When Perfect Faith Meets Imperfect Text

Revelation Restored: Divine Writ and Critical Responses
By David Weiss Halivni

By ALLAN NADLER

avid Weiss Halivni's "Revelation Restored" is a modern masterpiece of Jewish theology. While in his earlier works the revered scholar, rabbi and Columbia professor has limited himself to text-critical talmudic scholarship, in recent years he has written more personally. His moving memoir, "The Book and the Sword: A Life of Learning in the Shadow of Destruction," and his brilliant 1991 study of rabbinic biblical interpretation, "Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis," help to form the personal and scholarly background to Rabbi Halivni's latest and, I believe, most inspiring work.

In "Revelation Restored," Rabbi Halivni boldly and originally addresses the most important contemporary challenge to Jewish faith, namely the findings of modern biblical criticism. Rabbi Halivni grapples with the question of how a Jew can accept the Torah as being a less than perfect text, yet still piously robe it, crown it, kiss it and revere it as a sacred scroll.

Rabbi Halivni has, throughout his remarkable life and career, always struggled to balance his faith in God and the Torah with the harsh subjective realities of his experience and the objective findings of his scholarship. In his memoir, Rabbi Halivni confronts the problem of the meaning of the Torah in the wake of his shattering experiences during the Holocaust. And in this work he presents us with his brilliant and heart-searching solution to the central quandary of the enlightened traditionalist. That quandary, in Rabbi Halivni's words is "Jewish faith confronted by the science of textual criticism."

Rabbi Halivni's resolution of that problem lies in his discovery that it is not new at all. In fact, he demonstrates that the very man responsible for canonizing the Torah, the biblical scribe Ezra, was well aware of its inherent imperfections, or "maculations," as Rabbi Halivni refers to them. Nonetheless, Ezra still promoted the text as sacred and God-given to the Jewish people. Rabbi Halivni shows that Ezra had to reconstruct the Torah for the Jews who returned to Israel after the Babylonian exile, out of the fragmentary remnants of a long period of idolatry, neglect and, finally, expulsion.

If God's original revelation was by that time seriously flawed, Rabbi Halivni argues, it was because the people of Israel had sinned, and no fault of the divine lawgiver. Rabbi Halivni therefore insists that the consequences of the historical Israelite neglect of Torah (i.e. its present maculations, imperfect state), should not form the basis, or become an excuse, for ignoring its sacred origins and neglecting its commandments.

Ultimately, for Rabbi Halivni, faith does not require a constant manifestation of divine providence and perfection. As a survivor, he has been given to know all too well that the world is an imperfect creation; and, as a scholar, he has come to know that the sacred texts of Judaism are also imperfect. Yet Rabbi Halivni's dark experiences and deep learning have, remarkably, neither condemned him to cynicism nor compelled disbelief. They have instead engendered a heroic theological struggle to reaffirm faith in the postmodern period. Rabbi Halivni endeavors to show that a Jew can accept, along with the Bible's critics, that the Torah is a maculated text filled with "bumps and fissures" and still remain an observant, believing Jew.

Of course, Rabbi Halivni is not the first traditional Jewish scholar to deal with this central problem of Jewish faith. Much of the writing of England's greatest Jewish theologian, Louis Jacobs, has been devoted to this problem. In fact, Rabbi Jacobs' alienation from the Orthodox Jewish world was the result of his partial acceptance of critical biblical theory in his remarkable book, "We Have Reason To Believe," and many subsequent writings. And here in America, the great scholar and philosopher, Leo Strauss, long ago concluded, "It was granted by all except the most backward that the Jewish faith had not been refuted by science or history ... one could grant to science and history everything they seemed to teach regarding the age of the world, the origin of man ... The Jahvists, the Elohimists, the triods of Sisera and so on, without abandoning one iota of the substance of Jewish faith."

But Rabbi Halivni is the first to attempt not merely a theologically argued or polemical resolution to this central problem, but one rooted in an erudite, closely-argued, textual, historical study. He shows that, in the Middle Ages, the Rabbis were only able to protect the Masoretic text of the Torah from any emendation and affirm its inherent sanctity and inviolability by developing the belief in a parallel, supplementary oral revelation that contained all of the teachings of rabbinic law, which they referred to as Halakha la-Mishne Mi-Sinai. This was one of the many ways in which the imperfections of the Torah could be redressed without directly being addressed. The entire enterprises of Midrash Halacha and later medieval rabbinic criticism were all generated by the need to correct the text of the Torah, without openly acknowledging that it required any correction. Rabbi Halivni reminds us, both at the beginning and end of his study, that the very men responsible for secularizing the text were cognizant of its imperfections. Yet they remained resolute in their faith in its divine origins. If Ezra and some of the scribes of his day could maintain their belief in the sanctity of the Torah, even as they rescued and reassembled remnants of its tattered text from years of idolatry and neglect, Rabbi Halivni argues, so can we today. It is possible to retain critical judgement and befit from modern scholarship and still cherish the Torah and raise it.

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before the congregation as a sacred icon: "Those who wish to remain within this tradition of faith, while still embracing some benefits of a modern, critical outlook, may choose to join me in the belief that the work of canonization was undertaken on the sacred remnants of a real revelation."

What a generous invitation! And how sad that few traditional Jews will likely be brave or intellectually honest enough to join Rabbi Halivni on this very demanding, often painful but equally rewarding, path. Towards the end of his memoir, "The Book and the Sword," Rabbi Halivni bemoaned his existential religious loneliness. He cited a letter that he had sent to his colleagues in the Conservative movement, when he decided to leave the Jewish Theological Seminary, whose ordination of women, among other halachic modifications, had deeply troubled him: "It is my personal tragedy that the people I daven with, I cannot talk to, and the people I talk to, I cannot daven with. However, when the chips are down, I will always side with the people I daven with; for I can daven without talking. I cannot live without davening."

It is most fortunate that Rabbi Halivni is still talking and writing.