

# How to Read Jewish Texts

**Joel M. Hoffman, PhD**

<http://www.exc.com/JoelHoffman>

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Duke University, Durham, NC

*“αν θελης, αναγνωστικος ειναι, αναγιγνωσκει”*  
— Epictetus, *Discourses*. Bk. ii, ch. 18. (c. 100CE)

## 1 What Does it Mean?

### 2 Some Answers:

- (1) Science
- (2) Liturgy
- (3) Midrash
- (4) Religion
- (5) Art
- (6) Mysticism
- (7) Law
- (8) Etc.

### 3 Science

- (9) For example, *b'reshit*, בראשית: “It was in the beginning that....”

- (10) Similarly, *leivav*, as in *b'chol l'vav'cha* בכָּל לֵבָבְךָ: “with all your mind.”
- (11) “Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground.... Cain rose up against Abel and killed him.” (Genesis 4:8) Abel represents herding and Cain represents farming, and the killing represents the historically documented (Diamond 1999) ascendancy of farming over herding.
- (12) Noah’s ark. (Saggs 1991)
- (13) Pain in childbirth. (Sagan 1986)

## 4 Liturgy

- (14) Proof texts.
- (15) Selective quotation:
- (a) “Adonai! Adonai! A compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and truth, extending love to the thousandth generation, removing iniquity and transgression and sin, cleansing.” (Liturgy)
- (b) “Adonai! Adonai! A compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and truth, extending love to the thousandth generation, removing iniquity and transgression and sin, *absolutely not* cleansing, *visiting the transgressions of parents upon their children and grandchildren, to the third and fourth generations!*” (Exodus 34:7)
- (16) Hidden Meaning:
- (a) *Ein keloheinu*
- i. Ein keloheinu.... (“None...!”)  
Mi cheloheinu.... (“Who...?”)  
Nodeh leloheinu.... (“Let us give thanks...!”)
- ii. .... אין כאלהינו  
.... מי כאלהינו  
.... נודה לאלהינו

- (b) *L'cha Dodi* (Hoffman 2004b)
- i. L'cha dodi likrat kalah  
P'nei shabat n'kab'lah
  - ii. לכה דודי לקרת כלה  
פני שבת נקבלה
  - iii. Unification of God's male and female parts, that is, *yud-heh* with *vav-heh* to form *yud-heh-vav-heh*. That's the marriage of Shabbat.
  - iv. Go, my lover, toward the bride.  
Let us welcome Shabbat.
  - v. Go forth my love to meet the bride  
Shabbat's reception has arrived. (Hoffman 2004b)
  - vi. There are *yud-heh* (15) Hebrew letters in the first line, and *vav-heh* (11) Hebrew letters in the second line.

## 5 Midrash

- (17) Genesis 48:16: "...may the angel who saves me [Jacob] from all evil, bless these boys. May my name and the name of my ancestors Abraham and Isaac be known through them. And may they increase greatly on the earth." (....יִרְבּוּ לְרַב...)
- (18) But first, a quick Hebrew lesson:
- (a) *dag* (דג) means "fish."
  - (b) *dagah* (דגה) means "increase."
  - (c) The letter *heh* (ה) in Hebrew drops out in some verb forms.
- (19) Genesis Rabba: What fish? They live in water and when a single drop of water falls from above, they accept it thirstily as though they've never tasted water before. So too are Israel who live in water in Torah and when they hear a new bit of Torah they accept it thirstily as though they've never heard Torah before.

[...]The one whose name is like the name of a fish will bring them into the the Land [of Israel.] "...Nun, his [Ephraim's] son, and Joshua, his [Nun's] son" (I Chronicles 7:27)

- (20) And now, a lesson in Aramaic: *Nun* (נון) means "fish."
- (21) Leviticus 7: "11. This is the law of the peace-offering sacrifice to be offered to Adonai. 12. If it should be offered as a thanksgiving offering...." (וּזֹאת תּוֹרַת זִבְחַת הַשְּׁלָמִים....")
- (22) Leviticus Rabba:<sup>1</sup> So great is peace that all of the blessings are included in it. [...] So great is peace that all of the commandments are written in it. [...] When it says, "seek peace and pursue it"— Seek peace where you live, and pursue it in other places. [...] So great is peace that it is in all journeys. [...] So great is peace that Scripture speaks in fabrication in the Torah to impose peace between Abraham and Sarah. [...] So great is peace that Scripture speaks in fabrication in the Prophets to impose peace between between a man and his wife. So great is peace, that even on high, where there is no jealousy or hatred or competition or fighting or rivalry or the evil eye, they need peace — for it says, "[God] makes peace on high" (Job 25:2) — down below where we have all of these we need peace even more so. So great is peace that Scripture speaks in fabrication in the Torah to impose peace between Joesph and his brothers. [...] So great is peace that even in time of war we must start with peace — for it says, "When you approach a city etc." [...] So great is peace that the Holy One of Blessing's very name is "peace." So great is peace that the Great Name written in holiness can be erased with water to impose peace between a man and his wife. So great is peace that when the Holy One of Blessing created his world he created peace between those on high and those down below, on the first day creating on high and down below — for it says, "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth" — on the second day, on high and down below [...] On the sixth day, God started to create a human, and He said, if I create him from on high then those

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<sup>1</sup>From Hoffman 2006.

on high will be greater than those down below by one creation, and if I create him from down below, then those down below will be greater by one creation, so what should I do? He created him from on high and from down below — for it says, “Adonai, God, created Man of dust from the earth” (down below) and “He blew the breath of life into his nose” (from on high). [...] So great is peace that every blessing and grace and favor that the Holy One of Blessing bestows on Israel is signed with peace: The Shema ends with “who spreads a shelter of peace”; the Amida, with “the one who makes peace”; the Priestly Blessing, with “grant you peace.” I have examples not only from prayers, but also from sacrifices.... I have examples not only from this world but from the world to come — “Like a river I will extend peace to her [to Zion, in the days to come -JMH]” (Isaiah 66:12). So great is peace that when the Anointed King [the Messiah -JMH] comes, he opens with nothing other than peace — for it says, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the legs of the herald, proclaiming peace [heralding goodness and proclaiming salvation].” (Isaiah 52:7).

## 6 Pardes

(23) Four kabbalistic levels of meaning:

- (a) Plain (פשוט).
- (b) Reminder (רמז).
- (c) Derived (שדרש).
- (d) Secret (סוד).

(24) Paradise. (Even though *pardes* means “orchard.”)

## 7 Law

(25) Numbers 35, concerning murder and manslaughter:

- (a) Numbers 35:20: "If [someone] pushes [someone else] in hatred or throws something on purpose and death results [it is murder.]"
  - (b) Numbers 35:25: "If [someone] pushes [someone else] with no malice, or throws something by accident [...] the assembly shall judge [if it is murder or manslaughter.]"
  - (c) Numbers 35:30: One witness is insufficient to support a death sentence.
  - (d) Numbers 35:33: "Do not pollute the land in which you live. The blood [of the killed] pollutes the land."
- (26) Exodus 21:23–24:
- (a) "In the case of damage, you must offer a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot."
  - (b) What if a blind man pokes out your eyes?
  - (c) Talmud (Baba Kamma, 83b–84a): An "eye for an eye" means monetary damage.
  - (d) Rashi agrees with the Talmud.

## 8 Conclusion & Moving On

- (27) Review
- (28) Why do we do this?
- (29) Make the text your own.

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