

# LEHRHAUS

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# WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE: *SHABABNIKS* MEET THE SPOTLIGHT

SARAH RINDNER

Israel has produced several fabulous television series in recent years, perhaps especially those which depict fictional lives of religious Jews. These include the iconic [\*Srugim\*](#), which tracks the *Friends*-like relationships between a group of single friends navigating the South Jerusalem “national religious” dating scene. The entertaining, if somewhat melodramatic, *Kathmandu* follows the legitimately exciting lives of a Chabad couple living and working in Nepal.

[\*Shtisel\*](#), both hysterically funny and understated, set a new bar for subtlety and depth in exploring the dynamics of a rather dysfunctional but wholly endearing hasidic-*haredi* family in Jerusalem. *Shababnikim*, one of the latest additions to the mix, is a slickly produced and fast-paced series that chronicles the adventures, both external and internal, of four twenty-something denizens of an elite *haredi yeshiva* in Jerusalem. The aesthetics, four studs sauntering off to some irrelevant destination with the backdrop of a throbbing rock soundtrack, recalls the HBO series *Entourage*. The substance spans the gamut from romantic comedy to profound observations about Judaism, the relationship between the religious and secular worlds, and what it means to be a man. In other words, it’s the kind of series that could only exist in present-day Israel, and it’s the invention of a talented religious graduate of the Ma’aleh film school named Eliran Malka.

“*Shababnik*” is derogatory Israeli slang for a “*batlan*,” a time-waster—that is, a young *haredi* Jew who is exempted from military service but nevertheless falls far short of the declared reason for the exemption: “His Torah [study] is his occupation.” Instead, a *shababnik* spends much of his time just hanging out aimlessly. The eponymous *shababnikim* of the show straddle the border between this category and more serious *yeshiva bochrim*. They appreciate the good life, but they also, in different ways, maintain sincere connections to the world of the *yeshiva*, and each is a spiritual seeker in his own way.

Avinoam, the son of a prominent Sefardi parliamentarian, is drawn to the mystique of the secular world, and one cute female barista in particular. Despite his white shirts and black hat, he craves to be a part of the broader Israeli culture. He is also a born leader, and his ambition manifests itself more loftily at some times than others.

Dov Lazer is the clever, bemused son of a wealthy American *haredi* (Ashkenazi) businessman; more than the other *shababnikim* he displays analytical prowess and a sophistication of thought, but he is plagued by disaffection.

Meir is a religiously sincere heartthrob of working-class North African descent. He encounters obstacles because of his lack of “*yiches*” (pedigree) in a stratified culture that places great weight on small differences in practice and outlook, and is also plagued by ethnic prejudices. Meir’s mode of Torah study, although intuitive and thoughtful, is not taken seriously in an elitist Lithuanian-style *yeshiva*, with its emphasis on rigorous erudition.

Gedaliah is the red herring of the group—a brilliant and overly passionate *talmid hakham* whom the *mashgiach* (spiritual supervisor) of the *yeshiva* moves into the dorm room of the other three, with the hope that exposure to their worldly ways helps him overcome some of the intensity and painful awkwardness that were scaring away prospective wives. They are all four essentially well-meaning young men with real talents. They each struggle with religious and social expectations as well as with their own laziness, selfishness, and confusion. More than anything, they need to grow up, and the show explores the viability of the *yeshiva* as the right place to do that.

The electricity of the *yeshiva* environment, and by extension, the excitement of Torah learning itself, is something that is by its nature difficult to translate into a different medium. Television might very well be the most unlikely candidate, and yet somehow *Shababnikim* pulls it off. The show captures the energy of the fictional “Nesivos” *yeshiva* from the very first scene, when the venerated *rosh yeshiva*, Rav Bloch glides into the *beit midrash* to looks of adulation from adoring students and launches into a potentially fascinating Torah discourse, only to be tragically killed by an elegant chandelier, which crashes on his head only moments after he begins.

His replacement is the decidedly less magnetic Rabbi Shpitzer, who implements a variety of quasi-sadistic austerity measures aimed against the culture of decadence, embodied first and foremost by the *shababnikim* of the show’s title, that he thinks is dragging down the *yeshiva*. The ensuing battle takes place not through physical might, of course, but through words and ideas. Shpitzer is fond of rambling, romanticized stories of Eastern European Jews from the past who were disciplined and committed to their Torah studies. He combines this with a vapid corporate sensibility that emphasizes hours spent in the study hall over the quality and texture of Torah learning (though this does not, of course, prevent him from taking a condescending attitude toward Meir’s folksy, commonsense attitude toward Torah study).

It is true that there is something to simply showing up, but later on in the show, when Rabbi Shpitzer is asked if the majority of his students learn with “*esh*,” with fire, he is predictably unable to respond. The *shababnikim* in turn, are all fire: passion for Torah, passion for women, pride in the life of Torah and sensitive to any slight of it, and passion for life outside the *yeshiva*, which, not surprisingly, rarely lives up to expectations.

One of the series' refrains is that the disorderly *shababnik* model of *yeshiva* life may seem like a "jungle" to some, but that "only in a jungle can you produce lions." Ideally, intense Torah study does not produce automatons who merely follow the masses—rather, independent young men who are guided by Jewish principles but use their own judgment to make wise decisions and fiercely defend the honor of Torah when necessary. It's a delicate balance that is difficult to master. After all, the secular world is hardly equipped to produce "lions" either—a lack of restraint and focus is even more crippling than too much authority, as Avinoam will discover by way of a broken heart.

Midway through the first season, Dov Lazer gets into a scuffle, literally in the middle of a minefield, with a patronizing army officer his own age. It is unclear whether he escalates what could have been a minor encounter into a full-blown argument in noble defense of *haredi* culture or out of his own brash arrogance and pride. The *shababnikim* think that they are pretty great after winning an unevenly matched football game against a group of buff Americans. What will, however, actually make them great is if they learn to harmonize the impulses flowing from their youthful energy with their elite Torah education in order to behave in ways that elevate themselves and the world around them. The show documents their numerous failures in this regard, as well as their precious moments of success.

*Yeshiva* boys of a certain age are defined primarily by their vocation of Torah study, but also by their pursuit of an eligible girl to marry. Here the world of the Nesivos *yeshiva* dovetails most conveniently with the sensibility of romantic comedy. Indeed, for *yeshiva bochrin* in their early twenties trying to concentrate on learning while hormones rage and set-up dates with beautiful women beckon, tension is inevitable.

Rather than fall into the trap of false binaries, *Shababnikim* successfully conveys the *eros* that is at the heart of *haredi* Judaism, with its rigid separation of genders and its appreciation for human nature and its pitfalls. The time that these men spend in *yeshiva* does not dullen their *eros*; it only serves to heighten it. This places marriage in the foreground of their young lives in a way that is actually productive.

Gedaliah suffers the most from this predicament; as the most cloistered of all four of the friends he is also the most frustrated, and even borderline insane, when it comes to the proper way to relate to women. For him, Torah study is a way to channel some of that tormented energy; after yet another disastrous encounter with a young woman, he gazes lovingly at a volume of Talmud and exclaims that "she" remains his most beloved. Ultimately, once the proposition of a truly fulfilled marriage becomes a real possibility for Gedaliah, we sense that perhaps of all four main characters, Gedaliah actually has the most romantically satisfying future ahead of him.

Another key theme that pervades the series is a traditional religious one: perfection is not an attainable goal, and the outright denial of one's desires will not help achieve whatever progress can be made toward it. Instead, the channeling of those desires in the appropriate manner leads to the best possible outcomes for spiritual and personal growth. Perhaps the strongest expression of this takes place in the season finale, when a local Jerusalem sage-cum-oracle, Rabbi Alter Cooper, is called upon to adjudicate a dispute between Shpitzer, who views the *shababnikim* as utterly worthless, and his rebellious students. The holy Rav Cooper is unimpressed by the antics of the *shababnikim*.

However, he is even more unimpressed by Shpitzer and his two dimensional ideal of the *yeshiva* student: "If God wanted to make a world filled with only *tzadikim*, He would have!" he yells at Shpitzer, "that doesn't interest Him!" Rav Cooper continues, "God wants you to be different." Precisely what form that difference should take, whether it should conform to certain social boundaries or whether it may involve stepping beyond them, does not interest Rav Cooper. That is where free will steps in for those young lions brave enough to face down the jungle of real life and redeem themselves and their world in the process.

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# THE TENSION THAT IS *TANAKH*

YAAKOV BEASLEY

*"Just as a bride is bedecked with twenty-four ornaments,  
so too a scholar is bedecked with (knowledge of)  
the twenty-four books of the Tanakh" - Rashi, Exodus 31:18.*

*Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanus warned his students, "hold back your children from 'higayon'" ([Berakhot 28b](#)). Rashi explains: "'higayon' is 'excessive Tanakh study that attracts one too much.'"<sup>1</sup>*

At first glance, it appears strange to discover that Rashi—the Bible commentator *par excellence*—entertained a sense of ambivalence, and possibly hesitancy, regarding Bible study. Yet, perhaps more than any other field in Jewish studies, *Tanakh* provides the greatest challenges to students and teachers alike.

For hundreds of years, despite being Judaism's most fundamental text, study of *Tanakh* has been generally relegated to a secondary role in Jewish curricula. The varying rationales behind this have been explored elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, today there is a renaissance in *Tanakh* learning in Israel and abroad. It is visible everywhere. New books flow out of the publishing houses, each brimming with original ideas and competing for space on booksellers' shelves. The Israel Bible Quiz (*Hidon ha-Tanakh*) regularly draws high ratings on Israeli television. For many, the intellectual climax of their year is the opportunity to crowd Alon Shevut with thousands of other *Tanakh* lovers for a week every summer to learn from Yeshivat Har Etzion's top lecturers and thinkers.

However, it is not just in quantity that *Tanakh* study has changed. With the renewed emphasis has come new methodologies. Some of these are new reiterations of ancient ideas, while others draw heavily on academia, using new analytic methods and applying terms from literary criticism. For this, the revolution has not come without challenges and challengers. As new methodologies developed and progressed, the same old questions that nagged the early commentators have re-arisen, and many have expressed caution (if not outright opposition) about the changes that have overtaken *Tanakh* study in the past decades.

One of the leading scholars in North America in the vanguard of these changes is Rabbi Hayyim Angel, the National Scholar of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. Angel has

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<sup>1</sup> Rashi's second explanation of 'higayon' is 'childish' speech. The Aruch (s.v. *mefatrin*) also explains 'higayon' as Bible study. However, this identification is by no means universal. Rav Hai Gaon understood 'higayon' to mean the study of logic and grammar (*Otzar ha-Geonim, Berakhot, 39*), as did Ibn Ezra and J. ibn Tibbon. Shmuel ibn Tibbon translated it as the study of other languages. See also footnotes 17-22 in Breuer, "Hold Back Your Children from "Higayon."

<sup>2</sup> See Mordechai Breuer, "The Study of Tanach in the Yeshiva Curriculum" and "Hold Back Your Children from 'Higayon'," Yisrael Brand, "The Conflict Over Teaching Bible in Recent Generations," and Yaakov Beasley, "[Of Fainting Maidens and Wells: Bible Study in the Yeshiva Curriculum](#)."

written or edited over 130 scholarly articles and books (mostly in *Tanakh*), of which [Keys to the Palace](#) is the latest publication.

His latest book collects twenty essays on issues regarding *Tanakh* study or interpretations of biblical passages, all revolving around the question alluded to in the book's subtitle, "Exploring the Religious Value of Reading Tanakh." A close reading of Angel's bibliography reveals that of his books on *Tanakh* study, three have subtitles that contain the word "religious" in them ("Religious Value of reading Tanakh," "Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study," and "Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh"). This reflects the central theme and focus of Angel's thinking, and subtly acknowledges the fundamental challenge faced by religious *Tanakh* scholars today. *Tanakh* cannot be studied as one would any other discipline. Without an encounter with the Divine, or at least serving a religious purpose, *Tanakh* study, if not bereft of value, is at least notably incomplete.<sup>3</sup>

The emphasis on the religious aspect of the text come out in both sections of the book—seven essays that analyze the latest trends and approaches that are prevalent in today's *Tanakh* study, and then thirteen essays of Angel's explanations of the *Tanakh* texts. In the first group, the reader is introduced to the major trends and issues in *Tanakh* study today. How does one maintain faith in the oral and rabbinic tradition, yet study *Tanakh* from a historical and literary approach, armed with all of the new discoveries that have been made in Israel in the past half-century?

The discussions regarding the contributions of Rabbis Yoel Bin-Nun and Amnon Bazak are particularly important in this regard. Of the second group of essays, one can divide them into two sub-categories. Some are thematic essays that wrestle with moral and ethical issues raised by the texts, and others are Angel's original interpretative close readings. Though Angel is familiar and capable of engaging in the didactic and sophisticated modern literary techniques favored by those from the new school of interpretation (emanating from Yeshivat Har Etzion and the Herzog College from Israel), this is not his style. Instead, he is a patient compiler of all opinions and approaches, carefully pointing out the advantages and disadvantages of each, directing the conversation until his viewpoint is revealed.

As an example of this, let's analyze Angel's essay on Psalm 19. The Psalm begins by declaring "The heavens recite the glory of God, and the sky tells of the work of His hands" (Verse 2). Halfway through the poem, the Psalm switches subject, and the rest of the chapter proclaims that "The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the Lord is faithful, making the simple one wise" (Verse 8). The two halves apparently do not belong together. Almost all the commentators, beginning with the medieval commentators and continuing to

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<sup>3</sup> In this regard, Rabbi Angel reflect the viewpoint of his teacher, Rabbi Shalom Carmy, who has commented that any "shift in the mode of biblical study that detaches the reader from the exigency of the text ... undermines the very *raison d'être* of [that] learning." Angel consistently labels the new methodology of learning *Tanakh* by Rabbi Carmy's terminology — "the literary-theological approach". In his discussion regarding modern scholarship in *Tanakh* study, Carmy favorably views the new focus on "*peshuto shel mikra*", but argues that such endeavors can only find their place "within an overall program of *Machshevet Yisrael*, Torah study, and theological reflection", or else "the novelty or strangeness of a certain methodology" will "interfere with the primary vocation of elucidating *devar Hashem*." See Shalom Carmy, "A Room With a View, but a Room of our Own," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1996), 2-4.

Angel, attempt to account for relationship between the two sections. Critical scholars almost instinctively argue that the psalm was originally two separate works, which were joined together by later editors.<sup>4</sup> Rashi, for example, provides two answers, with the first suggesting that the goal is to compare nature to Torah (see also Ibn Ezra and the Radak), and a second answer that what the psalm is attempting is to contrast the two.<sup>5</sup>

To appreciate Angel's methodology, it is instructive to compare his essay with that of Rabbi Elchanan Samet, one of the leading practitioners of the modern approach of *Tanakh* study in Israel.<sup>6</sup> Samet approaches this psalm scientifically, like a surgeon wielding a scalpel. With a fine ear for literary cues and clues, he meticulously divides the poem into its sections and subsections, noting each of the parallels and the form of parallel used, locating the texts structure—its central axis, around which the opening and conclusion revolve. After a thorough dissection of the Psalm, Samet arrives at his conclusion. This would apparently validate the words of Ibn Ezra that the Psalm's message is that the “heavens and the Torah are two paths to the knowledge of God and His attributes.” However, comparing the second subsection of each half undoes this conclusion. Unlike the sun which fulfills its Divine purpose with happiness and strength, “like a bridegroom coming out his chamber,” man is fallible and imperfect, requiring him to cry out “Who understands errors? Cleanse me of hidden [sins].”

Angel's approach to the text is strikingly different. If Samet is a stylistic surgeon, Angel is a musician, identifying larger themes that arise from the discussion. In his essay, after presenting a quick synopsis of Jewish commentary regarding the relationship between nature and Torah in the psalm, Angel draws upon his encyclopedic knowledge of rabbinic texts that address this issue.

He begins with the *midrash at Sifrei* (Deuteronomy 306), which explicates Samet's conclusion: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: ‘Say to Israel: “Look into the heavens that I

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Tz.P. Chajes, in his “Tanakh im Perush Mada'i”: “This psalm divides into two separate parts, which at the outset were undoubtedly two separate poems. The first poem, verses 2-7, speaks of the splendor of nature in elevated poetic style, whereas the second, from verse 8 until the end, speaks of the greatness of the Torah.” Though Chajes analyzes the form and contents of the two poems, he makes no attempt to analyze why the two sections were then fused together. Rabbi Samet writes about this: “If and when we find such connections between the two halves of the psalm, the damage caused by the critical approach will become evident—how it conceals from those who accept that approach all the levels of meaning that could have been revealed had the text as it appears before us been explored more deeply.”

<sup>5</sup> Rashi s.v. “The law of the Lord is perfect”— “It too illuminates like the sun, as it is stated later: [‘The commandments of the Lord are pure,] enlightening the eyes.’ And it is stated, ‘For the commandment is a lamp, and the Torah a light’ (Proverbs 6:23). Another explanation: ‘And nothing is hidden from its heat’—on the day of judgment—And the day that is coming shall burn them up’ (Malakhi 3:19). But ‘the law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul’ for the paths of life, and it protects those who study it from that burning heat, as it is stated (ibid. verse 20): ‘But to you who fear My name [those who study the Torah], the sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in its wings.’”

<sup>6</sup> Angel has written about Samet's methodology in “Review of Rabbi Elhanan Samet, Iyyunim BeParashot HaShavua,” in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), 21-33. Interested readers can find an English translation of Rabbi Samet's interpretation online at the Yeshivat Har Etzion [website](#). In addition, an excellent summary of Rabbi Samet's approach and methodology is available [here](#).



created to serve you. Have they perhaps changed their ways?" ... [Rather, the sun] is happy to do My will, as it is stated: 'And it is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber' (Psalms 19:6).

Surely, there is an a fortiori argument: "If they who do not act for reward nor for loss ... then you, who if you merit you receive reward, and if you sin you receive punishment ... all the more so you must not change your ways." After mentioning other approaches in how to divide the Psalm without critique, Angel then deals with the larger philosophic question of the relationship between the study of Torah and appreciating God's handiwork through nature, quoting Maimonides, Rabbi Norman Lamm, *Pirkei Avot*, and his father, Rabbi Marc Angel.

Where Angel's modern sensibilities come to the fore are not in his interpretations of text. There his strength is in his careful gathering and analysis of previous commentators, providing a living example of how to approach a text. His strongest essays, in this reviewer's opinions, are those that directly deal with the more difficult questions that arise from plain readings of the biblical text. The challenges can be those dealing with the age of the universe and texts which *prima facie* are difficult for a modern person to accept, at least on a literal level.

Even more revealing are Angel's treatment of moral questions, whether Jacob's deception of his blind father Isaac in Genesis 27, misleading him so that he would receive the blessing Isaac wanted to give to Esau, or the theological questions posed by the "*Akeidah*," when Abraham bound Isaac as a sacrifice in Genesis 22. For many, the questions cannot even be asked. If our righteous forefathers performed it, they must not be asked. How much more so if God commands something, that it must be moral.<sup>7</sup> Angel notes these views, but then demonstrates the multi-faceted nature of Jewish thought and commentary, providing opposing viewpoints and fulfilling the popular dictum that "where there are two Jews, there are three opinions." Each of the opinions is evaluated, based on its plausibility from both the theological and literary aspects. But Angel does not limit himself to "kosher" thinkers either. Every voice that has something to add to the discussion is invited to participate. The discussion of the *Akeidah* includes the views of Immanuel Kant, Maimonides, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Moshe Halbertal, Soren Kierkegaard, David Shatz, and Shalom Carmy, for starters.

It is this willingness to learn from everyone that makes Angel one of the great *Tanakh* teachers of our time, and this accessible volume a necessary resource for anyone wishing to

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<sup>7</sup> This approach is best exemplified by the words of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Piaseczno Rebbe: "Now the nations of the world, even the best of them, think that truth exists independently, and that God commanded the truth because in and of itself it is true ... This is in contrast with Israel, who say: You are the God of truth; He, may He be blessed, is truth, and there is no truth outside of Him. All the truth in the world is [true] only because so God commanded and willed. Since He, may He be blessed, is truth, therefore, this too is truth. One is forbidden to steal because the God of truth so commanded. Because of the command of the true God, this is true as well. But when God commands the opposite—that property declared by a court to be ownerless is ownerless—then that becomes the truth, that this person's property is ownerless. And when God commanded our father, Abraham, to bind up his son Isaac [as an offering], then it was the truth to bind him. Had He not said to him afterwards, 'Do nothing to him,' it would have been the truth to slaughter him" (*Esh Kodesh*, 68).

understand the *Tanakh* on a sophisticated level, yet as a book that ultimately strengthen one beliefs.

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