

Jewish Theology Rooted in Biblical Texts: Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah*

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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 I read an academic book and find myself not only intellectually stimulated but also spiritually uplifted. As I read Shai Held's essays, this is exactly how I felt. Held has helped me to deepen my love of Jewish texts and I have learned a lot of *torah* (biblical teaching) through his collection of essays.

The range of resources that Held has at his disposal is impressive and I especially appreciate the way he meanders around traditional Jewish sources, alongside contemporary Protestant biblical commentaries. He brings voices into conversation with each other in ways that I have not experienced before. His writing style is casual and accessible, but also profound and persuasive.

The influence of Abraham Joshua Heschel on Held's theology is apparent. The introduction to Held's essays opens with a verse from Ps 119:97: "O how I love Your Torah" and this is shortly followed by a quotation from Heschel: "The way to faith in the 'Torah from Heaven' (*torah min ha-shamayim*) is the preparation of the heart to perceive the heavenly in the Torah (*shamayim min ha-torah*)."¹ Held surely lives into Heschel's call. Held's ability to open his heart to *torah* is indeed contagious, at least for this reader!

In this review, I raise a number of questions that I believe are ultimately about the role of the Torah (that is, the Pentateuch) in contemporary Jewish meaning-making. While this is the meta-question, I will explore this issue by

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

comparing Held's work to that of Jewish biblical commentators and theologians trained in historical-critical methodologies. The intention of this exploration is not to criticize Held's work, but rather to place it in the context of Jewish biblical scholarship (since the setting for the review panel was the Society for Biblical Literature).

A Work of Jewish Theology

Held's two-volume collection of *Divrei Torah*, that is, teachings on the weekly Torah portions, shines most brightly as a work of theology. For Held, the Bible tells a story about a God who loves and who can never abandon Israel (invoking Hosea), about a God of mercy who spares a family during the flood, about God's commitment to life and God's affirmation of human dignity, especially for the most vulnerable in society. Held consistently affirms that Jewish theology also focuses on human responsibility and accountability.

Herein lies the audacity of Jewish theology: Despite how stubborn we are, God enlists us as God's partners; despite how easily seduced we are by vanity and idolatry, God demands that we cast away our false gods; despite how callous we are to other people's suffering, God beckons us to care for the hurting and the aggrieved.²

Held consistently holds to the view that the Bible embraces the complexity of human nature; we are not irredeemably sinful nor as good-natured as to "kumbaya" together. Human beings have both great power and great responsibility. We are communal beings, but also need to think for ourselves.

Held also places his theology within the context of some contemporary issues like the trope of Jewish victimhood, where he points to the reality that Jews are not always the victims, but victimizers as well. A single quotation from Held's Introduction encapsulates his approach: "I attempt to understand how texts address the complexity and intractability of the human spirit. And I ask, always, what the text intends to say about God—and by extension, about what it means to live life in service of that God."³ In other words, Held makes it clear that his writing is predominantly about theology, and that biblical exegesis is one of several tools that he employs to understand God.

The Difference between Theology and Biblical Commentary

Jewish critical commentators root their work within the framework of modern biblical scholarship, which seeks to understand ancient texts by considering issues like authorship, provenance, and the meaning of the ancient texts in their earliest

² Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 1:xxix.

³ Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 1:xxxiii.

contexts. Such biblicists use philology, archaeology, source criticism, and a slew of other “criticisms” in order to draw evidence-based conclusions (even though many of our conclusions remain tentative and highly subjective), while Divrei Torah (expositions of the text for the faithful) weave tapestries by intertwining traditional texts and contemporary Jewish life for religious meaning-making. The academic pursuit is to clarify the “plain” meaning of the text, while the function of Divrei Torah is homiletical.

Another way of expressing this distinction is that biblicists place the text (and author and/or ancient contexts) at the center, while theologians like Held place God at the center. When I engage with biblical texts wearing my academic hat, my question is not “what do we learn about God and how ought we to behave?” but rather “what does the text reveal about God-beliefs in antiquity and how have subsequent generations reinterpreted the text?” One approach is religiously motivated, while the other is primarily academic.

An example of Held’s theological approach is his first essay on Parashat Terumah, (the liturgical reading of the Torah portion called Terumah), where he offers two different traditional understandings of the Jewish Kabbalistic view of divine contraction, known in Hebrew as *tzimtzum*.⁴ As one of his signature moves, he argues that both approaches have truth to them and the complexity of *tzimtzum* is best expressed by holding the two views together. However, not many people would read Parashat Terumah and think about *tzimtzum*. Held’s essay is actually based on a midrash (a rabbinic homily) connected to verses from the Torah reading: “Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts” (Exod 25:2) “and let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them” (Exod 25:8).⁵ The essay is a beautiful teaching about God, but it has nothing to do with the biblical text itself. If one is interested in learning something about the Torah portion Terumah, this essay will not be helpful.

Similarly, Held’s first essay on Parashat Be-shallah explores the centrality of human dignity as a step toward true freedom.⁶ After departing from Egypt, at the Sea, when the Israelites panic and claim that they should have stayed in Egypt, Moses tells them to hold still and to observe the might of God. God then speaks up with anger asking Moses why he is crying out to God. (The narrative itself makes no mention of Moses having cried out to God.) Held focuses on the latter part of God’s statement: “Tell the people to go on!” Held argues that God is condemning Moses for telling the people to wait passively and watch, when instead they need to act to regain their sense of dignity.

4 Held, Terumah #1 (Exod 25:1–27:19), “Being Present while Making Space: Or, Two Meanings of *Tzimtzum*,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:184–88.

5 NJPS translation.

6 Held, Be-shallah #1 (Exod 13:17–17:16), “Leaving Slavery Behind; On Taking the First Step,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:155–58.

Again, the teaching is powerful, but Held ignores the first part of the verse that is actually the more difficult. Why would God tell Moses to stop crying out to him when Moses was not doing so at all? Most biblicists see this disconnect as evidence of sloppy work on the part of the redactor who was intertwining the P and J narratives. Many biblicists are drawn to this verse because it helps to make the case for two intertwined accounts regarding the incident at the Sea. Most biblicists are interested in how the accounts are different, how they imagine God differently. Even biblical scholars who are more interested in literary, synchronic readings acknowledge the textual difficulty. Held weaves together traditional Jewish sources to explore human dignity as a necessary prerequisite to human freedom, but the connection with the plain meaning of the biblical text is tenuous at best. Someone seeking wisdom on Parashat Be-shallah will find relevant material here, but it does not really emerge from the plain meaning of the text. This essay is midrash, creative interpretation.

What Is Jewish Biblical Theology?

As I stated previously, these observations are not critiques of Held's work; rather, the publication of Held's work offers an opportunity for further exploration of an ongoing question among Jewish biblical scholars: What does Jewish biblical theology look like?

There are a plethora of books authored by Protestant biblicists that present a relatively systematic biblical theology.⁷ However, there is no analogous work by a Jewish biblicist. There is no consensus among Jewish biblicists regarding any aspect of Jewish biblical theology—even whether it is a legitimate field of Jewish inquiry! However, one opinion that has emerged is that a Jewish biblical theology should highlight the variety of different theologies in the Bible, rather than seeking one central theology as is typical of most Protestant biblical theologians.⁸

It is widely recognized by biblical scholars that the Priestly source(s) and the Deuteronomistic source are of a very different mind concerning the nature and presence of God, the holiness of the Israelites, how Israel is to stay in relationship with God, and so on. Jewish biblical theology could highlight the internal discussions within the Bible itself. Held uses contemporary biblical scholarship but seems to avoid identifying differing opinions within the Torah itself.

For example, in Parashat Tetsavveh, where Held discusses holy space, he

7 A few of the most influential works include Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols.; trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); Rolf Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. David E. Orton; Tools for Biblical Study 7 (Leiden: Deo, 2005).

8 Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament* is the rare work by a Christian biblical theologian that highlights tensions in the Bible.

writes, “Perhaps this is why the tabernacle is called both *mishkan*, literally dwelling place, and *ohel mo’ed*, or tent of meeting.” He then quotes Menachem Haran who describes how the *mishkan* functions and how the *ohel mo’ed* functions. Held concludes: “This is a core tension in biblical theology. . . . God is radically present but also mysterious and transcendent; immanent but not willing to be localized or domesticated.”⁹ Held’s reading implies that there are two different names for the tabernacle because the Torah cannot communicate the complexity of the topic of divine presence with just one idea. But, in fact, Haran and other biblicists argue that there are two different names for a holy place because they were different structures altogether that represent two different groups of biblical writers who had different understandings of God’s presence.

As a Jewish biblicist, I am interested in the fact that there were (at least) two different traditions regarding divine presence. The priestly *mishkan* is part of a system that privileges the role of priests, the importance of the elimination of ritual impurity, and the centrality of the sacrificial system; while the *ohel mo’ed* texts privilege prophecy as the medium of communication between God and Israel. In teaching this outside of academia, I present these two systems to encourage Jewish readers to think about what the two models hold as most important, to consider what traces of each tradition has influenced Jewish practice and identity, and to explore how these models might inform our own practices and identities. In discerning different sources (such as the distinctive approaches of J and P), we can more deeply appreciate the voices of our forebears. Or, as Benjamin Sommer has eloquently written: the “commentator revives a lost voice of the Jewish tradition. . . . Peshat readings, including modern critical readings, are significant because they enable us to hear religious teachings that might otherwise have been neglected.”¹⁰

Jewish Theology Rooted in Biblical Texts

Shai Held does consistently lift up different opinions and interpretations of text, but only post-biblical texts. One of the most powerful aspects of his work is that he incorporates different interpretations into a single vision to teach that life is complicated and that God is multifaceted. . Held could have written a very similar work organized around his central areas of interest: God’s love, God’s mercy, human responsibility. By setting the biblical text front and center, that is, by using the ritual liturgical calendar of Torah readings, Held’s work feels more rooted in the biblical text than works by other Jewish theologians. The format of presenting

9 Held, *Tetsavveh* #1 (Exod 27:20–30:10), “God in the *Mishkan*: Present but Not Domesticated,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:194–97, here 1:197.

10 Benjamin Sommer, “Two Introductions to Scripture: James Kugel and the Possibility of Biblical Theology,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100 (2010): 153–82, here 172.

theology via engagement with the text is certainly a dominant Jewish way of “doing theology.” By organizing his work around the weekly Torah portion, he is able to weave the rhythms of Jewish time and liturgy together with Jewish theology

Shai Held’s work in the volumes of *The Heart of Torah* is not Jewish biblical theology, but Jewish theology that uses biblical texts as starting points. Held’s collected essays enlightened me, as a Jewish reader, and deepened my own love of Torah and our rich textual traditions. Held’s work has revived important questions for me, as a biblical scholar, to consider regarding the overlapping but distinctive enterprises of Jewish theology and Jewish biblical theology.