The interest in Project TABS - TheTorah.com has been widespread across many communities, but the extensive interest in the Orthodox community may seem surprising for some, and likely would not have been the case a decade ago. In this essay, Prof. Chaim Waxman, a prominent scholar of Jewish sociology, offers an analysis of why the approach taken by TABS has found such a large audience among the Orthodox at this time.

Why Now?:

Toward a Sociology of Knowledge Analysis of TheTorah.com

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The field of sociology of knowledge entails, in part, the study of the relationship between ideas and their avenues of expression and the social context within which they emerge and develop.¹ This paper is a first attempt at a sociology of knowledge analysis of TheTorah.com.

The emergence of the site TheTorah.com is unique in a number of respects. My focus is on its substantive uniqueness. It is a forum for analyses of the Torah within the context of modern academic scholarship, and most of the contributors are religiously observant, including a high percentage who identify as Orthodox. The heterogeneity and openness manifested on the forum’s site is a novelty, especially in the West, which is characterized by denominationalism and boundaries erected to express and maintain the identity of each denomination. The non-denominational character of Israeli society ironically allows for greater tolerance, and there are several forums there which give expression to a variety of perspectives on Jewish theological and religious questions.

Note: This article was sparked by conversations I had with Herzl Hefter and Marc Brettler. As soon as I raised the idea as a possibility, Marc was very enthusiastic and encouraging. I also acknowledge the encouragement and assistance of Yehuda Jerome Gellman, Yitzhak Gottlieb, and Dani Waxman.

Perhaps the most popular of these is the “Shabbat” literary supplement to the newspaper, “Makor Rishon.” From a sociology of knowledge perspective, then, the question I wish to explore is, “Why now?” Given the denominational divides, what led to the birth of TheTorah.com at this particular time? The question cannot be answered exhaustively here; for now, some of the major factors will be indicated and discussed.

As I see it, the emergence of TheTorah.com is an outgrowth of a series of developments in American Jewry in general and Orthodox Jewry in particular, as well as developments within the dati (religious) communities in Israel.

**Higher education**
The second half of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of a generation of college-educated Orthodox Jews who studied in yeshivot. In my study of Jewish baby boomers, based on the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), I found that more than 75 percent of those who had nine to twelve years of day school education had at least a bachelor's degree. For 38 percent, a bachelor’s was the highest degree obtained; for 20 percent, a master’s was; and for another 20 percent, it was a Ph.D., M.D., Law, or other professional degree. Among those with thirteen to sixteen years of day school education, more than 83 percent have a bachelor's degree. Although these figures relate to all baby boomers with nine or more years of day school education and some of them may not be Orthodox, it is fair to assume that, at least for those with 12 or more years of day school education, the overwhelming majority are Orthodox. Data from the 2001 NJPS indicate that 66 percent of Orthodox Jews up to the age of 50 had at least a bachelor’s degree. The figures from the 2013 Pew survey seem to be a bit lower; it found that among Orthodox Jews, only 39% report having graduated from college.

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2 Makor Rishon is an Israeli newspaper with an overt Israeli-nationalist bent. It is not formally a Religious Zionist publication but the overwhelming majority of its staff and readership probably is. Its expanded Friday edition contains a variety of magazines and supplements. The literary supplement, “Shabbat,” includes, among others, essays, interviews and book reviews on Jewish philosophy, history, society, and culture.


4 I thank Uzi Rebhun for this information.
However, among Modern Orthodox Jews the percentages are considerably higher than that, 65%, as compared to 25% among “Ultra-Orthodox Jews.”

The development of Jewish Studies on college and university campuses
The Association for Jewish Studies (AJS) was founded in 1969, and by 2000, had about 1,400 members. In 2011, it had 1,881 members. Its annual conferences have likewise grown significantly over the years. Between 1996 and 2010, the number of sessions has more than doubled. In 2000, it was estimated that there were between 800 and 1,000 positions in Jewish Studies, approximately 150 endowed chairs, and around 600 courses in Jewish Studies in American colleges and universities. By 2011, there were more than 230 endowed chairs. Indications are that, despite a broad decline in job opportunities in the liberal arts, Jewish Studies has remained relatively stable.

Orthodox scholars play prominent roles in the field. For example, intuition and data suggest that the Orthodox are at least proportionately represented among the membership of the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS). I did an informal survey among more than a half-dozen colleagues who are active in the AJS, in which I asked them for their guesstimate as to the percentage of Orthodox in AJS. The range was between 10-25 percent, with most perceiving it to be 15 percent or higher. A 2008 membership survey of AJS found that 21.3 percent identified as Orthodox. In Israel, the percentage of dati’im (“religious”) in Jewish Studies is apparently even higher. As David Berger suggests, “a disproportionately large percentage of students in departments of Jewish Studies in Israel come from the religious sector.”

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7 Rona Sheramy, “From the Executive Director,” AJS Perspectives, Fall 2010, p.4.
9 Rona Sheramy, “From the Executive Director,” AJS Perspectives, Spring 2011, pp. 4, 56.
The “Year in Israel” program
A significant percentage of graduates of American modern Orthodox yeshiva high schools spend a year or more in Israeli yeshivot and midrashot, and this has had significant impact on American Judaism in general and American Orthodoxy in particular. One important result, in terms of the question at hand, of the Year-in-Israel experience is that in the yeshivot and midrashot in which they study, many of the Americans are, often for the first time, introduced to very new (for them) modes of Jewish thought. I have in mind especially the study of Hasidic thought, Kabbalah, and entirely new ways of learning Tanakh. The “limudei kodesh” staff members in the American yeshivot in which they studied were, until recently, products of American yeshivot in which the Litvish-Mitnagdish approach not only to learning Talmud but to “Yiddishkeit,” Judaism as a whole, was dominant. That approach emphasizes clear definitions of proper behavior and thought. Moreover, as Haym Soloveitchik has incisively analyzed, there has been an increasing authority of texts which define proper behavior and which decreasingly leave room for variation and, I would argue, individuality in religious behavior. Nor does that approach limit itself to behavior. There have also been efforts to ban works, such books as by Rabbis Nathan Kamenetsky and Natan Slifkin, which contained ideas that do not conform with what some in the charedi-yeshiva world consider proper. Although this type of censorship is not at all characteristic of modern Orthodox yeshivot, there have been efforts at mind control even there.

Some graduates of those American yeshivot go to Israel and are exposed to such “radical” notions such as: the value of hitbodedut, praying in isolation rather than in a minyan, (a quorum); not being concerned with the proper times for reciting the Shema and Amidah (following Reb Yaakov Yitzchak Horovitz-Hoce of Lublin); the notion of avera lishema, a sin for good intentions (following Reb Zadok of Lublin, following Reb Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbetz-Mei Hashiloach); expressions of what to some appear

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to be manifestations of determinism, as opposed to the notion of free will which is primary for Halakha;\textsuperscript{16} a series of Hasidic writings which view the 9\textsuperscript{th} of Av as joyous; among many others.\textsuperscript{17}

Many are also exposed to the writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook. In addition to his religious, mystical Zionist ideas, he expressed many other ideas that are antithetical to standard Litvish yeshiva thinking. For example, in contrast to the tradition of denigrating the arts, Rav Kook wrote that, “Literature, painting and sculpture aim to actualize all the spiritual concepts impressed deep in the human soul.”\textsuperscript{18} Rav Kook looked very favorably on the renewal of the Hebrew language by Eliezer Ben Yehuda and, to the consternation of \textit{charedim}, maintained fairly good relations with him. Rav Kook also wanted to translate Kabbalah into modern Hebrew.\textsuperscript{19} Most significantly, within the context of this article, he had a relatively lenient attitude toward skeptics concerning the principle of \textit{Torah min Haschamayim}, “Torah from Heaven.”\textsuperscript{20}

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\textsuperscript{16} See among others, Shaul Magid, \textit{Hasidism on the Margin}, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), p. 120. For a different interpretation, see Herzl Helfter, ““In God’s Hands”: The Religious Phenomenology of R. Mordechai Yosef of Izba,” \textit{Tradition}46:1, Spring 2013, pp. 43-65.

\textsuperscript{17} Yehuda Gellman also points to the Hasidic penchant to remove the text from its historical context and apply it ahistorically. As he puts it,

\begin{quote}
In the first Hasidic book ever published, R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye laid down a principle, attributed to Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov his teacher and founder of Hasidism, which was followed in the coming generations of Hasidism. The principle, let’s call it “The Principle of Universal Applicability,” states that the Torah is eternal, and \textit{therefore} must have application to every person in every age. The idea is not that people are to take the literal/historical content and see how \textit{that} might be relevant to their lives. For R. Yakov Yosef this means that the linguistic meaning, the \textit{pshat}, itself varies from one period of time to another. The eternity of the Torah involves the fact that the Torah can be read differently for every generation for all time to come. The Torah is eternally variable. While the Torah has text-immutability it has mutability of linguistic content.
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\textsuperscript{19} Avinoam Rosenak, \textit{Rabbi A. I. Kook [Hebrew]} (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2006), pp. 52-53.

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New approaches in the study of Tanakh

Tanakh was rarely studied in the Lithuanian yeshiva world and, when it was, the study was via a limited number of exegetes, most notably, Rashi.21 The roots of the neglect of Tanakh study may be Talmudic, and based on an assertion in Tractate Kidushin 30a, “To what extent is a man obligated to teach his son Torah? — Rav Yehudah said in the name of Shmuel, “for example, Zevulun, the son of Dan, whose grandfather taught him Mikra, Mishnah, and Talmud, halakhot and agadot.”22 Rashi, in interpreting the question, states: “’Torah’ – but not Nevi’im and Ketuvim.” Although many disagreed,23 this appears to have influenced and/or reflected an attitude, especially in the Ashkenazi world, that Tanakh study was not important.24

Subsequently, the study of Tanakh even came to be seen as dangerous. A contemporary work by Rabbi Moshe Shternbuch, a highly regarded authority in the charedi world, and one of the heads of the beit din (rabbinic court) of the Eda Haharedit, a prominent charedi organization in Jerusalem, and the rabbi of the Gr”a shul in Jerusalem’s Har Nof neighborhood, expresses this very concern. In his multi-volume responsa work, the question is posed as to whether one should teach Tanakh in primary school (cheder) before teaching Talmud. Shternbuch’s response is that it has not been the custom to teach Tanakh then because Tanakh in its straightforward interpretation – he uses the term “peshuto shel mikra” – may anthropomorphize God and lead to other heresies. He further warns of contemporary heretics (“Apikorsim”) who study Tanakh with the sole objective of demonstrating that people sinned even in biblical times and, thus,

21 For a historical analysis see Marc Zvi Brettler and Edward Breuer, “Jewish Readings of the Bible,” in The New Cambridge History of the Bible: From 1750 to the Present, Vol. 4 (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). A rare recent exception was Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, the “protagonist” of the aforementioned banned work, Making of a Godol, who not only studied Tanakh but also wrote unique commentaries which are now being prepared for publication.

22 Rabbi Yoel Sirkis, in his commentary of the Shulhan Arukh, claims that Rashi was actually the exception and that most maintained that the father’s obligation included the teach of Neviim and Ketuvim.

23 Rabbeinu Tam, one of the major Tosafists, went even further than his grandfather, Rashi, and was of the opinion that one can fulfill one’s obligation of learning Torah as well as Neviim and Ketuvim by learning Talmud, because they are all included there (Tractate Kidushin 30a). Although his opinion was the exception, rather than the rule, it may have influenced the trend. It may also be one of the reasons that, though men did not generally study Tanakh, women, who did not study Talmud, did study Tanakh and typically knew it better than men.
minimizing contemporary sinfulness. Since we cannot understand the true meaning in Tanakh, he claims it is best to refrain from teaching it.25

Until relatively recently, when Tanakh was taught in Orthodox schools, it was taught within the context of a highly literal interpretation of the doctrine of Torah min HaShamayim, according to which the Torah as we have it is the exactly the same Torah which was conveyed by God to Moshe at Sinai, who then wrote it completely and precisely. Moreover, it was emphasized that the text cannot be taken literally. Rather, the parshanut relied heavily on derash. Orthodox Jewish education also emphasized the great gap between contemporary humans and biblical figures, especially those portrayed heroically who were assumed to be on such a high spiritual level, they were actually free of human weaknesses and, especially, sin. For example, the statement by R. Shmuel bar Nahmani in the name of R. Yohanan, “Whoever says that [King] David sinned is mistaken,”26 was taken as authoritative, the final word.27

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed significant changes in approaches to parshanut. In a broad analysis of trends with respect to the study of peshat parshanut (exegesis) in medieval northern France, Sara Japhet suggests that the waning of the field of the scientific study of Judaism (Wissenschaft des Judentums) resulted in a decline in the study of medieval peshat parshanut because the works of those exegetes were not widely known and available to either specialists in Jewish Studies or the wider public interested in parshanut.28 Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel changed that. Secular Zionism looked to Tanakh as the basis for the old-new Hebrew culture

26 Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 56a.
and rootedness in Eretz Israel, thus justifying the return to Israel and the establishment of Jewish sovereignty there.29 David Ben-Gurion frequently quoted Tanakh to foreign dignitaries, as when, in his testimony to the Peel Commission, the British Royal Commission sent to Palestine in 1936 to examine the causes of the violence and offer policy recommendations, he asserted, “Our Mandate is the Bible.” As Anita Shapira indicates, Tanakh became increasingly central both to Ben Gurion’s perspectives and to his actions.30

**Tanakh in Israeli culture**

As a result of Ben Gurion’s commitments and actions, Tanakh came to play a significant role in Israeli culture. Moreover, the approach to it was unquestionably one of *peshat* rather than *derash*. Over time, however, the lofty status of Tanakh in Israeli culture apparently declined. At Hebrew University, internal political and ideological disagreements over the character of department and the approach in the field of Bible Studies stalled the establishment of the *Chug leMikra* (Scripture department) 15 years, 1925-40,31 and several years after Israel’s independence, the department was characterized by detached research and biblical criticism. At the same time, secular Zionism’s dilution of the religious content and character of Tanakh led to its being viewed as an irrelevant, archaic document.32 By the end of the twentieth century, interest in the Bible in the Israeli public seems to have declined sharply.33

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33 There is some disagreement as to if, when, and why the decline. In addition to the reasons cited by Japhet and Simon, Anita Shapira argues that the decline was largely the result of “appropriation of the Bible” by religious nationalism (Anita Shapira, “The Bible and Israeli Identity,” *AJS Review* 28:1, 2004, pp. 11-42; that article in Hebrew is the opening chapter in a book edited by Shapira, *Hatanakh vehehazehut halsraelit* [Jerusalem: Magnes, 2005]). Curiously, in her article on Ben Gurion and Tanakh, Shapira implies
When Ben-Gurion was Prime Minister, he established a Tanakh circle ("Chug haTanakh") which met regularly in his offices. It later came under aegis of the President of Israel, as the Tanakh Circle of the President’s Residence but ultimately met only very sporadically. There have been several efforts to revive it but thus far has been very successful. Ben-Gurion also established the annual National Bible Contest, Chidon HaTanakh, which was part of the national rituals on Yom Ha’atzmaut. Subsequently, and especially not very long after the Six-Day War of 1967, the secular population lost interest in the event and it became one with almost exclusively dati contestants and of interest to the dati population. It was only within the world of Religious Zionism that serious study of Tanakh developed.

**Religious Zionism and Tanakh**

Bar-Ilan University was founded in 1955 by the Religious-Zionist Mizrahi movement and initially all of its faculty and most of its students were dati. A Bible Department was established and ultimately it became the largest, not only in Israel, but internationally.

One of the most influential teachers of Tanakh was Nehama Leibowitz, who taught at the Mizrachi Women’s Teachers’ College in Jerusalem from the early 1930s to 1955. From 1956-1971, she taught at Bar-Ilan but resigned due to a strong disagreement with a department head there. Born in Riga, Latvia, in 1905, her family moved to Berlin when she was 14 years old. She received her doctorate in 1930 from the University of Marburg, which was then Prussia, for her dissertation which analyzed German-Jewish translations of the Book of Psalms and, almost immediately afterward, she made aliya and began her teaching career. Her approach was to focus on a topic in the portion of the week, analyze the classic commentators, seeking to understand what led them to offer their commentaries, and to evaluate them. Her creativity manifested itself

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Izhak Laor, in a review of Shapira’s book, argues that the decline is connected to a linguistic matter, namely that the language of Tanakh is alien to modern non-religious Israelis and, thus, has little appeal (I. Laor, “Shimshon higer bishtei raglav haya,” Haaretz, Jan. 17, 2006). Yair Zakovitch suggests a series of reasons for the change (I. Zakovitch, “Scripture and Israeli Secular Culture,” pp. 301-304). Somewhat curiously, Yairah Amit, in another review of Shapira’s volume, asserts that in fact there has been no decline in the status of Tanakh in Israeli society (Yairah Amit, “Ha-im yarda karno shel haTanakh?” Zemanim 95, Summer 2006, pp. 111-115.

34 Perhaps because he was a member, Yair Zakovitch is still somewhat optimistic that the circle can be revived and have impact (“Scripture and Israeli Secular Culture,” p. 314).

35 It was and is still named the Mahlaka leTanakh, whereas Hebrew Univesrity has its Hug leMikra.
primarily in her extensive and intensive literary analyses rather than in introducing new commentaries of her own. Beginning as stenciled sheets and then printed pamphlets, Leibowitz’s lessons gained in popularity and ultimately became sets of books in Hebrew which were later translated into English and several other languages.36

The role of Tanakh in Israeli Religious Zionism significantly intensified after the Six-Day War of June 1967. The Western Wall, the Temple Mount, Judea and Samaria, were now under Israeli control. Much of the Jewish population of Israel and abroad initially experienced great relief, joy, and pride over Israel’s swift victory. Many were struck with a sense of awe by the realization that what they considered the heart of the land of the Bible was once again accessible and under Israel’s authority, and some viewed it as a return to history. Within all of this fervor, there was a rise in Bible-consciousness, particularly among religious and traditional Jews in Israel and abroad.37

The role of Yeshivat Har Etzion
Several months after the war, Yeshivat Har Etzion was founded and grew to be known as “the Harvard of the yeshivot.”38 One of its unique characteristics was the integration of the intensive study of Tanakh into the curriculum. The yeshiva also helped establish Herzog College, which has a center for Tanakh research and study, and has spurred what many term a revolution in the study of Tanakh. Among its pioneers were Rabbis Mordechai Breuer and Yoel Bin-Nun.

Rabbi Mordechai Breuer developed the “Aspects Theory” (“Shitat habehinot”), an approach he viewed as an antidote to the major assertions of biblical criticism concerning the human composition of the Torah, while recognizing that the Torah spoke in several voices. Briefly, he argued that the Torah written by God is not limited by the laws of time, space, or linguistics. The arguments of the Bible critics are based on human laws but are essentially irrelevant in application to the Torah. Linguistic differences, for example, are interpreted by him as reflecting different attributes or

37 Among many secularists who opposed Israel’s occupations of the territories, alienation from the Bible was exacerbated.
aspects of God and often includes lessons God wishes to us to learn. Breuer’s approach enabled Orthodox students of the Bible to feel comfortable, at least initially, studying and even accepting many secular theories and assertions related to biblical criticism with the understanding that they pose no challenge for religious belief in Torah min Hashamayim.

Yoel Bin-Nun is probably the central figure in the “revolution” in Tanakh study that has taken place during the past three to four decades. In contrast to Breuer’s approach which showed a strong interest in what critical scholars considered sources, but interpreted these as original aspects of God’s revelation, Bin-Nun developed an approach that places emphasis on the historical, geographical, and linguistic contexts of passages in Tanakh. In-depth knowledge of these areas, he strives to demonstrate, both illuminates Tanakh and responds to the problems raised by biblical criticism. He is a challenging and creative thinker and writer on a range of topics especially the role of Religious Zionism in Israeli society and world Jewry, but his specialty is Tanakh. In that capacity, he heads the center at Herzog College; he is an editorial board member and frequent contributor to Megadim, the Tanakh journal published by Herzog College; and was one of the initiators of the annual “Yemei Iyun” Tanakh conference held at

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40 For many of those seriously interested in Bible study, this was probably a more appealing approach than that of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who declared,

I have never been seriously troubled by the problem of the Biblical doctrine of creation vis-a-vis the scientific story of evolution at both the cosmic and the organic levels, nor have I been perturbed by the confrontation of the mechanistic interpretation of the human mind with the Biblical spiritual concept of man. I have not been perplexed by the impossibility of fitting the mystery of revelation into the framework of historical empiricism. Moreover, I have not even been troubled by the theories of Biblical criticism which contradict the very foundations upon which the sanctity and integrity of the Scriptures rest. (Rabbi. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “The Lonely Man of Faith,” Tradition 7:2, Summer 1965, pp. 8-9).

He did not disclose why he was not troubled by those matters, especially those that he did not reject. See Tamar Ross, “Orthodoxy and the Challenge of Biblical Criticism: Reflections on the Importance of Asking the Right Question,” http://thetorah.com/the-challenge-of-biblical-criticism/

41 A portrait of Bin-Nun which highlights the centrality of Tanakh in his life and his approach to it is found in Yossi Klein Halevi, Like Dreamers: The Story of the Israeli Paratroopers Who Reunited Jerusalem and Divided a Nation (New York: HarperCollins, 2013); see esp. pp. 203-04.
Herzog College. Founded initially as two intensive study days which attracted approximately 150 Israeli teachers of Tanakh, the program has grown to a four-day major conference attracting thousands of participants from around the world, who hear lectures from well-known religious Tanakh scholars.  

The most basic profound impact of the Har Etzion-Herzog College school on the study of Tanakh is replacing the traditional derash parshanut approach giving primacy to the development and dissemination of the “Tanakh begova Einayim” (literally “at eyes’ height”) approach. As indicated previously, other than in medieval northern France, it was axiomatic that Tanakh cannot be understood through the text itself and can only be understood via midrash. Bin-Nun and his colleagues argue that Tanakh does not need any middlemen; it can and should be understood through deeper knowledge and understanding of the text itself. This approach has become very popular in the Religious Zionist/modern Orthodox communities in Israel, and within the traditional, non-religious public in Israel, and there has been some strong reaction to against it within the Chardal sector of the Religious Zionist community especially by Rabbis Zvi Israel Tau and Shlomo Aviner.

A major work on Tanakh which attempts to combine both traditional and modern peshat commentaries and interpretations is the 30-volume Da’at Mikra, published by Mossad Harav Kook, in Jerusalem. Each volume is edited by a scholar in the field and, in general, is viewed as a compromise between traditional and modern approaches. An attempt to bolster its “scientific” status was in the publication of a matching Atlas, edited by overall editor of the Da’at Mikra series, Yehuda Kiel, and Yehuda Elizur, who was a professor of Tanakh and biblical archeologist at Bar-Ilan University. The entire set has been popular within the Religious Zionist/Modern Orthodox communities,

43 See, for example, the books by Amnon Bazak, I Samuel: A King in Israel and II Samuel: David the King [both in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013), and his Until This Day: Fundamental Questions in Bible Teaching [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Miskal-Yediot Ahronoth and Sifrei Hemed, 2013).
44 See, for example, Binyamin Lau, Jeremiah [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Miskal-Yediot Ahronoth and Sifrei Hemed, 2010) and Esther: Reading the Megillah [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Miskal-Yediot Ahronoth and Sifrei Hemed, 2011); Yoel Bin-Nun and Binyamin Lau, Isaiah [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Miskal-Yediot Ahronoth and Sifrei Hemed, 2013).
45 Zvi Israel Tau, Zadik be-emunato yihye: Al hagisha lelimud Tora (Jerusalem, 2002); Five videos of lectures by Rabbi Shlomo Aviner on Tanakh begova einayim.
many of its volumes were used as textbooks in National Religious schools, and Yedioth Ahronoth published an edition for the traditional wider public.

The increased interest in Tanakh in Israel apparently manifest itself on the university level as well. James Kugel senses that there has been big increase in the number of kipah-wearing Bible students at Hebrew University compared to 30 years ago, with a corresponding drop in the number of chiloni students who choose to do Bible, at least at the graduate level. He is not sure about other universities. All of this activity is evidence of a significant increase in interest in Tanakh within the religious and traditional communities since the 1960s.

**Socio-political Factors**

In addition, some of the popularity of Tanakh may be attributed to socio-political issues. The ideological leadership of the settler movement used biblical references to reconstruct locations within Judea and Samaria as parts of the national homeland in order to create and intensify emotional and ideological connectedness with the territories. Likewise, much of Israeli tourism, especially in the territories, has and continues to connect most of the settlements and other sites visited with Tanakh. A symbiotic relationship thus emerged in which Tanakh intensified ties to the land and the land enhanced ties to Tanakh.

**Developments in American Orthodoxy**

In American Orthodoxy, the relationship to Tanakh is much more detached and remote. The language, Hebrew, is difficult enough. In addition, it is a document that relates to distant places, places with which relatively few have any serious personal connection. It is, thus, a document that was given in the past but with which one does not connect today. Moreover, there is much less of a gap between the modern and charedi sectors.

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46 Personal communication, June 2, 2014.

47 I would broadly suggest three distinct types of relationship with Tanakh in different Orthodox communities: 1. For Religious Zionists, Tanakh speaks directly to the reader and the reader interprets its words in ways that are contemporarily meaningful. Tanakh is a living document with which one has dialogue, conversations. 2. For charedim, it is a sacred document – “set apart and forbidden,” to use Emile Durkheim’s phrase or, as “set apart,” as Rashi and numerous others translate it and “forbidden” in the sense that no new interpretations are permissible – “hadash assur min haTorah.” In that context, communication is one way – it addresses the reader but there is no dialogue with it. It is “set in stone,”
than there is in Israel. As I have argued elsewhere, the overwhelming majority of American Orthodox is neither charedi nor modern, as those typologies have previously been defined. Rather, increasingly they are a blend of the two, which I have been tempted to label as “moderedi.” They are modern in the sense that they are well-educated both secularly as well as Jewishly, they interact with the larger society and culture, and they are very pro-Israel. On the other hand, they increasingly punctilious and stringent in matters of religious ritual and practice.48

The overwhelming majority of the teachers of Tanakh in day schools and yeshiva high schools grew up with the traditional approach to Tanakh teaching and, thus, that is the predominant approach even in yeshivas that view and project themselves as Modern Orthodox. Under those circumstances, it seems reasonable to assume that those who develop a strong interest in Tanakh are those who have studied at an Israeli institution which focuses on modern approaches to Tanakh research and teaching. Given the increasing numbers of students in “Year in Israel” programs, in which many are exposed to approaches to Tanakh which are radically different from that which they received in their American yeshiva education,49 it also seems reasonable to assume that there has been an increase in the number of Orthodox students studying Bible at American universities. Indeed, James Kugel said that he has seen an increase over the last 30 years in the number of Modern Orthodox undergraduates and graduate Bible students, while the number of Christian or unaffiliated students seems to have remained more or less the same.50

It is not only approaches to Tanakh that distinguishes Israeli dati-Orthodoxy from American Modern Orthodoxy. American Modern Orthodox Jews who have been in

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49 See, for example, Shalom Berger, “A Year of Study in an Israeli Yeshiva Program: Before and After,” Ph.D dissertation, Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration, Yeshiva University, 1997, pp. 17, 90.

50 Personal communication, June 2, 2014. It should be noted, however, that the increase in the number of students wearing kippot does not necessarily indicate that more Orthodox students are studying Bible. It may reflect the changes in the larger American culture on which Orthodox students at secular universities are now much more likely to wear kippot in public than they were 30-40 years ago.
Israel for more than the typical brief week or two may well have come into contact with broader intellectual analyses of issues of concern to Modern Orthodox Jews and Modern Orthodoxy than they knew in the United States. In Israel, they may have found a wide range of books, articles, and lectures in a dati context which gave expression to ideas that are not even raised within American Orthodoxy. The greater openness of Israeli dati-Orthodoxy may have enabled and/or encouraged them to “think out of the box” and express ideas with respect to Tanakh that American Orthodox Jews of earlier decades -- and most contemporary ones as well -- would never have expressed, even if they may have thought them. Some American Orthodox who spend lengths of time in the Year-in-Israel program or in other venues may well have been exposed to this new approach to Tanakh and retain it when they return to America. Though the attitude found in the Israeli dati world is much less prevalent outside of Israel, some of it may be beginning to find expression there.

Until recently, those with views and beliefs that did not conform with those of the Orthodox establishment had either to keep their thoughts to themselves, or else, if they found that too socially isolating, to affiliate with Conservative Judaism and find company with traditionalists there, not because Conservative Judaism was serious about source criticism but simply because it was more accommodating to a much wider range of beliefs and practices than was Orthodoxy. Leaving Orthodoxy was not unusual. In fact, the attrition rate of the Orthodox was quite high. Analyses of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey indicated that the Orthodox attrition rate was significantly higher than the Conservative and Reform rates. That has now changed dramatically. Over the past several decades the percentage of American Jews who identify as Conservative has declined steadily, from 42 percent in 1971 to 18 percent in 2013 and, given the age patterns, indications are that the decline will continue. Orthodoxy, on the other hand, appears to be in an upswing. Culturally, it is no longer a stigma to be Orthodox in contemporary American society. On the contrary, it is “in” to be Orthodox. And demographically, in contrast to the outlook for Conservative

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52 Bernard Lazerwitz, et. al., Jewish Choices, p. 40.  
Judaism, the outlook for Orthodoxy is rather positive. Its attrition rate has slowed and the Orthodox fertility rate is significantly higher than that of non-Orthodox American Jews.

A recent magazine article unrelated to the Bible stirred up some heated discussion by discussing a new development in contemporary American Orthodoxy, namely, “social Orthodoxy,” which entails adherence to Orthodox observance without the “dox,” the belief system. In fact, the phenomenon is not at all new. As I discussed elsewhere, in nineteenth century Eastern Europe, many Jews maintained traditional Jewish religious patterns not so much out of ideological commitment to Orthodox ideological principles, but as the cultural patterns they had internalized. When they immigrated to the United States, they founded synagogues because the synagogue was a central institution in their native communities, and they founded Orthodox synagogues as the only kind of synagogue with which they were familiar. It would be more accurate to describe them as Orthoprax, as conforming with Orthodox habit or custom, rather than as ideologically committed Orthodox.

Nor did such orthopraxy begin in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe. It has probably been around as long as Judaism as a religion has. It wasn’t called orthopraxy because the term “Orthodox” is a Western one, and coined relatively recently in

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contradistinction to Reform.\textsuperscript{58} The term focuses on belief because of specific historical circumstances and issues, but it has much more contemporary meaning in terms of practice; that is, Orthodox is understood to mean halakhically observant within a range of observances. When one segment of traditional Judaism legitimated a number of practices which the more-traditional Eastern European rabbinic leadership in the United States rejected, traditional Judaism in the United States split into two denominations or movements, Conservative and Orthodox.\textsuperscript{59}

Be that as it may, it was always assumed that one who identified as and behaved as Orthodox, was an Orthodox believer. What has changed is the willingness of individuals who identify as Orthodox to publicly declare that their affiliation is based on a conviction that “religious practice is an essential component of Jewish continuity,” or some other social reason rather than religious faith. The same factors that contribute to this new openness are probably among the factors which have contributed to Modern Orthodox thinkers expressing ideas about the Bible that are not in complete harmony with traditional Orthodox approaches and beliefs.

Several, probably interrelated, factors have contributed to this new openness in American Modern Orthodoxy. Before discussing them, however, it should be noted that American Modern Orthodoxy is today comprised of two distinct sectors. The largest and most established sector is that whose institutional home is Yeshiva University (YU) and whose rabbinic organization is the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA). Those in this sector now identify themselves as “Centrist Orthodoxy” and have, in fact, moved to become more demanding both ritually and ideologically.\textsuperscript{60} A more recent and considerably smaller sector of Modern Orthodoxy is one which proudly identifies as such and for whom its banner is “open Orthodoxy.”\textsuperscript{61} Its institutional

\textsuperscript{58} The term “Orthodoxy” derived from Christian theology and was first applied to traditionalists within Judaism in early 19\textsuperscript{th} century Germany as a pejorative by adherents of Reform. Subsequently traditionalist adopted the label as a badge of honor. In the United States, the term emerged several decades later and, likewise, those who adopted it did so in opposition to Reform. See Louis Jacobs, \textit{The Jewish Religion: A Companion} (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 370; Jonathan D. Sarna, \textit{American Judaism: A History} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 86-87.

\textsuperscript{59} Jonathan D. Sarna, \textit{American Judaism}, pp. 165-193.

\textsuperscript{60} I discuss this further in Chaim I. Waxman, “Defensive in the Center,” \textit{Conversations} 20, (forthcoming) Autumn 2014.

\textsuperscript{61} Avraham Weiss, “Open Orthodoxy! A Modern Orthodox Rabbi’s Creed,” \textit{Judaism} 46:4, Fall 1997, pp. 409-421
home is Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. Most of its graduates join the International Rabbinic Fellowship (IRF), which is comprised of Orthodox rabbis and clergy who gather to discuss issues in an environment which is more amenable to considering a broader range of ideas and issues than is Centrist Orthodoxy.

The impact of the World Wide Web
In addition to the above, there is the impact of the world wide web, which has been influencing the lives of its consumers in a myriad of ways. In terms of the subject at hand, its major impact has been in making information readily available and in providing the ability to disseminate ideas anonymously. The amount of information available on the web was inconceivable until recently. The late 1990s witnessed the birth and development of blogs, on-line discussion forums that allow for the expression and wide dissemination of ideas pseudonymously or anonymously.

Traditional Jews, including the Orthodox, were early consumers of the web, and sites catering to a wide range of their interests were soon set up. Orthodox Jews have a tradition of adopting and adapting from the larger culture for the enhancement of Orthodoxy. In the case of the web, its potential was seen in providing for interaction with – in study and in many other ways – Jews around the world. The web enhances the “Orthodox global village.” Traditionalist and Orthodox Jews who held beliefs and thoughts not sanctioned by the religious establishment could freely vent their frustrations and express their own positions anonymously while continuing to express their loyalty to Orthodox Judaism without fear of being labeled deviants or heretics. As the number of expressions of “deviant” notions increased, their appearance became less shocking and less stigmatizing, and individuals began to express their ideas openly.

62 If, in the early 1980s, Clifford Geertz could suggest that, “The hallmark of modern consciousness . . . is its enormous multiplicity”; how more so is that true for the world after the internet. See Clifford Geertz, Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 161.
64 The term was suggested to me by Menachem Friedman.
Even without the Web, higher education and the publishing industry have influenced people’s readiness to present challenging ideas. There have been various works in recent decades by Orthodox scholars containing ideas which at one time were (and to some still are) considered heretical. Books by Menachem Kellner and Marc Shapiro, for example, provide a very different perspective in “principles of faith” than had previously been known among the Jewish public, especially the Orthodox public. Likewise, the theory of evolution was, within Orthodoxy, often categorically labeled “heresy” until recently, and still is in much of contemporary Orthodoxy. However, as Rachel Pear has shown, a number of prominent Modern Orthodox individuals have voiced pro-evolution positions. In 2005, even the Rabbinical Council of America issued an admittedly very guarded pro-evolution position.

Pluralization without secularization

Close to a half-century ago, Peter Berger argued that the intricately interrelated processes of pluralization, bureaucratization, and secularization, which are endemic to modernity, have greatly shaken the religious “plausibility structures.” Several years later, he clarified that, although “a rumor of angels” prevails, it is but a “rumor” in modern society, and it co-exists with a "heretical imperative," that is, the pluralistic character of modern society impels us to make choices, including religious choices. We are no longer impelled to believe and act. We choose, even when we choose to be religiously orthodox. From the standpoint of traditional religion, that is heresy because, as Berger points out, "the English word “heresy” comes from the Greek verb hairein, which means “to choose.” A hairesis originally meant, quite simply, the taking of a choice." By the end of the twentieth century, Berger had recanted and averred that the

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world today "is as furiously religious as it ever was,"\textsuperscript{69} but that does not mean that there has been no secularization. As he now views it,

"There is indeed a secular discourse resulting from modernity, but it can coexist with religious discourses that are not secular at all. What is more, this secular discourse has its roots in the science and technology, which are the driving engine of modernity. . . . But this fact has not driven out religion, or even diminished its plausibility among very large numbers of people in most of the world."\textsuperscript{70}

What has developed is that we now have "a default secular discourse" which "co-exists with a plurality of religious discourses, both in society and in consciousness."\textsuperscript{71} Berger does not say, and I am not sure that he would agree, but the pluralized culture and consciousness with which we now live have intra-religious as well as interreligious dimensions. For many moderns, there has been a weakened sense of transcendence and what had once been unquestionable objective reality is now the individual’s decision. That decision may be to become more pious, but it is a personal decision based on the individual’s determination of what is more meaningful to him or her.

Modernity has brought about numerous social and cultural changes, and these have had impact on Orthodox Jews. Some staunchly attempt to resist the changes and turn even more inward. This is at the base of much of ultra-orthodoxy/\textit{charedism}\.\textsuperscript{72} For many of the non-\textit{charedi} Orthodox, the changes have raised serious questions and been

\textsuperscript{70} Peter L. Berger, “Further Thoughts on Religion and Modernity,” \textit{Society}, Vol. 49, No. 4 (July-August), 2012, p. 314. This seems similar to an observation made decades earlier by Jacob Katz, namely, “Secularization has affected the role played by religion generally . . . It did not, however, succeed in ousting religion nor in effacing the particular characteristics of the two religions [Judaism and Christianity=CIW] whose interrelation we have been considering.” See Jacob Katz, \textit{Emancipation and Assimilation: Studies in Modern Jewish History} (Farnborough: Gregg International Publishers, 1972), p. 125.
\textsuperscript{71} Berger, “Further Thoughts on Religion and Modernity,” p. 316.
a source of inner tension. As Gerald Blidstein points out with respect to the relationship between Halakha and democracy,

We can admit that we are uncomfortable with some of our materials. . . . I think that we ought not be ashamed of the fact of our discomfort and its sources. Such a situation is often just below the surface in the writing of R. Kook, and is probably one of the reasons for the fascination it holds.73

That has also been at the heart of many of the challenges religion and society in contemporary Israel,

For many, the social and cultural changes, especially the changes in social values, have led to reconsideration of traditional interpretations and/or perspectives. This manifests itself in a variety of ways with respect to attitudes toward and the place of women in Orthodox Judaism, and it manifests itself in much more limited but nevertheless significant changes in attitudes toward homosexuals.74

Under these circumstances, the traditional notion of kefira may no longer be applicable. Indeed, Menachem Kellner argues that there are “two types of religious faith: one which understands faith as primarily trust in God expressed in concrete behavior, as against another which understands faith as primarily the acknowledgement of the truth of certain faith claims.”75 The latter, which is the Maimonidean position, is exclusivist, whereas the former is theologically inclusivist. The exclusivist position may have been appropriate at a time when religion provided a complete and very firm objective reality. Denying or questioning a single item in that objective reality was viewed as threatening the entire system. The situation in modernity appears to be very different. A 2011 survey by the Gallup organization found that more than ninety percent of Americans continue to profess belief in God and that, “Despite the many changes that have rippled

75 Menachem Kellner, Must a Jew Believe Anything?, pp. 8-9.
through American society over the last 6 ½ decades, belief in God as measured in this direct way has remained high and relatively stable.”76

It seems reasonable to assume that the rate of atheism is higher among young American Jews, since the data in that Gallup survey show that “Belief in God drops below 90% among younger Americans, liberals, those living in the East, those with postgraduate educations, and political independents.” Even among them, however, there is no evidence of any significant increase in atheism. The available data are inconclusive on the questions of agnosticism, and it is possible that there has been an increase in those unsure about the existence of God although we have no evidence to support that.

From all that we have seen of contemporary American Modern Orthodox Jews, they indeed live with and employ a variety of discourses, some religious and some secular. In addition, their religious ideology and social structure facilitate their connections with Israel and their connecting with modern and, to them, meaningful approaches to Tanakh. From all appearances, for most of them, their engagement with it is not confrontational and rejecting but, rather, critical and attempting to understand it and oneself more deeply. It was in timely response to these needs, desires, and conditions that TheTorah.com was established.

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