers of text and of the world. Doing so requires some level of sophistication, but helping our students to hone that analytical ability is precisely the teacher's role in literature courses.

Just as we see that a narrative from Esav's or Hagar's perspective would drastically alter our understanding of those stories and our affiliation with or empathy for the characters, so too we see that the perspective in secular literature must be firmly viewed through Torah values. *Catcher in the Rye*, a work I teach every year to 11th graders, has frequently been banned for its central character's vulgarity, disrespect of authority, and misanthropy. My students believe almost unanimously that, were they to meet Holden Caulfield in person, they would dislike him immensely. Indeed, he is externally deeply dislikeable. But what they see from reading a story told entirely from his perspective is that he is a troubled young man, suffering from the loss of his brother to cancer and wounded by his parents' inattention. His unpleasant behaviors become more understandable in the face of our entry into his head, and a number of students have expressed their increased willingness, after "meeting" Holden, to give others the benefit of the doubt when they behave in socially inappropriate ways. If reading that narrative gives students even a moment of pause in considering how they judge another, then *Catcher in the Rye* serves an ethical purpose. Those who wish to ban it imagine that readers are so unsophisticated that they will envision every protagonist as a role model. As my students demonstrate year after year, though, they do not see Holden as an aspirational figure but as one who can help them to recognize the fundamental humanity of even a difficult and unpleasant person. He can, in other words, make them kinder.

The danger of such a reading is to lead readers towards a kind of moral relativism, which can feel frightening or, at least, destabilizing. If, for example, we begin not only to root for criminals or "bad guys," but to understand and sympathize with their motivations, do they in some ways become too understandable? Will every behavior seem permissible if it has a rationale, even a corrupt one? From decades of teaching literature with ethics at the forefront of conversations, I can say with some confidence that this is not a risk. On a continuum of "us" on one side and "them" on the other, the experience of hearing the Other's perspective can begin to move a character from fully Other to at least comprehensibly human. He or she is still not me, and never will be, but I can begin to understand his or her motivations not as those of a monster but as those of a person—a person who has made bad choices, perhaps, or who has been misinformed or traumatized or raised with a different set of values—but a human being nonetheless.

Because this shifting of the Other's place on that continuum can have such powerful effects, I go out of my way to share the voices of Others with my students. For instance, I relish the opportunity to bring Christian poetry into my classroom because that voice is so absent from my students' understandings of the world. When they read the beautiful, moving, faith-driven work of John Donne or Gerard Manley Hopkins or Mark Jarman, they begin to understand how faith motivates the lives of these differently religious writers. Far from having a proselytizing effect as some might fear, hearing these voices allows students to say, "These poets believe in something completely different from what I believe, but their faith is as deep as mine." Or they might say, "These Christians also struggle with or question their faith," as indeed they do. That kind of understanding is the first step toward genuine conversation and understanding, and if it can be presented within the comfortable, Jewishly-oriented environment of a Jewish school, it can allow students to understand the Other within a framework of Jewish values. To avoid this kind of material only ensures that students will learn about it in some other way that will less effectively equip them to consider it within a Jewish framework.

Ultimately, perspective and voice are central to our moral understanding. The more texts we can read from a variety of perspectives—and the more attuned we become to the way narrative choices shape our understanding of the world—the better off we are as actors in the real world. Given that most day schools include moral, Torah-centered behavior as among their stated goals, literature falls firmly within a curriculum that supports the Torah goals of a school. Far from being only a necessary skill for entering the work force or getting into law school, literature that includes the broadest possible range of voices and experiences itself fulfills a Torah value. Without it, we would be hard pressed truly to internalize the basic fact of God's spark in every human soul. When we do not know the stories of Others—their travails and successes, their pain and joy—we create barriers that prevent our fulfillment of the injunction to love the stranger and to remember that we, too, were slaves. Importantly, those two statements are part of pair; the all-important "because" that connects them reminds us that our love for others grows from our understanding of our own history, and our understanding of ourselves comes from our love of others. We cannot separate these, just as we cannot remove others' stories from our study of Torah. The two go hand in hand, and a Torah education that does not include stories written by, for, and about the stranger is incomplete.

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[1] Pesach Machzor, Koren Publishers, p. 167.

[2] Hanan Balk, "The Soul of a Jew and the Soul of a Non-Jew." *Hakirah, the Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought*. 2013. 62.

[3]*Hazal* do point out that Yaakov gets his comeuppance for this apparent wrongdoing when he is later the subject of Lavan's trickery.