

A Critical Review of Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah*

David Frankel
Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies

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.

The appearance of Rabbi Shai Held's two-volume work, *The Heart of Torah*, is cause for celebration. Held brings his formidable skills to bear on the weekly Torah portion and shows, with insight, erudition, and creativity, how it can speak in profound ways to the spiritual needs of the day. The work represents a significant achievement, particularly within the context of traditional Jewish Torah learning. Few works within the genre of weekly Parashah study maintain a careful and serious dialogue not only with the classical Jewish sources but also with Christian scholarship, literary analysis, historical-critical research, and more. The result is a multifaceted work that is literarily insightful, ethically challenging, theologically sophisticated, and, most important, religiously inspiring.

In spite of the work's remarkable qualities, there are certain aspects of it that I find problematic. My reservations do not relate to the insights and reflections that Held presents. I almost always find these sensitive, nuanced and compelling. Rather, they concern the ways in which these ruminations are at times identified, without sufficient qualification, with the biblical text, the theology of the Torah, or Judaism more broadly.

Rabbi Held spells out some of the principles of his approach to biblical interpretation in the introductory essay that appears in both volumes of the work. Here he affirms: "The essence of Torah is a God of love and kindness who calls Israel to love and kindness."¹ The God of Torah is also a God of life, who affirms the dignity of every human being, especially the vulnerable. Held's Torah places

1 Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 1:xxx.

great weight on human agency and responsibility. Thus, God “summons the people to reject passivity and to learn to act on their own behalf.”² Held draws upon midrashic literature in particular for confirmation of his ethics-centered conception of Torah. At the same time, he does not, in most instances, present his readings of the Parashah as exercises in interpretation in the midrashic mode. More often than not, he presents them as straightforward expositions of “the Torah,” or “Tanakh.” Indeed, Held’s entire two-volume work may be seen as an attempt to substantiate the premise on which it is based—that the heart of Torah summons us to ethical sensitivity and personal responsibility.

Anachronistic and Homiletical—yet Valuable

There are obvious difficulties with this approach. As we are all well aware, we generally find what we are looking for. Thus, if we set out to read texts with a strong ethical lens, we inevitably find ethical instruction. The main question is, of course, to what extent the ethical instruction that has been so discerned may legitimately be presented as that of the texts in their original literary contexts. To be sure, hermeneutical questions such as these are extremely knotty, and I do not wish to pretend that I have the proficiency necessary to address them adequately. Nonetheless, my basic sense regarding not a few of the ethically oriented readings that Held suggests or commends is that they must be regarded as anachronistic and homiletical. This does not mean that they are any less valuable. Texts take on new meanings and bear new implications when read in new and different social contexts and intellectual climates. It is important, however, to clearly distinguish between the meanings that were available to the ancient readers and those that emerge only in conjunction with later sensibilities.

One small example of such anachronistic exegesis is Held’s characterization of Judah as a biblical paragon of repentance and personal transformation.³ Held notes that when Joseph seeks to incarcerate Benjamin, Judah steps forward and pleads that he might be imprisoned in place of his brother. Judah assumes his responsibilities as a brother. He also expresses empathy for his father, impressing upon Joseph Jacob’s deep attachment to his youngest son. All of this stands in stark contrast, Held tells us, with Judah’s mode of conduct at the beginning of the Joseph narrative. There, Judah organizes Joseph’s sale into slavery, displaying total indifference to the pain this would engender.

How are we to explain Judah’s change in behaviour? Held suggest that the narrative interlude of Judah and Tamar may provide the key to Judah’s transformation. Here Judah endures the loss of two of his sons. This unbearable tragedy,

2 Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 1:xxvi.

3 Held, Mikketts #1 (Gen 41:1–44:17), “His Brother’s Brother: Judah’s Journey,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:88–92.

Held surmises, enables Judah to feel sympathy for Jacob's pain over the loss of his son, Joseph. Then, Tamar confronts Judah with the terrible guilt he bears in holding back from her his youngest son, thereby condemning her to perpetual childlessness. In the words of Held:

Tamar's message must have shaken Judah to the core, because the words she uses—"Recognize, please" (*haker na*)—are the very words Judah and his brother had used in presenting Jacob with his son's bloodied tunic: "Recognize, please (*haker na*), is it your son's tunic, or not?" (Gen 37:32).⁴

In other words, Tamar's carefully formulated speech compels Judah to confront and acknowledge not only his appalling treatment of her, but also of Joseph and Jacob much earlier. Shaken to the core by Tamar's challenge, Judah repents of his various sins and transforms himself into a new person. He is now prepared to act as a responsible brother and intervene on behalf of Benjamin.

Is this reading compelling? Does Judah bemoan his harsh treatment of Joseph and Jacob, and painfully resolve to mend his ways? The fact is that the narrator never tells us so in plainspoken words. Nor does Judah give any verbal expression to such thoughts and feelings. When Tamar confronts Judah with the words "Recognize, please," Judah confesses his trespass toward her but says nothing at all of his treatment of Joseph. Nor does he make reference to his role in Joseph's fate in his appeal for Benjamin, where he conveniently reports that Joseph simply died. Finally, the narrator tells us nothing about how Judah experienced the loss of his sons, let alone how this might have influenced his feelings toward his father.

Held projects inner feelings of empathy, remorse and penitence onto Judah, in spite of the narrator's disinterest in them, because they are central to his own theology. As far as the logic of the narrative is concerned, there is no need to imagine Judah remorsefully reflecting on his treatment of Joseph and undergoing a moral transformation. His initial proposal to sell Joseph into slavery was not an act of unalloyed callousness. It was the only plan that was likely to win the approval of the brothers and save Joseph from certain death. Furthermore, Judah's plea for Benjamin's release was not a radically new exhibition of empathy or brotherly responsibility. It was rooted in the unique commitment Judah made concerning Benjamin, in light of the life-threatening situation of the ongoing famine (see Gen 43:8-10).

Held's reading of Judah in the Joseph story is problematic not only because it projects inner thoughts and feelings on the biblical character that the Torah narrator was not interested in developing; it is problematic also because it is

4 Mikkets #1, 1:91.

anachronistic. Yehezkel Kaufmann points out in his *Toledot HaEmunah HaYisraelit* that the theme of repentance is a theological innovation that is absent in Genesis and other parts of the Bible.⁵ And in his recent book, *How Repentance Became Biblical*, David Lambert shows that “repentance,” as an act of introspection initiated by the individual, focusing on remorse over deeds identified as improper, and ending in a resolution to change one’s character, is essentially a post-biblical, Hellenistic phenomenon.⁶ Our tendency to identify and situate this mental-ethical practice in biblical texts is, to a large extent, testimony to the predominant influence of later Judaism and Christianity on our reading habits. Again, there is nothing wrong with reading Torah anachronistically, in tandem with interpreters of various eras, so long as we acknowledge that this is what we are doing.

Selective and One-Sided

Beyond the problem of anachronistic or insufficiently grounded exegesis is the problem of selectivity and one-sidedness. Held often draws broad conclusions concerning the character of “the Torah” or “Tanakh” on the basis of select passages, without giving due consideration to opposing voices. Of course, Held is well aware of the fact that Torah encompasses at least some measure of diversity, and he at times acknowledges conflicting biblical trends. But the work as a whole, as the title testifies, seeks to uncover “the heart of Torah,” and this involves accentuating theological consistency in the text, especially with regard to issues deemed fundamental. The result is a unified and coherent theological vision resting on an imbalanced portrayal of Torah in its full plurality and heterogeneity.

For example, Held asserts that human agency is central to the message of Scripture.⁷ Yet God never calls upon the Israelites in Egypt to take practical steps to facilitate their liberation. Prophets condemn Israel’s kings for forming political alliances with foreign powers instead of relying exclusively on divine salvation.⁸ And they look forward to the day when God will eradicate human willfulness and implant a heart of impeccable obedience (Deut 30:6; Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:25–27). Further, apocalyptic texts such as Daniel present all of world history as the gradual unfolding of a predetermined drama in which individual effort is largely pointless. Of course, it is perfectly legitimate to shy away from such texts in the context

5 Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Toledot HaEmunah HaYisraelit* [= *History of Israelite Religion*] 8 vols. (Tel-Aviv: Bialik Institute-Duir, 1937–56), 2:285–86. ET: Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. and abridged by Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

6 See David Frankel, review of David A. Lambert, *How Repentance Became Biblical: Judaism, Christianity and the Interpretation of Scripture*, *Journal of Religion* 97 (2017), 569–71.

7 Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 1:xxvi.

8 On this, see Alexander Rofé, *Introduction to the Literature of the Hebrew Bible*, Jerusalem Biblical Studies 9 (Jerusalem: Simor, 2009), 388.

of a discussion on the importance of initiative and responsible action. But one should not give the impression that they do not exist.

The one-sided nature of Held's work is nowhere more evident than in its uneasy engagement with morally problematic texts. The God of Torah is said to be a God of love. His displays of volatile jealousy and indiscriminate vengeance, of deep insecurity and narcissistic pride, are hardly discussed or given serious attention.⁹ The essential concern of Torah, Held asserts, is to inculcate compassion, especially toward the vulnerable. But what of the passages that summon us to exercise brutality and to renounce compassion (such as Deut 25:12)? Held acknowledges the presence of such passages and admits that the Torah can be used for evil. But he does not allow the reality of these passages to tarnish his glowing depiction of Torah as a blueprint for the embodiment of the good and the holy. Instead, he places the onus for such passages on the interpreter of Torah, whose task it is to read as humanely as possible. In the words of Held, "to worship the God of Israel is to worship a God of love and mercy—and thus . . . to commit to interpreting Torah accordingly."¹⁰

An Alternative Proposal

Allow me to briefly present a different approach to Torah interpretation in general, and to problematic texts more specifically, as a possible alternative. This approach proceeds from the belief that the God of Israel is not only a God of love but also a God of truth. Truth (*'emet*), according to the Rabbis, is God's very seal.¹¹ This implies that we must commit to interpreting Torah not only as humanely as possible, but also as truthfully as possible.

Martin Buber called upon us to engage in a dialogue with the Bible, not unlike the kind of dialogue we ideally engage in with our fellow human beings. We should listen to the text carefully and with ears as open as possible, and respond to what we hear with honesty and integrity.¹² For me, this Buberian model implies that we should openly contest biblical theologies that we find superficial or inadequate. True dialogue involves the ability, nay necessity, to at times openly and respectfully disagree. If we can never disagree with some biblical perspectives, we can never meaningfully agree with any.

We might also set biblical texts in opposition with one another, and explain why we prefer some over others. For example, if we cannot reconcile ourselves to the belief in a God who harbors a special love for one particular people, we can

9 The literature on this theme is extensive. See, e.g., Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).

10 Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 1:xvii.

11 Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 55a.

12 Martin Buber, "The Man of Today and the Jewish Bible" in *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1968), 1–13, here 5.

give theological priority to the Wisdom books, which implicitly deny the belief altogether.¹³ Here I take issue with the thrust of Held's assertion about the primacy of election in his second essay on Parashat Devarim, when he says that "contemporary Jews who wish to have a theology rooted in scripture have no choice but to reckon with chosenness. To jettison the language of chosenness is, I fear, to jettison Tanakh itself."¹⁴ By emphasizing the enormous diversity of thought, however, both in the Bible and in Jewish literature more broadly, we allow the student of Torah to maintain her own authentic dialogue with the multifaceted tradition, and identify those ancient voices that resonate for her.

Finally, truth and honesty demand that we frankly acknowledge that significant portions of Torah not only fail to inculcate love and mercy, but actually inculcate cruelty and inhumanity. The Torah, like everything in the world that is not God, is a flawed amalgamation of good and evil. We should not equivocate on this matter or employ sophisticated interpretive strategies as a means to avoid acknowledgment of the depravity of deplorable texts. This is not only because of our commitment to truth, but also because of the perils of an uncritical orientation toward Scripture. Rabbi Held acknowledges that while Torah can motivate us to love and care for others, it can also "bolster chauvinism and cultivate hate." In fact, the latter is not just a theoretical possibility. It is a not uncommon reality today amongst certain Jewish circles in Israel and the Diaspora.¹⁵

In a telegram sent to President Kennedy on June 16, 1963 regarding what was referred to then as "the Negro problem," Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity."¹⁶ One might well contend that the situation today, in which Torah study not infrequently bolsters chauvinism and cultivates hate, again calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity. Leviticus 19:17 reads, "Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt" (NIV). In the spirit of Heschel's call for spiritual audacity, I would suggest applying this passage to Torah itself. If our relationship to Torah is to be one of true dialogue, then we must muster the courage to rebuke it when necessary. If we don't speak out openly against deplorable sacred texts, whether they appear in the

13 For the conflict between covenant theology and the theology of biblical Wisdom literature see Walther Zimmerli, "The Place and Limit of the Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology," in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, ed. James L. Crenshaw (New York: KTAV 1976), 314–26. See also the recent reevaluation of Zimmerli's essay in Stuart Weeks, "The Place and Limits of Wisdom Revisited," in *Perspectives on Israelite Wisdom: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Jarick, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 618 (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016), 3–23.

14 Held, Devarim #2 (Deut 1:1–3:22), "A Bolt from the Blue: Or, When God Falls in Love," in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:204–8, here 2:207.

15 It is sufficient to mention pernicious works such as "Baruch Hegever" and "Torat Hamelech," which have been endorsed by many rabbinic authorities.

16 See Susannah Heschel, ed., *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), vii.

written Torah, the oral Torah, or contemporary rabbinic teachings, if we ignore such texts in the hope that our students won't notice them, we will share in the guilt for what they may engender.