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*BronfmanTorah: commentary on the Torah that draws on the lives, skills, and insights of our community*

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# Not Your Grandmother's Chumash

Rabbi Larry Edwards | BronfmanTorah | December 2017

On November 11, as part of our 30th Anniversary weekend, Rabbi Larry Edwards led a Shabbat lunch discussion in the home of Jed Marcus and Jessica Greenbaum, parents of Becki Marcus ('15). His session was entitled, "SO NOT your great-grandmother's Judaism: Are we even still Jews?" We are pleased to share with you two source materials, comments, and guiding questions based on that session.

Click [here](#) for downloadable sourcesheets.

***Rabbi Larry Edwards**, a member of The Bronfman Fellowship faculty, has served as Hillel Director at Dartmouth College and Cornell University. From 2003 to 2013 he was Rabbi of Congregation Or Chadash, a congregation founded in the 1970s by members of the Jewish GLBT community. He now teaches courses at University of Illinois at Chicago, DePaul University, and the Hebrew Seminary. Rabbi Edwards was ordained by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1975, and received a Ph.D. from Chicago Theological Seminary in 2005.*

**Source #1**

### Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig: R = *Rabbenu*<sup>1</sup>

We too translate the Torah as one book. For us too it is the work of a single mind. We do not know who this mind was; we cannot believe that it was Moses. We name that mind among ourselves by the abbreviation with which the Higher Criticism of the Bible indicates its presumed final redactor of the text: R. We, however, take this R to stand not for redactor but for *rabbenu*.<sup>2</sup> For whoever he was, and whatever text lay before him, he is our teacher, and his theology is our teaching.

An example: let us suppose that Higher Criticism is right, and that Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 are in fact by different writers—though I myself would not like to decide finally in favor of this notion after a man like Benno Jacob has said that he does not believe it. Even in that case, however, it would remain true that what we need to know from the account of creation is not to be learned from either chapter alone but only from the juxtaposition and reconciliation of the two. Indeed, it is to be learned only from the reconciliation of the apparent *contradictions* from which the critical distinction begins: the “cosmological” creation of the first chapter, which leads up to man, and the “anthropological” creation of the second chapter, which begins from man. Only this *sof ma’aseh ba-mahashabah tehillah*<sup>3</sup> is the necessary teaching. Another example: Mount Sinai in smoke and the chapter of the thirteen *middot*<sup>4</sup> are not enough to teach us what revelation is; they must be interwoven with the *mishpatim* and with the Tent of the Presence. And so everywhere.

**Comments by R' Larry Edwards:** The Higher Source Criticism of the Bible (and especially of the Torah), was the work primarily of German Protestant scholars in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The name most associated with this approach is Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918), though it has antecedents including Spinoza and Hobbes. The notion that the Torah (and certainly the rest of the Hebrew Bible) was the work of multiple authors, and not the direct revelation of God through Moses, has been accepted (and extended) by most modern biblical scholars, including (non-Orthodox) Jewish scholars. However, if the Torah is in fact the work of human beings, what is the source of its authority? Buber and Rosenzweig, at work on their German translation of the Bible, responded to objections coming from the Orthodox community. In a letter, they explain that the Torah is, for them “the work of a single mind” – not Moses, but the Redactor of the text as we have it, whom

they name *Rabbenu*.

For example, the two creation narratives of the opening chapters of Genesis may come from different sources. A traditional commentator might “reconcile” their apparent contradictions by showing how they both tell the same story, and are not contradictory at all. A modern skeptic might take the contradictory narratives as undermining altogether the notion that the Torah is divinely revealed. Buber and Rosenzweig argue that both accounts are necessary to the Teaching, which is to be discovered in the process of reading them together.

Does this work for you? Does it re-establish the authority of the Torah as authentic Teaching? It is not the Judaism of our great-grandparents. It is an approach to the text informed by modern scholarship, in which the text continues to speak with a commanding Voice. Does this sound valid to you?

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[1] From a letter to Jacob Rosenheim, leader of separatist Orthodoxy in Germany. Frankfurt, April 21, 1927; published in *Der Morgen*, October 1928. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, trans. by Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p, 23.

[2] “Our Master” or “Our Teacher,” often used to refer to Moses.

[3] From the Friday evening hymn, *L’cha Dodi*: “the end of the work is what arose first in thought.”

[4] “Divine attributes,” Exodus 34:6ff.

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## Source #2

### Emmanuel Levinas: “The Miracle of Confluence”<sup>1</sup>

I am convinced that the Bible is the outcome of prophecies and that in it ethical testimony – I do not say “experience” – is deposited in the form of writings. But this perfectly agrees with the humanity of man as responsibility for the Other... That modern historical criticism has shown that the Bible had multiple authors spread over

very different periods, contrary to what was believed several centuries ago, changes nothing of this conviction, to the contrary. For I have always thought that the great miracle of the Bible lies not at all in the common literary origin, but, inversely, in the confluence of different literatures toward the same essential content. The miracle of the confluence is greater than the miracle of the unique author. Now the pole of this confluence is the ethical, which incontestably dominates this whole book.

**Comments by R' Larry Edwards:** In the next generation, Emmanuel Levinas offers another way of responding to the questions raised by “Higher Criticism.” He uses the religious vocabulary of “miracle” and “testimony.” But he too is influenced by modern skepticism about a single Divine revelation: he is not prepared to call the Sinai event an “experience.” What the Torah and later biblical books offer is testimony -- not to an event, but to a central theme – which for Levinas is the ethical demand of “responsibility for the Other.” That all the books of the Bible agree about this core teaching is, for him, evidence of a miraculous confluence. How can it be that, over the 950 years or so during which the writings collected into the Tanakh were composed, a consistent chord is struck throughout? This is the “miracle” of the biblical Teaching.

Here again, I ask: Does this description convince you of the Bible’s authority? Or perhaps it challenges your sense of biblical authority. Once more, not our great-grandparents’ understanding, but is it enough? Or is it, perhaps, even better?

I myself like the idea of the Bible containing a multiplicity of voices. They do not all have to agree, though I believe that they all do circle around a set of central questions. (Could we come up with a list of the “central questions”? What if there turned out to be 10 (or 613)? Ah, the ultimate expression of a postmodern Torah: The Ten Questions.) I love the contradictions and disagreements – the deep ones are like tightly-wound dialectical springs that produce further thought and reflection.

Franz Rosenzweig, in his address at the opening of the Frankfort Lehrhaus, speaks to “All of us to whom Judaism, to whom being a Jew, has again become the pivot of our lives.”<sup>2</sup> He does not feel the need to prove to me that it ought to be the pivot, but reaches out to those who share his feeling that Judaism is central.

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Some of us have that sense, but may struggle to explain or justify it intellectually.

I believe that Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas offer a convincing path toward an authentically meaningful, intellectually defensible Judaism. Do they work for you, that is, do they push your thinking further?

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[1] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 115.

[2] Franz Rosenzweig, "Upon Opening the Jüdisches Lehrhaus" in *On Jewish Learning* (New York: Schocken Books, 1955), p. 98.

***Continue the conversation. Send Rabbi Edwards your thoughts:***

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***P.S.: We're always looking for more dvar torah writers. Interested? Contact [stefanie@byfi.org](mailto:stefanie@byfi.org). We look forward to hearing from you.***

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