

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Amalek from Generation to Generation

I WAS DISAPPOINTED that you included gratuitous political posturing in your recent article *Amalek From Generation to Generation* (*Hakirah* 28). *Hakirah* is supposed to be “a forum for the discussion of issues of *hash-kafah* and *halakhab* relevant to the community from a perspective of careful analysis of the primary Torah sources.” The article could have made its many fine points without the political posturing, sexism and xenophobia: “And thus the **base** of the Democratic Party in the United States is made up of the envious lower classes, the Muslims, and the G-dless ‘intellectuals’ who dominate and indoctrinate on our college campuses and in the media. All are driven by jealousy. Jealousy and its precipitous hatred for the Jews and Judeo-Christian America unite them.” Castigating Secretary Clinton as a modern-day Amalekite does not meet the standards of a text-based Torah journal. One can add *Hakirah* to the list of Orthodox institutions that have become political spokespersons for the Republican Party and where dissenting views are vilified as antithetical to Torah values.

Melech Tanen
Thornhill, Ontario

Asher Benzion Buchman responds:

I thank Dr. Tanen for acknowledging that my article on modern-day Amalek made “many fine points,” but I am puzzled as to why he then finds it to include “gratuitous political posturing” as there is nothing gratuitous about my identification of the **base** of the Democratic Party with Amalek. That is the whole point of the article. What could be more “relevant to the community” than this? The purpose of Torah is *lilmod al m'nas la'asos*. Rambam identifies the eternal enemy of the Jews as those who either want to physically annihilate the Jewish people or to kill them spiritually by tearing them away from their religion. He refers to the prophecies of Daniel to suggest that these two groups will eventually work in tandem. Honest people should be willing to acknowledge the truths about those groups who have the most intense hatred towards the Jews and Judaism. The **base** of the Democratic Party uncritically embraces BLM rallies/riots where the Palestinian flag is routinely displayed and hatred for all Jews is clearly expressed. Let me quote from the New York Times (May 15, 2021):

On Thursday, a group of leading progressive members of Congress offered a rare break from party unity, giving fiery speeches on the House floor that accused

Mr. Biden of ignoring the plight of Palestinians and “taking the side of the occupation.” Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York directly challenged the president, who had asserted that Israel had a right to defend itself. “Do Palestinians have a right to survive?” she asked in an impassioned address. “Do we believe that? And if so, we have a responsibility to that as well.” Less than 24 hours later, on Friday, nearly 150 prominent liberal advocacy organizations issued a joint statement calling for “solidarity with the Palestinian residents” and condemning “Israeli state violence” and “supremacy” in Jerusalem. The statement was signed not just by groups focused on Middle Eastern and Jewish issues but by groups dedicated to causes like climate change, immigration, feminism and racial justice—a sign that for the party’s liberal faction, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has moved far beyond the realm of foreign policy. “The **base of the party** (my emphasis) is moving in a very different direction than where the party establishment is,” Mr. Zogby said. “If you support Black Lives Matter, it was not a difficult leap to saying Palestinian lives matter, too.”

What kind of electorate puts open anti-Semites like Omar and Tlaib into office, and what kind of party allows them to be influential? As Tlaib spewed her hate for Jews,

President Biden praised her. And though as of this writing he had not acquiesced to his party’s base in its call to stop Israel from defending itself, nevertheless he doomed the Abraham Accords and replaced them with the Iran nuclear deal.

The intellectual elite on college campuses routinely attack Judaism, and of late, the entire Judeo-Christian culture is under assault by this group. The Liberal media constantly distorts what is happening between the Arabs and Jews, especially when Israel is under attack and must defend itself. When Hillary Clinton declares, “deep-seated cultural codes, religious beliefs and structural biases have to be changed,” she is leading the left’s charge to eradicate the Seven Noachide Laws from American culture. The call to “defund the police” and to abandon government laws on immigration and protection of private property makes *dinim* the sixth of the seven laws that are under attack. (It would seem that *ever min bachai* will survive for the time being—but give them time.)

In Orthodox circles, the talk is about whether we will soon be forced to leave America. Rabbi Berel Wein, a learned scholar and accomplished historian, writes:

A serious question has now arisen regarding the future of the United States of America. It is a very polarized society, and over the past decades, it has lost its moral footing. It has become dissolute, hateful of its own her-

itage, spoiled by too much material wealth, and subject to Marxist indoctrination emanating from its educational systems. Whether or not the United States will be able to survive this storm is, as of yet, an undecided question. However, it is clear to me that no matter what happens, it will become increasingly difficult for Orthodox Jews to maintain themselves in American society. The entire culture is hostile to Torah values and to a Jewish way of life.

Jews have waxed prosperous over the past decades, and the continuity of Orthodox educational institutions is contingent upon the continuation of that prosperity. However, whether America will have a prosperous future over the next few decades is a difficult question to answer. There will be more governmental regulations regarding curriculum, and the nature of educational classes in schools. Education separated by sex will certainly not be allowed, and the concentration on Torah studies will be severely limited. I hope that I am wrong regarding my fears, but my heart tells me otherwise.¹

As I write these words (late May) I read about the physical attacks on Jews only blocks from my home in Flatbush by men chanting “Free Palestine.” This is happening throughout the world and online the mention of Zionist sympathies brings a flood of vilification against

all Jews, encouraged by people who are icons of the left.

Dr. Tanen refers to “a list of Orthodox institutions that have become political spokespersons for the Republican Party.” This must be a very short list as the chilling effect of the cancel culture and the fear of actual physical violence have silenced all the institutions that I would hope would be speaking up. The rank and file of Orthodoxy naturally supports the party that supports Israel, religious liberty and the seven Noachide Laws. Most Orthodox Jews also bear the simple *mid-dah* of *hakarav batov*. *Hakirav*, unlike the institutions Dr. Tanen supports, allows many voices to be expressed and the mainstream voice of Orthodoxy should be one of them. Moreover, where does he see in any of *Hakirav's* authors the “vilification” of dissenting views? It is he who, rather than make a rational argument as to what facts are wrong, resorts to the standard name calling of “ism’s” and “phobias” to those who simply state the facts. If a cogent argument can be made for supporting a political party whose “base” and driving forces despise Israel and whose intent is to abolish the seven Noachide Laws and support the inexplicable Iran nuclear deal that imposes an existential threat to Israel, *Hakirav* will print it. It would bring comfort to many of us to feel that the left is not intent on destroying us.

The Rav expressed a more hopeful tone some 50 years ago. “*The Gentiles are not anti-Zionist and*

are not anti-Semites. They just don't understand us, and they resent us, and resent our resistance to assimilation and apostasy."² The Rav is addressing Esav, which was the enemy he saw 50 years ago. And Esav must be torn away from the influence of Amalek whose jealousy cannot be deflected. As I noted in my essay, Esav will eventually be won over by Israel, but the Rav explains we need a spokesman "*who is as sophisticated and as well-trained as all of the alufim, and perhaps better; who commands the respect of the agnostic and uses the beauty of Yefes to protect the obolei Shem.*" As I ended my essay, "*An ideological battle must be waged. Our duty lies before us.*"

Peshat and Midrash

In the *Letters* section of Volume 29, there is an interesting exchange between Steven Brizel and the authors, Rabbis Aton Holzer and Arie Folger, regarding an article about the new RCA "Siddur Avodat HaLev." However, there is one aspect of this exchange with which I take issue. These writers both express the view that there is something wrong in discussing the *peshat* of a *pasuk* without also including the *midrashic* interpretation. The discussion relates, of course, to the non-halakhic *pesukim*.

Thus, Holzer-Folger write, "often *Hazal*, in their flowing *midrashic* style, are clearly hinting at *ommeko shel peshat* ... the distance between *peshat* and *derash* is smaller than we often assume." Brizel writes, "the

words of *Hazal* are the first and primary basis for understanding Tanach."

I here present the view that *peshat* and *midrashei Hazal* are two completely different, but equally important approaches to the words of the Torah (שבעים פנים לתורה). In fact, not only does the *midrash* not explain the *pasuk*, but, as Rambam points out, the literal words of the *midrash* are often problematical, "תראה בו עניינים רחוקים מן השכל" (Introduction to *Seder Zeraim*, Part Six) and also "ינתברר שכל מה שחז"ל אמרו שבלתי-אפשרי, אין דבריהם אלא על דרך משל". (*Commentary on the Mishnah, Sanhedrin*, Introduction to Chapter "Heilek")

Viewing the *midrash* as "the primary basis for understanding Tanakh," rather than the Torah words themselves, indicates disrespect for the words of Torah, and leads one to miss the important message of the *midrash*, as I will illustrate.

Thus, when reading a *pasuk*, there are two separate but equally important tasks before us. One task is to understand the *peshat* of the *pasuk* and the second task is to understand what the *midrash* learns from this *pasuk*. As the following example shows, the *midrash* is not "hinting at *ommeko shel peshat*," but rather, the *midrash* presents various aspects of the *pasuk* in a unique style.

Consider *Beresbit* (45:26-27), which relates that Jacob did not believe his sons when they returned from Egypt with the incredible

news that Joseph was alive, was the viceroy of all Egypt, and had given instructions to bring the entire family to Egypt. However, when Jacob went outside and saw the wagons that the brothers had brought with them in which the family was to travel to Egypt, he then believed the report. Why did the wagons make Jacob change his mind and believe this fantastic report?

A well-known *midrash* gives the following explanation (*Beresbit Rabbah* 94:3): The last time that Jacob had been together with Joseph, twenty-two years ago, they were learning the Torah laws of the be-headed heifer. Since the Hebrew word for wagon is similar to the Hebrew word for heifer, the *midrash* states that Jacob immediately interpreted the wagons as a message sent from Joseph, saying that the fantastic report of Joseph being alive is actually true.

Here is an excellent example of Rambam's statement that the *literal* words of the *midrash* often make no sense. Since wagons were the expected means for bringing Jacob's family to Egypt, why should Jacob associate the wagons with Joseph? This is especially true in view of the fact that the subject of their learning had nothing to do with wagons. Moreover, this *midrash* finds no support whatsoever in the words of the *pasuk*.

The following *pesbat* explanation suggests itself. The wagons that Jacob saw had come from Pharaoh, who had instructed Joseph as follows (45:19): "Take wagons and

bring your family to Egypt." Pharaoh's wagons were, of course, engraved with the royal seal of Egypt. Seeing the royal seal of Egypt engraved on the wagons convinced Jacob that the fantastic report of Joseph being alive and viceroy of Egypt is actually true.

Having explained the *pasuk* according to *pesbat*, we now come to our second task. What important lesson is the *midrash* teaching us with its explanation of this *pasuk*? It is written in the Torah that there was a special, close relationship between Joseph and his father (37:3). How does a father establish such a close relationship with his son? A social worker might suggest playing baseball with his son, or going to the movies with his son, or sharing inner feelings with his son. "No!" says the *midrash*. Rather, the best and proper way to establish such a close, long-lasting relationship is for the father and son to learn Torah together.

Thus, studying both the *midrash* and the *pesbat* of a *pasuk* reveals the multifaceted nature of our Holy Torah.

Nathan Aviezer
Petach Tikva, Israel

Steven Brizel Responds:

I reject the truly mistaken and forced dichotomy that adolescents and adults either must learn Chumash on a child's level via *The Midrash Says* or solely via "*pesbat* only."

The letter demonstrates that the

proper study of Tanach, and especially Chumash, requires a thorough knowledge of what I refer to as the *Gedolei Mefarshim* (Rashi, Ramban, Ibn Ezra, Seforno, Rashbam, Netziv, and Meshech Chochmah at a minimum) before venturing into so-called “*peshat* only” which by no means requires jettisoning what the *Gedolei Mefarshim* say on any verse in Chumash in terms of Hashkafah, Aggadah and Halachah.

The real question remains as follows. D. Adam Ferziger, who is by no means *chareidi* in outlook, demonstrated and documented in his article that unacceptable notions of Biblical criticism that were the hallmark of Bible study at JTS and elsewhere, immigrated to Israel, became acceptable at Bar Ilan and then in other circles associated with the Religious Zionist world. It then became the methods of teaching Tanach in many MO schools in the United States.

I remain concerned and convinced that such a *peshat* only *derech* which is heavily rooted in constructing literary-based models and structures, cannot be reconciled with the *mesorah* of *parshanut*, where such structures cannot be found in the words of *Chazal* and the *Gedolei Mefarshim*.

I very seriously question whether you can say that the Torah, a *Navi*, *Chazal* or Rashi, etc., used a literary model, etc., when there is no such proof for the same in the words of the Torah, the *Navi*, *Chazal* or Rashi, etc. This is especially so in those portions of the To-

rah that simply cannot be understood on a pure *peshat* basis.

More fundamentally, I remain convinced that any *derech* in the study of *Tanach*, and especially Chumash, the roots of which deny the unity of *Torah SheBeAlPeh* and *Torah SheBeKesan*, and which reduces *Tanach, r”l*, to just another ancient Middle Eastern book of certain religious canons, will not interest or inspire the next generation with any bedrock fundamentals of *hashkafah* and *emunah* which can only be explored in any fashion based on an awareness of the classical *Mefarshim* and the statements of *Chazal* that were chosen by the *Mefarshim* for that very purpose.

Aton Holzer and Arie Folger respond:

It is our view that midrash quite often does many things at once. As you have noted, midrashim teach proper behavior and convey important matters of theology, ones which are often quite removed from the Biblical text and anachronistic in the Biblical context. In addition, the more fanciful midrashim excite the imaginations of younger students and are suited for piquing the interest of small children, as R. Moshe Lichtenstein³ has observed.

At the same time, these very same midrashim, on closer examination, quite often reveal the uncanny discernment of *Hazal* to semantic or syntactical variance, patterns within the text and intertextuality—allusions that the *text itself* subtly makes to other Biblical pas-

sages (or vice versa), often highlighting shared themes.

In the academy, this phenomenon has been amply documented by Daniel Boyarin in his 1990 *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*; in the *beit midrash*, it is a mainstay of the approach of the “New School of Orthodox Torah Commentary.” The midrash that relates Abraham’s being cast into Nimrod’s furnace is not merely a tale to fire up the child’s imagination, nor simply a moral lesson—though certainly it is both of these—but it is also a clear intertextual reference to Hananiah, Misha’el and Azaryah. These figures found themselves exiled to Abraham’s ancestral home, replete with a towering structure built for (the leader’s) self-aggrandizement, and assumed the forefather’s mission of resisting theological conformity and rebuilding the Jewish nation anew. The midrash regarding Abraham’s destruction of his father’s idols likewise intertextually refers to Gideon, the leader who began his career by doing just that, and with that confidence in his convictions led a small army against mighty kings from the east—just as did Abraham.⁴ The Aggadah regarding Pesach as the date of Lot’s salvation from the destruction of Sodom—ostensibly focused on Lot’s choice to serve his guests matzot—actually highlights the thoroughgoing parallels between that story and that of the Exodus, in both of which the door of the house, angels, plagues, and removal from the city occur.⁵ In all of these cases and so many more, the midrash serves to extend an existing

parallel that might have gone overlooked, and thus foreground intertextual links already embedded in the Biblical text—and understood in this way, they very much serve the *pesbat* that we are meant to uncover.

The midrash that you cite is no exception. Yes, the Midrash surely does promote Rabbinic ideals of father-son bonding over Torah study. But on a deeper level, doesn’t the Midrash point us to a tension that already surfaces within the text? Joseph apparently is killed in the fields, under mysterious circumstances. Jacob cannot make peace with his own sense of guilt, nor with the brothers’ seeming indifference; this ultimately manifests in Jacob’s refusal to send Benjamin to Egypt with Reuben and, at least at first, Judah.

The Torah passage which frontally asserts the matter of communal responsibility for a death in the fields, and its resolution, is none other than that of the decapitated heifer. Joseph, said to have “studied this passage with his father” at the time he was sold, indeed emerges as one who takes responsibility for his brothers’ lives on the eve of his sale, faithfully carrying out his father’s command to ascertain their wellbeing at considerable personal risk. His brothers do not evince the same, rather quite the opposite—at least not for the next twenty-two years.

Only when the leader of the tribes, Judah, finally demonstrates a sense of responsibility for a brother’s life can Joseph send the

“heifers.” The arrival of wagons signal to Jacob not merely that Joseph is alive, but that he is ready to reconcile—because the metaphoric “decapitated heifer” has been offered. After Judah’s remarkable speech, the callous indifference to human life in his proto-Jewish city has been corrected; *ve-nikaper labem ba-dam*.

(AF adds:) The careful reader will have noted that while Dr. Aviezer interprets our position as being based on a categorical statement, i.e., that all midrashim are always *pesbat*, we never stated such a thing. Instead, we wrote of midrashim *often* pointing at *ommeke shel pesbat*. We concede that midrashim may sometimes or also often be about teachings that are superimposed onto the text, meaning they use the text as a starting point to make an unrelated holy insight. The example Dr. Aviezer gave and his interpretation are legitimate, even as we suggest that there are also *pesbat* pointers in that very same midrash.

Hoshanot

In the last issue of *Hakirah*, Dr. Steven Oppenheimer writes a detailed and in-depth halachic analysis of the various customs for *Hoshanot* recitation in an attempt to demonstrate whether synagogues may change their practice as to this part of davening from one view to another. The essay presents two divergent views for when they are recited, after *Hallel* and after *Mussaf*, and gives competing arguments for each view: decreasing *tircha de-tzibura*, ein

maavirin al hamitzvot, and *zrizin makdimim* for the former, and delaying *minbagim* after *chiyuvim* for the latter. Dr. Oppenheimer also correctly notes that each view argues that his practice most closely resembles what actually took place when the temple stood.

There are two small omissions to the essay that are noteworthy. Though Dr. Oppenheimer cites the view of the Tur, he fails to note that Tur appears to have a different practice on Yom Tov when *Hoshanot* follow *Mussaf* (start of 660), and on Chol HaMoed when they follow *Hallel* (start of 663). Thus, the view attributed to more contemporary and modern authorities to distinguish between Yom Tov and Chol HaMoed goes back far earlier than the author intimates!

There is an important conceptual question that should be surfaced as well: Are *Hoshanot* an extension of the Mitzvah of *Lulav* (which appears to be the view of the Rambam, *Lulav* 2:23 and of *Or Zarua* 315), or are they part of the unique temple service of the holiday of Succot (see Rashi *Succah* 43b (*sbluchei*)? The more the ritual of *Hoshanot* is part of the Mitzvah of *Lulav*, the more we would advise reciting them after *Hallel* (552:1 and many *acharonim*).

These two observations may be related. On Chol HaMoed, when there is no mitzvah of *Lulav* outside of the temple, Diaspora Jews recreating the Mitzvah of *Lulav* as it existed in the *Mikdash*—including all three components: *Lulav*, *Hallel*, and *Hoshanot*. Thus, Tur argues that

on Chol HaMoed, *Hosbanot* are part of the core mitzvah of *Lulav* and the better time for *Hosbanot* is earlier. But on Yom Tov, a Diaspora Jew performs the Mitzvah *D'orayta* of *Lulav* and *Etrog* “*Chutz LaMikdash*,” which does not include *Hosbanot*, and so the *Hosbanah* prayers are delayed specifically on those days until after *Mussaf* according to the Tur, much like *Birkat Kohanim*, a predominantly temple practice, is reserved for the *Mussaf* prayers.

The article provides an excellent summary of the topic, but these are important additional perspectives to add.

Rabbi Yaakov Jaffe
Brookline, MA

Steven Oppenheimer responds:

I want to thank Rabbi Jaffe for taking the time to carefully read the *Hosbanos* article. Rabbi Jaffe wants to make a *diyuk* in the language of the Tur. It seems from the Tur in *siman* 663, when discussing Chol HaMoed, *Hosbanos* are mentioned after *Shacharis* whereas in *siman* 660 the Tur places *Hosbanos* after *Mussaf*. While this is intriguing, it is curious that this observation is not made by the classic commentaries—the Bet Yosef, the Darchei Moshe or the Bach. In fact, the Bach in 660 makes no distinction between Yom Tov and Chol HaMoed, and clearly says the Tur’s position is that *Hosbanos* are always after *Mussaf*. The Bach rejects the position of Rav Saadiah Gaon that *Hosbanos* are before *Mussaf*, and the Tur explicitly writes that

this is not the custom (660). The *Aruch HaShulchan* (659:2) cites Rav Saadiah Gaon’s custom to recite *Hosbanos* after *Hallel*, but concludes that the Tur rejected this position. In my article I mention that historically (preceding the Tur) there were different customs regarding when to recite *Hosbanos*. Furthermore, the contemporary *poskim* who do distinguish between Yom Tov and Chol HaMoed do not bring the suggested discrepancy in the Tur’s language as the basis for their custom. Moreover, none of the *poskim* I queried made that observation. This does not mean that Rabbi Jaffe is incorrect. I think his observation is intriguing and could be a further reason to distinguish between Yom Tov and Chol HaMoed when reciting *Hosbanos*. That having been said, *tircha detzibura* was the reason given by Rav M. Shteinman for the Steipler Gaon’s and the Chazon Ish’s custom of distinguishing between Yom Tov and Chol HaMoed. On the other hand, many congregations do not make a distinction between Yom Tov and Chol HaMoed and always recite *Hosbanos* after *Hallel*.

With regard to Rabbi Jaffe’s second point, which is built on and requires reliance upon his first point, the Tur’s actual comments are very brief and do not include Rabbi Jaffe’s suggestions. Rabbi Jaffe’s reference to 552:1 (*hilchos Tishab b’Av*) may be a typographical error, perhaps he was referring to 652:1. In 652:1, the *Shulchan Aruch* and the commentaries discuss the proper time for *netilas lulav* and the

na'annim, i.e., before davening or during *Hallel*. *Hoshanos* are not part of that discussion.

I think Rabbi Jaffe's central point is making a *diyuk* in the apparent discrepancy presented by the Tur regarding the appropriate place for the recitation of *Hoshanos* as presented in 660 compared to 663. While not mentioned in any of the classic commentaries, both hypotheses seem reasonable and are an interesting addition to the points made in my article.

Stoicism and Judaism

I very much appreciated Stewart Rubin's thorough and scholarly comparison of Stoicism and Judaism—a topic that has occupied me for several years, in print and in lectures.^{6,7}

I am in broad agreement with both the differences and similarities between Stoicism and Judaism explicated by Mr. Rubin. I would like to add two points I believe to be key in understanding these two great religio-spiritual traditions:

1. Re: "the Stoic conception of the Creator," it is important to note that

in Judaism, the relationship between G-d and man is fundamentally *covenantal*; representing a kind of "contract" between G-d and humankind. There is nothing resembling this in Stoic philosophy or theology, in which the Deity is both remote and impersonal, if constituting a single entity at all.

2. Judaism and Stoicism share the concept of a "common bond of humanity." As Mr. Rubin notes, in Judaism, people are created "in the image of G-d" (*b'tzelem Elokim*). Though I am not aware of a comparable statement in Stoicism, the Stoics did enunciate the view that a "common bond" unites all humankind. Thus, Marcus Aurelius taught,

All things are woven together and the common bond is sacred... for there is one Universe out of all, one God through all, one substance and one law, [and] one common Reason of all intelligent creatures...⁸

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NOTES

- ¹ <https://www.rabbiwein.com/blog/post-2309.html>.
- ² Jacob J. Schacter, "Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Remarks at the Hanukat Ha-Bayit of the Talner Shübel in Brookline, MA, December 16, 1973," *Hakirah*, vol. 30, p. 29.
- ³ Moshe Lichtenstein, "Fear of God: The Beginning of Wisdom and the End of Tanakh Study," in *Yirat Shamayim: The Awe, Reverence and Fear of God*, Marc D. Stern, ed. (Yeshiva University Press, 2008), 135-162.
- ⁴ Yaakov Medan, "Then I Shall Bring Upon the Nations a Clear Language," archived at <https://www.hatanakh.com/en/articles/then-shall-i-bring-upon-nations-clear-language>, accessed on April 27, 2021.
- ⁵ Yoel Bin Nun, "Lot's 'Pesach' and its significance," archived at <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/lots-pesach-and-its-significance>
- ⁶ Pies R., *The Three-Petalled Rose*, iUniverse, 2013.
- ⁷ R. Pies, *On Stoicism, Buddhism and Judaism*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHV4AImIAfMies>
- ⁸ *Meditations*, 45, translated by A.S.L. Farquharson, New York, Knopf, 1946.