

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE WORK AND METHOD OF NEHAMA LEIBOWITZ

by YAIRAH AMIT

To Nehama, on the occasion of her eightieth birthday

Only rarely are students privileged to study with the master of a method: either it may take time for the method to be recognized, or the master may shut himself up in an ivory tower and remove himself from students. We have been privileged; Nehama herself has taught us her method. This was no accident – what she has to say requires action, the action of elevating the Torah through teaching, and Nehama has practiced as she has preached.

I

It is in the nature of things that innovations do not spring out of a vacuum, and Nehama Leibowitz's method was no exception to this rule. It responded to the exigencies of its time and was influenced by the changes and struggles within the Jewish world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nehama's education combined universal, humanistic tenets with the principles of Judaism and Jewish nationalism. Such a combination was the result of the achievements of Jewish emancipation and enlightenment (*Haskalah*), on the one hand, and the Zionist movement, on the other, in both of which the study and teaching of the Bible were considered vitally important. Unlike traditional Jewish education, which focused on *halakhic* literature, the *Haskalah* saw the Bible as a bridge between

Dr. Yairah Amit is Lecturer in the Department of Bible at Tel-Aviv University. Translated from the Hebrew by Anna Barber.

Judaism and European Christian culture. For this reason, its practitioners emphasized the moral and aesthetic aspects of biblical literature, so that the Prophets and Writings, full of ethical teachings and aesthetic appeal, became the favorite biblical collections of the *Haskalah*. For Zionists, for whom the Bible was a means of strengthening the Jewish national enterprise in the Land of Israel, there was an understandable tendency to focus on the books of the Former Prophets, which describe the process of conquest, settlement, and national unification, and also propound the moral values of biblical prophecy.

Bearing the weight of these two ideologies, in 1930 Nehama Leibowitz made *aliyah* and encountered new attitudes in the land of Israel, which reflected the uncertainties of the emergent society. Here, the emphasis was on the secular realities of life, which meant that religion and traditional Jewish culture receded into the distance, and the Bible was interpreted in the light of humanistic or even Marxist approaches.

In the context of this complex and variegated situation, the work of Nehama Leibowitz stands out as a continual struggle to bridge the gap between traditional Judaism and non-traditional Jews, to bring the words of the Sages of the Jewish tradition to those who wanted nothing to do with their world, and to create an interest in various aspects of *Halakhah* among those who preferred Prophets and Writings to the Torah (Pentateuch). In order to build these bridges, Nehama developed her own method and then applied it to, for the most part, pentateuchal literature. As Professor Auerbach writes: "In circles which had distanced themselves from Torah study, the *gilyonot* woman has restored the study of the Torah to its former glory."¹ In describing her work, Y. Eisner writes, "Leibowitz has produced an entire generation of Bible – principally Torah – teachers. Her teaching has taken oral and written forms: starting in 1941, the *gilyonot* ('folios') of study on the weekly Torah portion, which were supplemented, beginning in 1956, by the 'Guide to Teaching the Weekly Portion.'"² The *gilyonot* were meant for anyone who wished to learn, first and foremost, about pentateuchal literature. They were based on traditional Jewish commentaries from every period and included a series of guiding questions, which the reader-student was to answer by arriving at an understanding of the biblical text, together with the *midrashim* and various commentaries. Not only were the *gilyonot* circulated in every nook and cranny within the Land of Israel, including border settlements and military bases; they also reached communities throughout the Jewish world. For Nehama's students, Bible study was combined with an introduction to rabbinic literature, medieval exegesis, and modern Jewish scholarship. They learned by means of a written dialogue that went on for years. M. Arend has already singled out "the astonishing diligence with which, year after year (without an institute, an office, or even a letterhead), she

1. A. Auerbach, "On Reading the *Gilyonot* on the Weekly Portion" (Heb.), *Ma'ayanot* 4 (1954), p. 55.

2. Y. Eisner, s. v. "Leibowitz, Nehama" (Heb.), *Encyclopedia Hebraica* Vol. XXI, p. 675.

would correct her students' answers by hand, comment and criticize, contradict and encourage – all out of a deep love for the subject and an exemplary pedagogic approach.”³

Beginning in 1954, she began to publish “Studies in the Weekly Sidra” alongside the *gilyonot*. The “Studies” – unlike the *gilyonot* – were based, not on questions, but on answers; that is, they consisted of commentaries which shed light on some aspects of the weekly portion. The “Studies” were translated into English, French, Spanish, and Dutch, and formed the basis of Nehama’s books on the Pentateuch.⁴

Not only has she written; it must be noted that, since her arrival in Israel, Nehama has never stopped teaching. She has taught in seminaries for teachers, guides, youth leaders and counselors, in Youth Aliyah institutions, in extension courses for Israeli and foreign teachers, in seminars for school administrators, and at the University of Tel Aviv. Even today, after her retirement, she continues to give lectures and extension courses and to teach at the Hebrew University’s School for Overseas Students.

II

Nehama has applied her special method in this variety of different frameworks. What better way to understand that method than by reading her own words:

The purpose of this lesson is not to increase material knowledge of the Torah, to provide a wealth of information, or to meet a reading quota. Its purpose is to teach a method of study, to encourage reflection and depth of thought, and to develop a sensitivity to the most delicate nuances and associations of the words of scripture. That goal can only be achieved by reading the text with the aid of great scholars, that is, by examining the commentaries, comparing them with each other and weighing their words against the text itself, while bearing in mind its wording and style, its context, and its structure. The ultimate aim is to make students fully aware of the great light which shines out of the Torah – Torah both written and oral, Torah in its legends and interpretations, and Torah in its most literal form, down to the last letter – so that they will cherish it and its Giver.⁵

3. M. Arend, “Scripture demands Study” (Heb.), *Bi-sedeh Hemed* 11 (1968), p. 30, n. 1. Let me add that, in so far as I was able to determine, to date Nehama has received, corrected and responded to over forty thousand letters.

4. N. Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit (Genesis): In the context of Ancient and Modern Jewish Bible Commentary* (Jerusalem, 1972); *Studies in Shemot (The Book of Exodus): Part I: Shemot – Yitro (Exodus 1-20, 23); Part II: Mishpatim – Pekudai (Exodus 21, 1-40, 38)* (Jerusalem, 1976); *Studies in Vayikra (Leviticus)* (Jerusalem, 1980); *Studies in Bamidbar (Numbers)* (Jerusalem, 1980); *Studies in Devarim (Deuteronomy)* (Jerusalem, 1980). The above volumes were all translated by A. Newman; these titles are also available in French and Spanish. In Hebrew: *‘Iyunim be-Sefer Bereshit* (Jerusalem, 1970³); *‘Iyunim Hadashim be-Sefer Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1973³); *‘Iyunim Hadashim be-Sefer Va-Yiqra* (Jerusalem, 1983).

5. N. Leibowitz, “A Lesson in Torah” (Heb.), in *Ma’ayanot* 4 (Jerusalem, 1954), 34.

Thus, in order to bring her students to cherish the Torah, Nehama Leibowitz created a method of study and teaching which is a “tree of life for those who hold fast to it.”

In his comprehensive attempt to analyse Nehama’s method, Arend⁶ points out three basic themes: (1) “*entertaining*” *actualization*, which “tempts” the student to take an interest in the subject matter by showing its relevance; (2) *rigorous adherence to the text*: This serves as a sort of boundary to theme (1); adherence to the text prevents the exegete from being carried away by the kind of “relevant” interpretations which might obscure its literal meaning; (3) *selected exegesis, with a preference for the traditional commentators*. Most of the exegesis presented by Leibowitz comes from Jewish commentaries through the ages: from the classical Rabbinic sages and writers of *midrash*, through the medieval exegetes – Rashi, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Nahmanides, Rashbam (R. Samuel ben Meir), Radak (R. David Kimhi), Sforno, Abarbanel, and R. Isaac Arama, (the author of ‘*Aqedat Yizhaq*) – down to later commentators, such as R. Jacob Zevi Mecklenburg, author of *Ha-Ketav v’ha-Kabbalah*, or R. Naphtali Zevi Judah Berlin of Volozhin, author of *He’emek Davar*. Nehama’s amazing breadth of knowledge in the field of Jewish exegesis, as well as her clear, logical analyses, contribute to a new understanding of both the biblical text and the commentary itself.

However, two of the characteristic themes mentioned above – actualization and the preference for traditional commentaries – are at times liable to lead one away from the pure and simple meaning of a text. Her relative disregard for the achievements of biblical criticism and her desire to captivate students may take Nehama away from the ideal of the literal meaning – the *peshat* – as formulated by Samuel David Luzzatto: “Let us aim to understand the real intention of the writers and let us not harbor any secret desire to find support in the Bible for beliefs or speculations which have other sources...”⁷ To reach the real meaning of the biblical text, one must undertake a thorough examination of the critical literature, as well as exhaustive – and, at times, exhausting – attention to philological detail. The goal of Leibowitz’ method is to create an appreciation of both Torah and of the traditional Jewish commentaries, and to restore Jewish exegesis to its former glory; to this end, Nehama chooses her passages carefully, rarely dealing with modern biblical criticism. And yet, it is precisely among the more religious that her method has been called into question. Some have expressed a concern for the respect due the exegetes, arguing that novices in the study of Torah should not be allowed to judge the commentaries of the greats – Rashi, Nahmanides, and so on. Some have taken an insular position and have protested the quoting of Christians, heretics, and even apostate Jews alongside the traditional Jewish commentators.

6. M. Arend, *op. cit.*, p. 34-35.

7. ShaDal (S.D. Luzzatto), *Perush ‘al Sefer Yesha’yahu* (Jerusalem, 1970²), introduction, p. x.

Paradoxically, Nehama's method has been, and continues to be, applauded by the very people who regret her relative disregard of general biblical scholarship. For them, the real significance of her method lies in its creation of a meeting point between traditional Jewish exegesis and the school of historical-philological research developed by Protestant scholars beginning in the late eighteenth century. Presenting both schools side by side, Leibowitz shows that such problems as duplications or even contradictions, which served as the starting points for historical criticism, are nothing new. Jewish exegesis had already taken note of these problems and had dealt with them in its own fashion. By setting out a variety of exegetical schools, Nehama brings traditional commentary out into the open, transforming it into a basic factor to be reckoned with by scholars whenever they wish to elucidate a biblical text. "If in Israel today, one cannot discuss biblical law, for example, without examining the traditional commentaries, this is in large measure due to Nehama Leibowitz. The importance of her contribution is twofold: Traditional exegesis has been awarded the status it objectively deserves, and a valuable dimension has thus been added to modern biblical scholarship. Now any scholar who is really after the truth must take serious note of the solutions proposed by traditional Jewish commentators. The uniqueness of the contribution made by Israeli biblical scholarship lies in part in this integration of various exegetical schools."⁸

Another cornerstone of Nehama's method which has elicited the approval of enlightened, critical scholars is her close reading of the text, reflecting the influence of the aesthetic approach of Buber and Rosenzweig to the Bible.⁹ Close reading involves an emphasis on linguistic cruxes in the text and a strict attention to its minutiae. It exposes structural forms, key phrases, or highly significant differences in wording; it questions lexicographical and grammatical oddities, and much more. Her faithfulness to the principle of close reading has made Nehama Leibowitz a pioneer in the literary-aesthetic approach to biblical interpretation. With this approach, she has shown the extent to which the literature of the Bible represents artistic creativity of unique distinction, well able to stand up to modern textual-aesthetic analysis.

Yet Nehama's tendency to seek out what is relevant has led to a selective coverage of texts. She is more likely to focus on passages which are interesting by virtue of their subject matter or the exegetical response they aroused. Because of her didactic

8. Y. Hoffman, "More than a Scholar, More than a Teacher" (Heb.), *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, Dec. 24, 1982.

9. See M.M. Buber, *Darko shel Miqra; 'Iyunim be-defusei signon ba-Tanakh* [*The Way of Scripture; Studies in Stylistic Forms in the Bible* (Heb.)]; cf. M. Weiss' introduction to that volume, "Be-sod siaḥ ha-Miqra," pp. 9-33; F. Rosenzweig, "Das Formgeheimnis der biblischen Erzählungen," in M. Buber & F. Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (Berlin, 1936), 239-261 [also published in his *Kleinere Schriften* (Berlin, 1937), 167-181], and the other essays in that collection.

leanings, she often shows a preference for passages with a moral message and, above all, she is interested in pure logical analysis. It is no wonder that all these considerations have prevented Nehama from producing a systematic commentary to the Torah. Auerbach already issued the warning in 1954, when he invited her to write a new commentary, saying, “The *gilyonot*, for all their good qualities, cannot take the place of the commentary we lack... Dr. Nehama Leibowitz can and must give us that commentary...” He called her to this task precisely because he believed that “the selection and understanding of interpretations is a fine art” and “her questions guide the reader and reveal her strength as a teacher.”¹⁰ However, it seems that her didactic nature and the need to stay in direct contact with her hundreds and thousands of students led Nehama to a compromise solution; she preferred to publish the *gilyonot* while, at the same time, continuing to train educators and to lecture to anyone who was ready and willing to learn Torah.¹¹

On one of the occasions when she set forth her method, Nehama said: “A scholar can have no honor greater than the knowledge that his students cherish the words of the Torah thanks to him.”¹² She was of course, referring to the exegetes drawn upon in her commentaries – but these words, certainly, apply to Nehama Leibowitz herself, for her students cherish the words of the Torah and the words of its interpreters, as well – thanks to her.

Nehama Leibowitz’s work has not escaped official notice. When the government wished to award the Israel Prize for Adult Education in 1956 to “a scholar or writer whose overall life’s work constitutes an exceptional contribution to progress in his/her field or to the advancement of Israeli culture,” the judges saw fit to select Nehama Leibowitz. They saw her work in the field of exegesis, which brings the Bible to thousands of readers from all walks of life and affiliations, in Israel and abroad, as “an educational innovation of enduring worth.” In their words, Nehama’s “own character as a teacher – her dedication, modesty, and integrity – may serve as a model to all.”¹³ In 1980, she received the Lieberman Prize for the Dissemination of Knowledge of Torah and, in 1982, the City of Tel Aviv awarded her the Bialik Prize in Judaica for her lifelong work in biblical exegesis.

In the last few years, Nehama has taken it upon herself to prepare a course devoted to Rashi’s commentary, under the auspices of the Open University. Here, she focuses on one exegete and his method, as she began to do in the article appended to her Hebrew book, *New Studies in the Book of Exodus*, entitled “Rashi’s use of

10. *Op. cit.* (above, note 12), p. 56-58.

11. One ought to mention that her publications include additional subjects; see: N. Leibowitz – M. Weiss, *Shi’urim be-pirkey Neḥamah u-Ge’ulah* [*Lessons in (Prophetic) Chapters of Comfort and Redemption* (Heb.)] (Jerusalem, 1958); *idem.*, *Leader’s Guide to the Book of Psalms* (New York, 1971).

12. N. Leibowitz, “On the Teaching of the Bible in the Upper Grades” (Heb.), *Hagut ba-Miqra* 4 (Tel-Aviv, 1984), pp. 161-162.

13. See the recommendation of the Committee of Judges on the granting of the Israel Prize in Education, 1956.

Midrash in his Commentary to the Torah,” which she concluded with the words: “The question of Rashi’s system of selecting one *midrash* among the many relating to a particular verse will be discussed elsewhere, if God ordains us for life.”¹⁴

We can only wish for Nehama — and for ourselves — that it indeed be thus ordained; may she continue in her work, and may we continue to reap the fruits of her labor.

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14. N. Leibowitz, *Iyunim Hadashim be-Sefer Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 524.