

Shabbat Parashat Vayechi 5786

Rabbi David Englander

A Big Tent for Study and Faith

A couple of weeks ago, we had the pleasure of welcoming Professor Mark Leuchter back to Beth El. Many of you were there. You heard a scholar who cares deeply about his subject and just as deeply about the people listening to him. He teaches seriously without being intimidating, thoughtfully without being distant.

But I also want to say something out loud that some people may have felt and experienced, which is that for certain audiences, Mark can be controversial.

So I want to spend a few minutes this morning explaining why that is, and why I choose, very intentionally, to invite scholars like him into our community anyway.

The controversy goes back to how we understand Torah itself.

For much of Jewish history, the Torah was understood primarily as sacred history of divine origin. Holy because God revealed it. Authoritative because God authored it. Interpretation was encouraged, but the foundation was assumed. The text we have is the text that always was.

Then, in the modern period, scholars began asking new questions of the Torah. Historical questions. Literary questions. Questions about how stories were shaped, preserved, and transmitted. Some worried that these approaches drained Torah of holiness. Solomon Schechter, one of the founders of the Conservative Movement, feared that studying Torah only as a human document would empty it of its sanctity.

That tension did not remain theoretical. It became institutional, and affected the way academics learned and how rabbis and cantors were trained.

JTS is probably the best example of this shift. At the Jewish Theological Seminary, people used to joke about an ongoing struggle between the Bible Department and the Talmud Department.

The Bible scholars studied Torah historically and critically. They asked where the text came from, how it developed, and what it tells us about the ancient world and Israel's understanding of God. They were less focused on whether the Torah was given word for word at Sinai. This is Professor Leuchter's approach, and one that is very common in academic Bible study.

The Talmud scholars, on the other hand, were building systems of Jewish law and practice on the assumption that the Torah's authority rests on divine revelation. For them, the structure of Judaism only makes sense if the foundation is sacred and binding.

Each department thought the other was missing something essential.

And that brings us back to the question many people still ask.

Rabbi, which do you believe?

Is Torah divine revelation, or is it a product of human history? Is it holy because God gave it, or meaningful because people shaped it?

My answer is that the question itself assumes we have to choose. And I am not sure we do.

Let me show you what I mean through the Joseph story.

Read traditionally, Joseph's story is sacred history unfolding under divine guidance. Joseph is sold by his brothers, rises to power in Egypt, and ultimately saves his family from famine. What looks like betrayal becomes redemption. As Joseph says, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." In this reading, God is quietly directing events so that the Israelites end up in Egypt, setting the stage for redemption and the Exodus.

Now listen to how some critical scholars read the very same story.

They ask whether the Joseph narrative may have been shaped later as a theological explanation rather than a simple record of events. Why were the Israelites in Egypt to begin with? What are we meant to learn as a result of being the descendants of those whose story includes tyranny and enslavement, so that we would know to seek freedom and justice? The Joseph story, read this way, becomes a national memory shaped into narrative. A story that explains identity. A story that insists our descent into Egypt was not an accident or a failure, but part of a larger arc that leads to peoplehood and redemption.

A reading that learns lessons from its messages and content without insisting on its full historical accuracy. That reading can feel unsettling, because it shifts the question from “Did this happen exactly this way?” to “Why was this story told this way?”

But here is what matters to me.

Even if one were to read the Joseph story as shaped memory rather than literal history, the truth it carries does not disappear. It still teaches that families can fracture and still heal. That suffering does not have the final word. That meaning can emerge only in retrospect. And from a faith-based perspective, those truths are not weakened by the questions. They are deepened by them.

Same Torah. Two lenses.

One sees divine orchestration moving history toward redemption. The other sees a people making sense of its past in order to claim its future.

And I believe Torah is big enough to hold both.

When I pray, I pray to the God who calls us to live as beings created in the divine image, who speaks through sacred words and sacred obligations. When I study, I bring curiosity, reason, and every tool available to understand those words more deeply. Classical commentators and modern scholarship. Faith and intellect together.

That is not a contradiction. It is a conversation.

And that brings me to community.

I have said recently that I hope Beth El continues to be a big tent, especially in a moment when the world feels fractured and polarized. I mean that politically and socially, but I also mean it religiously.

Doubters and believers have been praying together for longer than we like to admit. People who experience Torah as divine command and people who experience it as sacred human striving have been building Jewish life together for generations.

What binds us is not uniform belief, but shared commitment. To learning. To practice. To showing up. To wrestling honestly with what it all means.

So I want to ask you, gently, not what you believe, but where you place yourself in this tent.

Are you here because of certainty? Or because of questions? Because of faith? Because of community? Hopefully you are here because this tradition still speaks, even when the study of how it all came together challenges us but also helps us to understand it in deeper, more relevant, and profound ways.

There is room here for all of that.

A tradition that has survived by asking questions should not fear them now. Torah does not require us to read it the same way, only that we keep returning to it. Again and again. With faith. With questions. With curiosity. When Torah remains our shared language, it continues to bind us to one another, as it always has, and hopefully always will.

Shabbat Shalom.