

INTRODUCTION

MARK RANDALL JAMES

University of Virginia

Like many other issues of the *Journal of Textual Reasoning*, this collection of essays takes the form of commentary on a commentary. It is distinctive, however, in that the base text to which the contributors have responded comes from a d'var Torah ("word of Torah") delivered by biblical scholar Blaire French at Congregation Beth Israel in Charlottesville, Virginia on June 7, 2014. By bringing modern biblical scholarship to bear on difficult questions about Jewish identity in the context of a worshipping community, French's d'var—entitled "A D'var Torah for Beha'alotcha: The Search for Evocative History"—provides an opportunity to reflect on how the academic study of Jewish texts can help respond to problems of Jewish life outside of academia. The six suggestive responses gathered in this issue, together with French's closing reply, "Between Belief and Wonder," are a testimony to the power of French's initial word.

French poses the question of how to reshape and retell Jewish history in a way that evokes its power for those—especially secular Jews—who have become alienated from it. Following Yosef Yerushalmi in his book *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, French argues that "terrible ruptures often spawn meaningful reconfigurations of tradition." Only reflection on the grave crises of Jewish history, she suggests, can enable

the telling of an “evocative secular Jewish history” powerful enough to “seal the bonds of Jewish unity and identity today.”

French sees Yerushalmi’s impulse prefigured in the attempts of post-exilic Jews to reconfigure Jewish tradition in the aftermath of the Babylonian exile. She celebrates in particular the Chronicler’s often maligned revisionist history, constructed from earlier traditions during the Persian period. In Chronicles’ version of sacred history, for example, the Levites have responsibilities far beyond those conceived in *Beha’alotcha* (Numbers 8:1-12:16, the Torah portion that occasions French’s comments). Similarly, by a strategy of “selective recollection and strategic forgetting,” Chronicles places at the center of its narrative a Torah-observant David who has all the piety but few of the sins of the David remembered in the books of Samuel, even as it pushes the patriarchs and the exodus to the background. French calls our attention to the way the Chronicler takes up material from the past—neither as “history” (fact) nor mere “story” (fiction), but rather acting as what she calls a “history-teller” who “made Israel’s past into a story worth remembering and repeating.” An analogous task faces secular Jews today.

But why should secular Jews turn to the Bible? As French notes, a book like Chronicles, with its religious traditionalism, poses difficulties for those who would look to it as a model of *secular* Jewish identity. French puts her answer in the form of a paradox: “The historical chain of Jewish tradition transmission—even when reformulated—ultimately leads back to revelation, whereas a reading of the full Bible, paradoxically, may or may not.” Jews can’t escape the Bible; but alongside its tales of revelation, it includes alternative narratives that provide resources for evoking a secular Jewish history and identity. French ends with a call *ad fontes*—not to the pieties of the Chronicler, but rather to another book from the Persian context: the famously secular book of Esther. French suggests we read this as a kind of “collective autobiography” of the Jews, in which “Jews are Jews by virtue of what they do with and for each other while living as world citizens.”

We have loosely organized the six responses to French’s proposal as answers to two questions posed by French. The essays in part I, “Seeking

Jewish Identity," take up French's invitation to identify biblical sources for evoking and reconstructing a contemporary secular Jewish identity. If even secular Jewish history must trace its roots to the Bible, which biblical texts are most fruitful for this task? The essays in part II, "Rereading Jewish History," address the question of method. If biblical narratives cannot serve this function when taken as either history or fiction, how instead should contemporary Jews read biblical texts in service of this reconstruction?

In the first essay in part I, "The Book of Ruth: Between Story and History, Between Sacred and Secular (or, Scripture for the Pew's Jews," Lesleigh Cushing argues that the book of Ruth constitutes the most promising biblical source for reflecting on contemporary secular Jewish identity. If the Bible poses an obstacle for secular American Jews because of its dubious historicity and its focus on God, Ruth's tale gives interpersonal relationships priority over human-divine dynamics. Moreover, Ruth reforms the sharp exclusivity implicit in certain visions of Jewish legal observance by critiquing the Deuteronomic exclusion of Moabites from the community of Israel and celebrating the free adoption of the commandments, whatever one's family of origin. Ruth offers a paradigm of Jewish identity centered on an ethical commitment to *hesed* that may resonate especially well with today's secular Jewish community.

In his essay "'But Mordecai Bowed Not, Nor Did Him Reverance': The Book of Esther's Challenge to 'Secular' and to 'Religious' Identities," Daniel Weiss develops French's suggestion that the book of Esther offers a non-religious model of Jewish identity. However, Esther should not be read as commending a 'secular' Jewish identity, if this implies that secular Jews assimilate by foregoing daily practices that distinguish them from their non-Jewish neighbors. Instead, the book of Esther supports an alternative *political* model of Jewish identity. On Weiss' reading, while the text gives no indication that Esther's Jewish identity requires her to adopt religious practices that would distinguish her from Gentiles, it celebrates Mordecai's politically provocative act of refusing to bow before Haman, implying that he does so because he is a Jew. Mordecai's act represents,

for Weiss, a “negative theopolitics” in which Jews refuse to accept the sovereignty of any human ruler.

In his essay, “‘The Cap’n Crunch Effect’: A Response to Blaire French’s Essay,” Mark Leuchter complicates French’s reading of *Chronicles* as revisionist history by insisting that all historical narratives present a remembered past rather than the actual past. What is distinctive about *Chronicles*, Leuchter argues, is that unlike the book of Kings, it is not so much a refraction of remembered events as it is a *literary* refraction of texts. *Chronicles* can be read as a meditation on how the remembered past may be mediated through authoritative texts. By recognizing other texts with other interpretations of Jewish history, and by retelling this history with a focus on the land and the shared genealogy of the Jewish people, the Chronicler implies that the post-exilic Jewish community can embrace a diverse range of historical memories and conflicting interpretations of Jewish history. Irrespective of whether one views *Chronicles* as sacred scripture or social commentary, Leuchter suggests, this account of Jewish life and intellectual culture offers a powerful corrective to the increased polarization of the contemporary Jewish community.

The essays in part II turn to the question of method, exploring French’s notion of “history-telling” as a way of appropriating Jewish history and focusing in particular on the relation between historical narration and ongoing liturgical and legal practices. In her essay, “Total Textual Immersion: Considering Biblical Retellings in Exodus and *Chronicles*,” Emily Filler points to the Passover *haggadah* (which means “telling”) as exemplifying the way of telling history that French describes. Filler points out that the command to “remember” the exodus by celebrating the Passover is built into the biblical narrative itself, which Filler reads as “implicit instructions” about a “participatory” approach to Biblical history. Rather than narrowly focusing on questions of historicity (like many traditionalist) or reducing the exodus to an extended metaphor or exemplar (like many liberals), the *haggadah* exemplifies a way of dwelling in the world of the text through the ongoing communal practice of freely retelling its narrative.

In her essay, “Remembering with Advantages: Chronicles and the Hermeneutics of Revision and Redaction,” Ashleigh Elser argues that by including parallel tellings of the same story, the canon itself calls attention to the role of textual interpretation in the ongoing retelling of history. Taking her cue from Gadamer’s claim that the practical demands of legal interpretation exemplify the general structure of the hermeneutic problem, Elser examines the Chronicler as a legal interpreter who must reconcile apparently discordant texts from the Torah about the laws of Passover while maintaining fidelity to “the verbal conditions of the sources.” Even scriptural contradictions or contrivances may bear their own kind of revelation, Elser suggests, for the canon uses them to invite those who would retell Jewish history to the constructive hermeneutic task of showing how the words of scripture may be retold as a story that enables the community to go on living.

In his essay, “The Rest Is Jewish History: Using the Rabbinic View of History as a Response to Blaire French’s D’var Torah,” Jonathan Milevsky appeals to the rabbis as exemplars of a way of retelling history that responds to French’s challenge. On a standard interpretation of the rabbis, they show little concern with matters of historical detail except as they contribute to the establishment of moral or legal rules. Milevsky argues, however, that the rabbis were indeed concerned with history, so long as its details were recorded in a way that secures its ongoing relevance. He sees this attitude exemplified in a Talmudic interpretation of the end of Esther, which commands that the text be written “for generations” —that is, in a way that future generations would find relevant, as they do each year in celebrating Purim. As long as Purim continues to be practiced, Milevsky implies, the history of Esther continues to be relevant to the identity of the Jewish people.

We hope that French’s d’var Torah and the insightful commentary to which it has given rise will provoke the readers of the *Journal of Textual Reasoning* to ongoing reflection on the challenges facing those who would evoke a viable secular Jewish identity in response to the crises of the present moment.