

# AVIVAH ZORNBERG

by SARAH BRONSON



Writing a commentary on the Torah is not for the faint of heart. The undertaking necessitates breadth and depth of knowledge in the Bible, Talmud, *midrash* and almost a thousand years of commentary on those texts. And yet, the study and creation of midrash – the interpretation of biblical texts, the search for meaning in enigmatic verses and stories, the quest to “figure out what God really meant” – has been the essence of Torah study for thousands of years.

To tease new meanings and discover hidden nuances in the Torah is a significant accomplishment. In the case of Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, it is noteworthy on several additional levels: she began her career not as a Torah teacher but as a scholar of English literature; she has developed a unique technique for interpreting the Torah, weaving together ideas from secular philosophy, psychology and literature with traditional Jewish texts; she is the product of an ultra-

Orthodox seminary where the idea of women earning PhD's, and of using ideas from the secular world to shed light on the Torah, is considered unusual at best and taboo at worst; and her work has been published by a general-audience publisher and is read by Christians and secular philosophers as well as Jews.

In person, Zornberg, in her mid-sixties, is a modestly dressed, attractive woman with a calming presence. Her voice is soft, and lilts slightly with a Scottish accent. In conversation, as in her lectures, one listens closely because she speaks quietly; however, there is nothing retiring about her. She is assured and articulate, and the musicality of her speech does not veil the underlying assertiveness.

Zornberg is internationally known as a gifted interpreter and teacher of the weekly Torah portion. For more than two decades, she has taught the weekly portion to thousands of students at women's and coeducational institutions in Jerusalem including Matan, Pardes, Midreshet Lindenbaum, the Jerusalem College for Adults at the Orthodox Union's Israel Center, and at the Kol Rina Synagogue in central Jerusalem. Her lectures regularly draw hundreds of men and women. Bill Moyers chose her to be one of a handful of scholars interviewed in his 1995 PBS series on Genesis.

In describing her teaching style, Zornberg has written that her approach is "to share my own personal struggles for meaning, to discover the ways in which life and text inform each other. My audiences...[are] in the position of 'eavesdropping' on my meditations, on the literary and philosophical resonances emerging from these texts...my way of reading these sources...is a kind of *listening* for the meta-messages in the text."

Her first book, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (Jewish Publication Society, 1995; Doubleday, 1996), won the 1995 Jewish Book Award for nonfiction. Her second book, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (Doubleday, 2001), deepened her reputation as one of Orthodoxy's great contemporary biblical commentators.

What makes Zornberg's work unique is the range of disciplines and rigorous application of knowledge she brings to bear on

the Judaic texts. Zornberg fuses her mastery of literature and other secular studies, particularly philosophy and psychoanalysis, with her passion for Judaic texts. An instructor of English Literature at the Hebrew University in the early 1970s, Zornberg is just as likely to quote Rousseau as the Rambam, and finds as much inspiration in Thomas Mann as in the Malbim.

“Avivah is a fantastic lecturer,” says David Bernstein, dean of the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, and both a former student and an employer of Zornberg’s. “She has an extremely broad scope of both Torah and general knowledge. She brings together worlds, which is exciting for listeners. Her training as a PhD in English literature, her command of the Torah, her modern and post-modern analytical tools, create a full and fresh picture of the text. Her approach is rooted in tradition but synthesizes all these fields, and makes the biblical text come alive. I don’t think there is anyone else teaching *parsha* [the weekly Torah portion] in the English language who is getting as many people to hear them as she is.”

At a lecture at the Pardes Institute, Zornberg discussed the story in Numbers, chapter 27, in which the daughters of Tzelafchad approach Moses and ask why their family should lose its apportioned share of the Land of Israel just because their father had no sons. Moses turns the question to God, who declares that the women are correct, and then proceeds to outline the Jewish laws of inheritance. “Why,” Zornberg asked the class, “does the Bible present these laws in the context of a story, rather than simply state the laws outright? What have we to learn from this story of Tzelafchad’s five daughters that is so important that the Torah devotes precious space to recounting it?”

Zornberg paused as the students – including several attending the class via two-way satellite video from Boston’s Hebrew College – took notes or considered the question. Soon, a few students offered suggestions; Zornberg acknowledged their theories as valid before going on to explain her own in a one-hour lecture.

During the class, Zornberg quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson at length, explaining his ideas about individual autonomy and the

process through which a person actualizes his or her humanity. The story of Tzelaḥchad's daughters was soon transformed into a statement about the importance placed on the individual, the way the Torah sees itself as an organic text, and the ideal, here implied by God, that ideas should first come from the people and if an idea is true, He will countersign it. Far from being a story about inheritance laws, Zornberg said, the anecdote is a statement of God's pleasure in the people, in our ability to interpret and even anticipate His will.

Reading the Torah through the lens of Emerson is not, in itself, a unique approach; many Orthodox rabbis and other teachers will "hook" their audience into a Torah discussion by first quoting a secular source and then showing that the Torah expressed the same idea centuries earlier. But Zornberg does not use secular sources to provide more weight to the Torah; rather, she uses all the texts in her vast memory store as equal players in what she calls the "force field" of interpretation.

"I used to do the fairly conventional thing," she remembers of her beginning days as a Bible lecturer in the early 1980s. "I'd say, 'here is an idea,' and then illustrate it [with a text] from the secular world. And then I began to feel that what I really wanted to do was to weave a tapestry, in which here would be Emerson, and here would be the Sfat Emet [late nineteenth-century Gerer Rebbe], and here would be Rashi [eleventh-century biblical commentator] – and then you can see how one reacts on the other. There is a force field in it that I like, rather than staying within the central experience [of the Torah text] and maybe peeping out every now and then to see what else is going on in the [secular] world."

The traditional *midrashim* – which Zornberg uses in her analysis of the Torah – are commonly taught in Jewish day schools, but Zornberg's approach teases out new layers of meaning that are surprising in their direction and depth.

For example, many are familiar with an ancient legend about Abraham. According to the story, Abraham's father, Terach, owned a shop in which he sold idols. Realizing that a higher power must have created the universe, Abraham smashed the idols, leading his father

to turn Abraham over to the king, Nimrod, for punishment. Nimrod and Terach arranged to burn Abraham to death in a furnace, but Abraham miraculously survived the three-day burning unscathed.

Zornberg points out that the simplest explanation for the popularity of this story is that it establishes Abraham's credentials as the progenitor of the Jewish people. But in lectures about the *Akeidah* – the Binding of Isaac – Zornberg says this early event in Abraham's life sheds light on his psychological profile, and helps explain why he was willing to sacrifice his son.

"The Chasidim say that Abraham was confused by God's instructions, and wondered what God had really meant for him to do," she says. "Rashi says that God clarifies to Abraham, when they reach the mountaintop, that He had said to 'raise' Isaac, not to kill him. We must be alive to the implications of this statement. God is saying to Abraham 'you misunderstood me.' But a human being is not asked to consider sacrificing his son, only to have it trivialized by God later."

By applying ideas from psychoanalysis to the furnace story, we can understand how Abraham experienced the mission, she says. "The fact that Abraham's father condemned him to die in a furnace is a repressed level of experience. There was no other way Abraham could have understood God's instructions, given who he was and what he'd gone through. Of course he would hear it [as instructions to kill Isaac]."

The culmination of the Binding, the fact that Abraham "is developed enough to hear the angel calling, stopping him," means that Abraham is now at the point that he can ascribe a different meaning to God's mission, to understand that 'to raise him' means to bring Isaac to the mountain, but that the killing is unnecessary. "He is able to interpret the prophecy now because he is in a different place [psychologically]. This is a story of what Abraham is capable of understanding," she says, adding that by interpreting the story this way, it becomes relatable to anyone who feels that he or she has been "sacrificed by their parents," literally or metaphorically. The Akeidah is, in one sense, the story of the abused child becoming an abuser, and redeeming himself from his trauma just in time to avoid repeating it.

In her approach to the Bible, Zornberg is “trying to make something which hopefully remains authentic, but which touches people, which touches me and other people where they really live, which is often a conflicted place, where there are a number of things going on. [My students] feel that something is speaking to that [conflicted place], rather than looking upwards and trying to simplify, simplify, simplify.

“I don’t know if simplifying appeals to me so much,” she says. “I like complexifying.”

Indeed, most everything in Zornberg’s religious outlook and scholarly work is complex, even her description of her ideal student. “I like someone who is curious and creative and seeking, who is clearly an individual and not a type, who is struggling in a unique way,” she says. “People who seem to have found too many answers sort of lose me. I like to have young people who are bubbling and still a little bit troubled. I like people who are a little anguished.”

Is Zornberg anguished? “Yes,” she says, “about death, about bad things happening to righteous people, about the Holocaust. The inner burdens that people have to bear. What it means to be a person. Why is that so hard for so many people? But I’m happy too. I also have great joy and great love.”

Teaching is among the highest of Zornberg’s great loves, after her husband and three adult children (playing the piano is also on her list of joys). Preparing lectures – facing a biblical text and sculpting something new and unique to say, dwelling in the force fields between every book and every poem she has ever read – is both frightening and exhilarating.

Her favorite verse is Psalms 119:92, in which King David says of the Torah, “If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.” Zornberg notes that the Hebrew word “*sha’a’shuah*,” normally translated as “delight,” literally means “play-thing.” The constellation of ideas she has encountered and the questions presented by the Torah’s choices of words is her playground.

What is it that draws her to analyze, interpret and reinterpret the same texts year after year? “It’s the material, the opportunity to

express ideas and feelings,” she says. “It’s a strange mixture of the didactic and the creative.” Forming her lectures into books affords another level of pleasure, since writing allows for more precision and control in articulation, and results in “something you can actually hold onto afterward. In teaching, everything disappears. You hope something has lodged in someone’s soul.”

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Avivah Gottlieb was born in 1944 and grew up in Glasgow, Scotland. Her father, Rabbi Dr. Wolf Gottlieb, was the head of the Jewish Court there and Zornberg’s first and most influential Torah teacher. She attended local secular schools and, after classes, studied Jewish texts with her father.

Studying with her father “was an enviable experience,” she recalls, “in the sense of the connection with a world of loving God, loving Torah, loving the Jewish people, loving me. It was an experience of Torah and of a world that is hard to duplicate.”

As a child in a small Galician village, Rabbi Gottlieb had shown such promise in Torah studies that his parents, feeling that his potential outstripped their abilities to teach him, sent him to live with his scholarly grandfather in a larger town within Galicia. Eventually Zornberg’s father moved to Vienna where he received a doctorate and several rabbinical ordinations. Interested in modern scholarship as well as Jewish studies, Rabbi Gottlieb was “alert and curious and interested in life,” Zornberg says. “His mind was open to all kinds of things, and it came across in his way of teaching. There was an openness, not a rigidity, which sat strangely well with his quite serious religiousness. He was a pious person. He had lots of wonderful stories about the world he came from, the Chasidic world.”

Even more important than the hours Zornberg spent with her father learning to read Rashi or interpret a passage of Talmud were “the emotional things,” she says, “like memories of hearing him chant the words as he studied Talmud. There is something very moving about that melody, something romantic. There is a feeling of a vanished world.”

At seventeen, Zornberg left Glasgow for the internationally renowned women's seminary in Gateshead, England. Religiously, she was "on fire, very passionate," she says, in the way that many older teenage girls are fervently spiritual. Her path led her to Cambridge University, where she earned a PhD in English literature. She immigrated to Israel in 1969, began teaching English literature at the Hebrew University, and in 1975 married Eric Zornberg, a physicist from the U.S. with a PhD who decided, upon his immigration to Israel, that he preferred to work with his hands; he has a successful career fixing washing machines and dryers, "to the envy of some of his academic friends," Zornberg notes, smiling.

It was in Israel that she encountered one of her role models, Tamar Ross, a professor of Jewish philosophy at Bar-Ilan University and the mother of seven children, who is just six years older than Zornberg. "When I was at that tentative age, in my early twenties, without any idea what I'd do in the world, she was fascinating," Zornberg says of Ross. "She came from a privileged Orthodox intellectual background. There was a quality that she is who she is and she has got this great mind."

Zornberg was impressed by Ross's "quite daring, quite radical, but well-documented theories about feminism and about many other things. She can't do anything without being both original and extremely thorough. She's very unusual, and very religious, of a type that when I was younger was very important to me."

Zornberg and Ross remain in touch. Ross says of Zornberg, "We were both educated against the stream. My father was a rabbi, her father was a *dayan* [judge in Jewish courts]. Both fathers gave us an intensive Jewish education that was far more ambitious than the norm in those days. And our religious attachments were strong, despite the fact that we were both exposed to a very good secular education. I think what interested her in me was the way I combined the two. To see people who were able to be intellectually honest and nevertheless fervently committed to Jewish tradition was very liberating for her."

Ross was also instrumental in encouraging Zornberg to teach



Torah. In the late 1970s, Zornberg left the Hebrew University, where her lack of published work was threatening her career. “It was publish or perish, and I perished,” Zornberg says, and then jokes: “It turned out to be a *tchiyat hameitim* [resurrection of the dead].”

At Ross’s urging, Zornberg began teaching at Midreshet Lindenbaum, an Orthodox institution for young women. Over time she was invited to teach Torah at an ever-growing roster of schools, and slowly developed her now-renowned technique of biblical interpretation.

“Dr. Zornberg is a very creative and innovative Torah scholar,” says Malke Bina, educational director of the Matan Women’s Institute for Torah Studies. “She has created a new, exciting, inspirational and introspective way to learn Torah. If you say that learning can be three-dimensional, I’d say she is ten-dimensional.”

The weekly class lectures led to Zornberg’s first two books, in which each chapter corresponds to a weekly Torah portion. Like her classes, the books search the verses and themes of the Torah not to find answers, but to find new questions, focusing heavily on the psychological and existential conflicts in biblical characters and texts.

Both books have earned critical acclaim. In a 2001 *Washington Post* review of *The Particulars of Rapture*, reporter and Middle East expert Paul William Roberts wrote:

[the book] is quite simply a masterpiece. I know of no other book that presents the enormous subtleties and complexities of rabbinic Biblical interpretation with such skill, intelligence, literary flair and sheer elegance of style. Zornberg’s dazzlingly eclectic erudition would be oppressive in the hands of a lesser writer, but such is the beauty and succinctness of her writing that her references to Thomas Mann, Wordsworth, Isaiah Berlin, Wallace Stevens, Susan Sontag, and Freud, to name but a few, seem more like the illuminated letters in medieval manuscripts, heightening both beauty and meaning... Her purpose here, however, is not so much to explain the midrashic technique...as to show that technique in action.

Though Zornberg accepts praise of her work with equanimity, she denies that her books are revolutionary. “I just try to convey my excitement about what I’m noticing,” she says. “I think what is there, hidden or not-so-hidden in the text is so interesting and so moving, and it addresses people where they really live. And if people haven’t noticed it before, well, it always happens, history moves on; someone has to be the first to point out that there is psychoanalytic understandings in the sages, the midrash, and Chasidism. It is very helpful to think a little differently from the way people have thought up until now. In a way, it seems so obvious to me that I do not feel daring about it.”

A common observation, especially in Jewish media reviews of her books, is that Zornberg is only the second Orthodox woman after Nechama Leibowitz to publish a Torah commentary. However, being female has never stood in the way of her teaching or lecturing. If there have been criticisms of her writing Torah interpretations as a woman, she has never heard them herself, she says. The modern Orthodox community has embraced her, and reaction from the ultra-Orthodox world ranges from praise to avoidance.

Perhaps this acceptance is because, although Zornberg gives significant weight to secular ideas, she never addresses the questions of whether the Torah is true or not, who wrote it, or why she chooses to observe Orthodox Jewish law. Ross notes that Zornberg’s “views in between the lines are more sophisticated than the ordinary believer, so she can accommodate historical analysis and literary criticism, and it doesn’t touch her religious approach to the text. She is not bound to a fundamentalist view about how the Torah developed. These topics are not relevant for her. That is what makes her capable of speaking to all audiences.”

Looking forward, Zornberg is content to continue teaching, writing, and interpreting. Her next book, about communication and the unconscious in the Torah narrative, is forthcoming from Schocken Books.

“It releases something in me,” she says of her studies and her teaching, “almost like poetry. A feeling of creating something

beautiful which takes its energy from what I sense in the text. When I'm teaching, when I'm writing, it's not my whole self, but it is the best part of me."