



PROJECT MUSE®

Zev Garber's Usage of Biblical and Rabbinic Sources

Joel Gereboff

Hebrew Studies, Volume 51, 2010, pp. 353-358 (Article)

Published by National Association of Professors of Hebrew



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/400591>

ZEV GARBER'S USAGE OF BIBLICAL AND RABBINIC SOURCES

Joel Gereboff

Arizona State University

Interpreting and identifying the implications of biblical texts read through the lens of rabbinic sources and thought is a key component of Zev Garber's teaching, oral presentations, and published works. Garber engages biblical sources in a midrashic manner in order to extract theological and moral lessons relevant to Jews and others, especially Christian theologians. He writes and teaches so as to have his readers and audiences grapple with theological, philosophical, and moral concerns emerging from these documents when read holistically. Central to Garber's interpretation of the Bible is his understanding of midrash and Oral Torah as the rabbinic method and underlying concept for reading the Written Torah in an effort to have it speak to the changing circumstances over the ages.

Interpreting and identifying the implications of biblical texts read through the lens of rabbinic sources and thought is a key component of Garber's teaching and published work. From his first publication, "Psalm 138:4: A Religious Polemic in the Haggadah,"¹ to forthcoming essays, Garber has engaged biblical sources in a midrashic manner in order to extract theological and moral lessons relevant to Jews and others, especially Christian theologians. Although he is fully knowledgeable of the modern historical critical approach to biblical and rabbinic sources, evidenced particularly by his large number of book reviews, his publications on biblical sources only occasionally make use of these methods. He writes and teaches so as to have his readers and audiences grapple with theological, philosophical, and moral concerns emerging from these documents when read more holistically.

The key methodological assumptions and theoretical premises of his analyses of biblical texts first appear in print starting in the late 1970s, and are well developed by the mid 1980s. Central to Garber's interpretation of the Bible is his understanding of midrash and Oral Torah as the rabbinic method and underlying concept for reading the Written Torah in an effort to have it speak to the changing circumstances over the ages. Garber offers several different formulations of his understanding of the rabbinic approach to textual analysis. These are captured in such ideas as his interpretation of *na'aseh venishmah* from Exodus 24 and his neologism, *historiosophy*. The

¹ Z. Garber, "Psalm 138:4: A Religious Polemic in the Haggadah," *CCAR Journal: The Reformed Jewish Quarterly* 17 (1970): 57–60.

application of these methods allows Garber to extract theological, and above all, moral lessons for the current world. Learning for Garber is meant to nurture sensitivity and empathy which lead to ethical decision-making and moral development.

Garber's published work on biblical sources achieves its mature and steady expression in the early nineties, for from that point forward, it is framed by the reality of the Shoah and the issues raised for all those living in the post-Shoah era. A good portion of these writings of the last twenty years are revised versions of his presentations in his dialog with three other partners of what is known as the Post-Shoah Midrash Group. His contributions here address theological and moral issues raised by the Holocaust as well as by developments in the land of Israel and relations between Palestinians and Israelis. His overall goal is to speak to these concerns as an observant, rabbinically formed Jew who carries forward the ongoing processes of midrashic interpretation resulting in the further disclosure of Oral Torah for our age.

In what follows, I will briefly elaborate on some of these key claims, offer some exemplifications, and end by situating Garber's work within the frame of his own autobiographical representation.

The focal points of many of Garber's articles are specific biblical passages, though these in turn are interpreted through comparison with other biblical sources. Garber has penned articles on the flood story, Genesis 6–9, the story of Sodom, Genesis 18–19, Jacob's encounter with the Angel at the Jordan, Genesis 32, Jethro, Exodus 18, the revelation at Sinai, Exodus 24, texts dealing with Amalek throughout the Tanakh, passages related to *lex talionis*, "The Love Commandment" in Leviticus 19, a passage in Deuteronomy 30 on the nature of the covenant and Torah, the confrontation between Amos and Amaziah recorded in Amos 7, and the Song of Songs. In addition, he has written several articles on the development and interpretation of the Passover Haggadah. He interprets the above cited biblical texts by bringing them into dialog with passages from classical rabbinic texts, especially the two talmuds, early rabbinic midrashim, and medieval commentators and legalists including Rashi, Rambam, and Ramban.

As noted, Garber sees his work as a form of midrash, a term for which he has offered several definitions. For example, "Midrash is biblical inquiry; an attempt to explain the biblical text in as many ways as seem possible to the

inquiring mind of the Jewish sage.”² For Garber however, the “crucial problem in textual interpretation is to discover a suitable hermeneutic, one that is both fair to the original image and faithful to the contemporary ethic.”³ Garber’s comments from an article from 1979 on “Interpretation and the Passover Haggadah” apply equally as well to his understanding of the challenge faced by earlier rabbinic and contemporary interpreters of the biblical texts. He writes, “Interpreting the Passover Haggadah is the problem of relating blocs of religious thought patterns to the fluid, constantly changing life of the Jewish community. It is a question of old forms and new challenges.”⁴

A different way Garber understands his task as part of the ongoing rabbinic response to Sinai is set forth in his interpretation of the Israelites reply to God found in the covenant text of Exodus 24, “*na’aseh ve-nishma*” in his article, “Dialog at the Mountain: Thoughts on Exodus 24 and Matthew 17:13.” He writes, “Whether the Torah is defined as the result of an exclusive encounter at Sinai or of an evolving journey from Sinai, this national treasure is traditionally understood by the response of *na’aseh venishma*, (We shall do and we shall hear [reason]). Accordingly, the way of Torah presents three paths for the contemporary Jew.

1. One should believe that God’s Torah given at Sinai is all knowledge (*na’aseh* alone).
2. The Torah at Sinai tradition should be abandoned and Torah should be explained in purely rationalist terms. Torah is made in the image of the Jewish people (*nishma* alone).
3. One should accept the existential position that God’s teaching was shared at Sinai face to face with all of Israel present and future. “Present” implies that God’s revelation occurred and that Torah is the memory of this unusual theophany; “future” hints that Israel’s dialogue with God is an ongoing process. This view holds that people know only a part of divine truth and that each generation seeks, makes distinctions, categorizes, and strives to discover more (*na’aseh ve-nishma*).

² Z. Garber, “Torah and Testament: Teaching and Learning Scripture in Dialogue and in Hermeneutics,” in *Puzzling out the Past: Studies in the Northwest Semitic Languages and Literatures in Honor of Bruce Zuckerman* (ed. S. Fine, M. J. Lundberg, and W. T. Patard; forthcoming, 2010), n. 28.

³ Z. Garber, “Interpretation and the Passover Haggadah: An Invitation to Post-Biblical Historiosophy,” *Bulletin of Higher Hebrew Education* 2 (1988): 26.

⁴ Z. Garber, “Interpretation and the Passover Haggadah,” *Journal of Reform Judaism* 26 (1979): 83.

He concludes this *drash*, exposition, by drawing out its implications for how Jews should read and interpret biblical and the larger rabbinic corpus of Torah. He states, “*Na’aseh* alone permits no ultimate questions; *nishma* alone provides no ultimate answers. *Na’aseh venishma* together asks questions and attempts answers but leaves many uncertainties. Yet uncertainty is truth in the making and the inevitable price of freedom.”⁵ These comments make evident the existential and epistemological axioms of Garber’s approach to biblical and rabbinic sources. Jews who affirm Torah see it as providing divine guidance mediated through the limitations of human reason. The meaning of Torah is forever open to discovery, especially as Jews seek to elucidate its messages for their ever changing circumstances.

Perhaps the most unique formulation of Garber’s understanding of classical rabbinic and his own view of Torah is captured in his notion of the rabbinic *historiosophical* approach to texts. For Garber, the rabbis did not interest themselves in historiography. “Jews in pre-modern eras did not look backwards with the aim of discovering facts. They sought rather to derive paradigms from the sacred events of the past by which they could then interpret and respond to contemporary events.”⁶ Garber then introduces his neologism by stating,

Jews dabbled in *historiosophy* (a philosophy of history) and not *historiography*. The biblical authors discuss life, liberation, deliverance and the Jewish People’s continuous relationship with God. Running through this experience is an element of mystery stemming from God’s penetration into history, limiting human knowledge and ethical conduct.⁷

And Garber concludes by drawing out the implication of this rabbinic approach to biblical and rabbinic texts. “The right and ethical life is to be attained by following creeds, rites and rituals and appointed times—all of which enable each generation to reenact the pivotal moments in the life of the Jewish people.”⁸

These approaches shape Garber’s reflections on such matters on the relationship between Jews and Christians in the post-Shoah as well as his visions for Israeli-Palestinian connections. For example, his essay, “Night

⁵ Z. Garber, “Dialogue at the Mountain: Thoughts on Exodus 24 and Matthew 17:1–13,” in *Confronting the Holocaust: A Mandate for the 21st Century Part Two* (ed. S. C. Feinstein, K. Schierman, and M. S. Littell; Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1999), p. 5.

⁶ Z. Garber, “Interpretation,” p. 26.

⁷ Z. Garber, “Interpretation,” p. 26.

⁸ Z. Garber, “Interpretation,” pp. 26–27.

Encounters: Theologizing Dialogue,” focuses on Gen 32:22–32 the story of Jacob at the Jordan and Matthew 26:36–46, the account of Jesus in Gethsemane. After having discussed how Jacob’s transformation into the limping Israel indicates that Jacob does not lack firmness or strength “but represents that Jew who has confronted the holocaustal evil decrees of God and man and has prevailed,” Garber goes on to comment,

Jacob weakened and yet made stronger in the crucible of the Shoah, is psychologically prepared to meet at the River the other streams of the Abrahamic faith in mutual dialogue and respect. Only the Jacob who can wrestle unabashedly with the curse of the Shoah can hope to emerge with the blessing of Shalem (Gen 33:7) totally whole and at peace with the struggle. He has seen the dark face of God and yet he walks upright refusing to be downtrodden.⁹

Garber concludes by identifying the larger theological and moral implications of his reading. He states,

Torah is not the all perfect absolute of the true believers, nor does it provide an instant blueprint to rescue upon distress or demand. In God’s creation, there is *tohu vavohu*, (‘unformed and void’) so that man can redeem an imperfect world. God purposefully hides His face so that man can be free and choose the right ethical action.¹⁰

The clues to what has shaped Zev Garber’s engagement with biblical and rabbinic texts appear in his 2009 essay, “Terror Out of Zion: Making Sense of Scriptural Teaching.” Salient in this account is his primary and secondary school education in Orthodox yeshivot in the period immediately after the Holocaust, taught by refugee rabbis and survivors who “taught me the spirit of *musar* (moral deliberation) that God’s covenant with the Jewish people is absolute and eternal—and that the mission of the Jews is to apply ethical monotheism to everyone, everywhere at all times and under all circumstances.” After charting the contributions of his university training to his thinking and methods, he concludes, “For me the continuity of the Jews lies more in actual ethnic memory than factual historical details. Faith knowledge and its corollary, ‘mythicizing history’ was and is the way of

⁹ Z. Garber, “Night Encounters: Theologizing Dialogue,” in *Shoah: The Paradigmatic Genocide: Essays in Exegesis and Eisegesis* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994), p. 161.

¹⁰ Z. Garber, “Night Encounters,” pp. 161, 167.

Torah.”¹¹ These remarks help explain the passion, method, existential situation, and deep moral commitments and concerns that energize Zev Garber's interpretations of biblical and rabbinic texts. The ongoing process of midrash for him, often done now in conversation with previously excluded dialog partners, such as Christian theologians, is the way to engage Scripture in light of pressing political, moral, and theological issues. These discussions should result in the articulation of Jewishly informed answers that serve to help Jews fulfill their mission of improving the world and bringing peace to it and all of its inhabitants.

¹¹ Z. Garber, “Terror Out of Zion: Making Sense of the Scriptural Teaching,” in *Confronting Genocide: Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (ed. S. L. Jacobs; Landham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), pp. 279–280.