

Moral Theology in an Exegetical Key: Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah*

Ellen Davis
Duke Divinity School

Abstract

Shai Held's two-volume work, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (2017), is a model of articulate Jewish theologizing grounded in specific biblical texts. This article interacts with Shai Held's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *The Heart of Torah* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego, CA, November 2019.

It is not often that one gets to read, let alone review, a book in biblical studies or theology that is truly a page-turner. Shai Held's project is unusual, ambitious, and as he himself describes it, "harrowing," and so the reader wants to see how it turns out.¹ Moreover, the ideal reader of this book has a personal stake in Rabbi Held's project, which is to foster "a mature spirituality."² This phrase arrests my attention, since "spirituality" is a word not overused in books reviewed at this Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.

By his account, a mature spirituality has two elements. It involves taking seriously Torah's witness to God's will and manifest presence, and living "with our eyes and hearts open" to the world in which we find ourselves.³ That would be a fair summary of my own goals as a teacher of Bible to Christian divinity students, most of whom are preparing for pastoral ministry, and so here I hope to show how Shai Held's project can be directly useful and even provide a model for me and my students in our work of biblical interpretation, as well as introducing them to Jewish interpretation and religious thought altogether.

1 Shai Held, Be-har #1 (Lev 25:1–26:2), "Another World to Live in: The Meaning of Shabbat," in *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 2:76–80, here 2:76.

2 Be-har #1, 2:76.

3 Be-har #1, 2:76.

Held's Approach—Both Textual and Theological

Perhaps the most distinctive and compelling aspect of his approach—and ultimately, what makes him in my judgment a reliable interpreter—is that he resolutely holds together the text and God at the center of the conversation, never allowing either exegetical or theological claims to be abstracted one from the other. He has a keen eye for philological and literary detail—not to be taken for granted in someone trained in moral philosophy. At the same time, he pursues a remarkably wide-ranging theological inquiry, drawing upon Jewish liturgy and commentary tradition from ancient times to the present, while also consulting contemporary Christian commentators and theologians across the theological spectrum. (As far as I can see, he does not yet work with the history of Christian interpretation, but that may be only a matter of time.)

As a philosopher, Shai Held has an eye for big questions, and the biggest of them is also the most basic: What is Torah, after all, and what does it mean for the Jewish people? That question comes up first and most directly in an essay that takes as its surprising point of departure the moment when pregnant Rebekah goes “to inquire of the LORD” (*lidrosh et-HaShem*, Gen 25:22). But if she and other characters in Torah inquire of God directly or through a human intermediary, Judaism generally follows the sensibility expressed in a psalm such as 119, which seeks guidance and moreover, delight, through study of God's *written* word. Shai Held speaks of the great “gamble” of text-centeredness. When the gamble pays off, Jews gain access to God “in every conceivable circumstance,” even when God seems entirely absent from our world.⁴ Shai Held, who calls himself “a Jew in search of God,” affirms how precious that access is to him, and yet he names the danger inherent in the gamble: “Whatever mediates God can also come to displace God. We can become so focused on Torah that we lose any sense of the reality of God, let alone of God's commanding presence.”⁵ It is possible to worship Torah and lose God.

A later essay on the law of the runaway slave in Deuteronomy shows appreciation for the moral insight that the text affords, while also illustrating the danger of an exclusive text-centeredness.⁶ Deuteronomy's formulation of the slave freely choosing a place to dwell in the land creates a parallel with God's own freedom to choose a place for the divine name to dwell in the land; thus “the whole land is a sanctuary, and the entire people is summoned to welcome those who arrive in search of freedom.”⁷ However radical that law may have been in its own time, it

4 Held, Toledot #2 (Gen 25:19–28:9), “Between God and Torah: Judaism's Gamble,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:54–9, here 1:58.

5 Toledot #2, 1:57.

6 Held, Ki Tetse' #1 (Deut 21:10–25:9), “Let Him Live Wherever He Chooses: Or, Why Runaway Slaves Are Like God,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:251–4.

7 Ki Tetse' #1, 2:251.

does not eradicate slavery and thus is insufficient as an ethical guide for us. Shai Held recounts with sorrow his experience of hearing a respected teacher in yeshiva suggest that “perhaps Jews should hope for a restoration of slavery so that we would again be enabled to observe the Torah’s guidance on how to treat slaves humanely.”⁸ That memory substantiates his core conviction that Torah interpretation and observance is not an end in itself but “a bridge connecting us to a compassionate God,” and “we can become so focused on the bridge itself that we simply forget about what (or Who) stands on the other side” (1:58).

The Wager of Transcendence

Here, and in any number of other instances, we see Shai Held going for broke, pinning everything on the reality of God and more, “the wondrous fact of God’s closeness.”⁹ His intellectual project rests on a strong form of what George Steiner calls the “wager on transcendence.”¹⁰ In *Real Presences*, Steiner argues that all genuine art—in contrast to mere academic or journalistic criticism of art—entails a “presumption of [transcendent] presence.”¹¹ If we adopt Steiner’s terms, then, to characterize *The Heart of Torah*, we might say that it is to be distinguished from much of the kind of “secondary literature” that most of us write and review, in that this book is existentially engaged criticism; it is text and not textbook. If Shai Held is practicing a style of commentary that is itself an art form, I might name the genre “moral theology in a homiletical key.” (I intend that as a compliment.) He troubles to write well and often beautifully, because he is not scoring academic points or even merely clarifying an intellectual argument (although he does the latter with some regularity), but rather addressing fundamental ways we think and live. Notably, he is not afraid to conclude his second volume as a preacher might, with an overt exhortation, even a prayer: “let us recall: Torah is about a God of love who calls us to a life of love. May we merit that a Torah of lovingkindness always be upon our lips.”¹²

Theocentric Moral Theology

Shai Held’s style of theocentric moral theology has direct ethical ramifications, because “how we treat others is in some sense how we treat God.”¹³ Therefore he gives persistent attention to current social issues. For example, in connection

8 Ki Tetse’ #1, 2:254.

9 Held, Va-ethannan #2 (Deut 3:23–7:11), “A God So Close, and Laws So Righteous: Moses’s Challenge (and Promise),” in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:215–9, here 217. See also Toledot #2, 1:59.

10 George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 4, 214.

11 Steiner, *Real Presences*, 214.

12 Held, Ve-zot ha-berekah #1 (Deut 33:1–34:12), “The Beginning and End of Torah,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:295–8, here 2:298.

13 Held, ‘Aḥorei Mot #1 (Lev 16:1–18:30), “Yom Kippur: Purifying the Tabernacle and Ourselves,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:52–56, here 2:56.

with Leviticus's treatment of impurity at childbirth purity, he focuses on maternal mortality rates that are escalating in the United States and inequitably distributed around the world.¹⁴

He does not shy away from vexed political issues: In his treatment of "Jacob's ethical legacy" on killing, he engages in a fairly detailed consideration of theological responses to military violence in modern Israel.¹⁵ Focusing on the mid-rashic tradition that when Jacob returns to Canaan after his long absence in Mesopotamia, he is afraid both of being killed by Esau *and of killing him*, Held then reflects on "the Rabbinic antipathy to weapons," even though Jewish tradition asserts the need to take a preemptive strike against a murderous aggressor. Then, turning to the question of the modern state, he considers and rejects two rabbinic positions: first, the realized messianism of R. Abraham Isaac Kook (d. 1935), who in the early decades of the twentieth century believed that a Jewish army was a contradiction in terms, and second, the sacralization of military force by the younger R. Zvi Yehudah Kook (d. 1982). Against both those views, R. Held affirms, "The full-throated embrace of militarism represents a dramatic departure from normative Jewish ethics as it has been understood for millennia. Having a state means having an army, but that is a tragic necessity rather than a revelation of the holy."¹⁶ Although in this particular discussion he does not name the militaristic position as idolatrous, such a judgment would be consistent with his practice of aligning theology and ethics. It goes without saying that the sacralization of force is a form of idolatry found also within Christian communities.

Attention to Pastoral Issues

I want to conclude by pointing to two emphases of the commentary that may be especially valuable for those studying for pastoral ministry, although they are not common among professional biblical interpreters. These are Shai Held's repeated attention to first, pastoral leadership, and second, the liturgical calendar. In both instances I take my examples from his essays on Leviticus—not a book that my Christian students would normally consult for guidance in these matters.

First, on leadership: In a subtle analysis of Leviticus 10 (Shemini), Shai Held sees the inappropriateness of Moses's pious opining about God's will to his brother immediately following the shocking death of Aaron's two sons. This is not a time for theological platitudes; Moses's words betray his own fear of the chaos that has burst out in the sanctuary. Yet it is intriguing that Held does not condemn Moses for what might seem to be the equally insensitive refusal to allow

14 Held, *Tazria* #1 (Lev 12:1–13:59), "Living on the Boundary: The Complexity and Anxiety of Childbirth," in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:37–41, here 2:41.

15 Held, *Va-yishlah* #1 (Gen 32:4–36:43), "The Fear of Killing: Jacob's Ethical Legacy," in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:69–73.

16 *Va-yishlah* #1, 1:73.

Aaron and his surviving sons to mourn in public. Israel's covenant with God is in jeopardy, and in this moment the priests cannot give free expression to their personal grief; putting the public crisis first is the necessary cost of assuming leadership.¹⁷

Finally, I note Shai Held's attention to the liturgical calendar as a way of highlighting the text's theological import. Of numerous examples, I choose his treatment of Sukkot (Booths), the one festival that Leviticus explicitly commands as an occasion for joy (Lev 23:40). Yet this is "profoundly surprising"—why not Passover or Shavuot, which commemorate the momentous, transformative events of Exodus and Sinai?¹⁸ Held's answer is that Sukkot celebrates a "calmer covenantal joy: . . . the joy of the quotidian and the pedestrian . . . of commitment and responsibility rather than of uplift and exhilaration."¹⁹ As a nearly lifelong admiring outsider to Judaism, I wonder if this celebration and consecration of the quotidian might be its special genius; certainly it is the focus of my own "holy envy"—to cite the phrase coined many years ago by the late Bishop and Professor Krister Stendahl, a pioneer in interreligious theological conversation.

In sum, Shai Held has given us a probing and intimate reflection on Torah as a mode of access to God for Jews, and he has generously done it in a way that is accessible to Christians. I would be happy if my students were to be moved to holy envy by this wise and lovely book, so that they too might seek God through Scripture and their own religious traditions—complex, troubled, yet beautiful as they are.

17 Held, Shemini #2 (Lev 9:1–11:47), "Of Grief Public and Private: Moses and Aaron Face the Unimaginable," in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:31–36

18 Held, 'Emor #1 (Lev 21:1–24:23), "Covenantal Joy: What Sukkot Can Teach Us," in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:66–70, here 2:68.

19 'Emor #1, 2:69.