



## The Relevance of the Mikrā' to the Life of Modern Mankind

By  
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"Was Judaism ever 'in accordance with the times'? Did Judaism ever correspond with the views of dominant contemporaries? Was it ever convenient to be a Jew or a Jewess?

Was the Judaism of our ancestors in accordance with the times, when compelled by the Egyptians to bend their necks during decades under the yoke of slavery and to suffer their babes to be buried in the waves of the Nile? Was the Judaism of the Maccabees in accordance with their times, when they resisted to the utmost the introduction of Grecian manners prevailing in their days? When the Temple at Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans and the sons of Judah were slaughtered, sold in slave markets, cast before wild beasts or scattered through every country then known; when Worldly Wisdom would have taught, 'Now it is certainly impossible for us to remain Jews'... Was that Judaism in accordance with the times, for which, during the centuries following the Dispersion, our fathers suffered in all lands, through all the various periods, the most degrading oppression, the most biting contempt, and a thousand-fold death and persecution?

And yet we would make it the aim and scope of Judaism to be always 'in accordance with the times'!" **Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1854**

The question of the continuing relevance of the Mikrā' in the "modern scientific age" is linked to the question of the value of history and the value of science. It is sometimes suggested that the world, as we "moderns" know it, is radically different from the world as seen by our ancient ancestors. We have problems that our ancient ancestors could not have thought of i.e. Nuclear Proliferation, Atomic Warfare, Global Warming etc, so books which were meaningful to our ancient ancestors are no longer meaningful or relevant to us. How far is this objection true?

The above objection falls down on the fact that there are perennial problems, these being problems which persist throughout the ages, albeit in different forms and in different cultural contexts. The basis of the idea that there are perennial problems is that, despite the gap in time between our ancient ancestors and ourselves, we are conscious that we share the same human nature. Human Beings have needs and problems stemming simply from what they are, and from the relation between their

nature and the physical world in which they live. These problems recur from one generation to the next. However, the *Mikrā'* deals with them as seen by our ancient ancestors.

It may be objected that there are many books, some stemming from times and cultures nearer to our own, that we may use to read of these problems, so why do we require the ancient writings of one people, writings written long ago under different situations than those of today? The answer is that this is, to a degree true. These problems recur in the literature of other peoples, to which we must ascribe a value. In this case, the *Mikrā'* is seen as one book among many. We can, however, argue for two uses. We can point out firstly that we study these perennial problems through the study of history, a discipline in which we must specialise because of the immense scope of the subject; it is therefore possible to investigate these problems through the *Mikrā'*. However, this would not establish a claim that the *Mikrā'* is somehow relevant to all peoples. We can also argue secondly, that the *Mikrā'* is part of the totality of history, and that in this sense it has an enduring claim. This sort of claim can be made for any extract of ancient history, however, so although it justifies the claim that the *Mikrā'* has historical relevance it cannot go beyond that to universal relevance.

There is also the problem that in the "modern scientific age" textbooks quickly become obsolete. Science replaces knowledge very quickly. Scientific textbooks are often disposable after only a few years. Can we not say that the *Mikrā'* is similarly disposable? We really cannot do this, for to argue that it is as disposable as a scientific textbook is to confuse two different kinds of literature. Scientific literature is, as scientists admit, theory, and theory is only useful as far as it helps to solve problems. Once a better theory is produced old theories are disposed of. Accounts of human experience; i.e. the other kind of literature, are unique. Similarly, accounts of mankind's adventures are unique, for no one can ever recreate the unique experience of the adventures of another. Such things have a lasting value. Put in simple terms, the theory of gravity, proposed by the famous scientist Isaac Newton, has now been improved and the old theory abandoned, but the account of Newton's discovery of the "law of gravitation", as he sat under the apple tree, has lasting value. The *Mikrā'* recounts the exploits and experiences of our ancient ancestors, and, therefore, is in this sense irreplaceable.

Other elements of lasting value include stories, poetry and songs. These are also found in the *Mikrā'*. The book of Psalms, for instance, is just such a work of enduring beauty. The book of *Îyyōv* [Job] is a story that rehearses the age-old problem of why bad things happen to good people. Times may change but such tales endure as classics.

So far, I have concentrated on the secular aspect of the *Mikrā'*'s value. This now takes us onto the value of science. Science is very useful for making the material life of mankind better, that is if it does not destroy the planet first. It can help us to understand how the universe was formed, the laws of physics that govern the material universe and the way our bodies work etc, but science does not satisfy the need in mankind for the ultimate truth. It cannot prescribe the morally right course of action, nor can science provide a satisfactory account of its own foundations. Other subjects such as ethics are needed; the *Mikrā'* provides an ethic that science cannot provide. Science provides us with the techniques for solving the physical aspects of some of our problems, but it cannot solve the problems of human

relationships. Reflecting on the experience of 'Ēlōhîm [God] as revealed in the Mikrā' can help in this respect. Science has not replaced Religion in this age, nor can one ever replace the other. The Mikrā' addresses the enduring religious needs of mankind.

This takes us on to the fundamental question of the value of the Mikrā'. The Mikrā' tells us of the encounter between the living 'Ēlōhîm, YHWH, and the Children of Yisrā'el. It provides us with experiences that are unique, rare and profound. It reveals to us what the only living 'Ēlōhîm requires from us.

War is a common feature in the Mikrā'. War did not die out in the Biblical period but is still a well known feature of modern day society. The wars of today are more deadly than any war was in the past, for now we have weapons of mass destruction (Nuclear, Biological and Chemical). The Mikrā' informs us that there is such a thing as a just war and that sometimes war is a necessary evil, a nation must protect itself against another nation bent on its destruction, and the war against Nazi Germany and her allies was such a war. In the Book of Deuteronomy there are certain rules and regulations that govern war. For instance "And a place there shall be for you, outside the camp; and you shall go outside there. And a spade there shall be for you with your weapons; and it shall be when you sit outside (to relieve yourself), you shall dig with it, and you shall return and you shall cover up your excrement". (Deut. 23:13-14)<sup>1</sup> This is important because even though war is a matter of destroying the enemy, soldiers must not lose their sense of being human. In Deuteronomy it is written "When you shall besiege a city (for) many days to war against it to seize it you shall not harm its trees to wield an axe against them, because from them you may eat, and them you shall not cut down; for are the trees of the field human beings, to come against you in the siege? Only the trees which you know that they are not trees for food, them you may harm and cut down; and you may build siege (works) against the city that is making war with you until it be dominated." (Deut. 20:19-20) This passage has great relevance in an age with weapons of mass destruction; our wars are against each other and not against the world around us. All channels of negotiations must be exhausted before a war is undertaken as can be learnt from Deut. 20:10-12, "When you come near to a city, to war against it; you shall proclaim peace to it. And it shall be if peace it answers you, and it opens to you; then it shall be all the people that are present in it shall be to you for tribute and they shall serve you. And if it will not make peace with you, and make war against you; then you may besiege it."

Poverty is still very much relevant today as it was to our ancient ancestors. There are nations who are starving, while others have so much surplus, which they destroy in order to keep food prices artificially high. That is not to say that wealthy nations must pour their surplus into the "Third World", but that they must help them to become self-reliant, to give to them enough to halt starvation and help them to help themselves.

Social justice is not something that went out of fashion 3,500 years ago, but something that holds value for all eternity. The oppression of the poor, the down trodden and the defenceless, the abuse of the employee in this dog eat dog society are issues that stare us in the face every day. This is one of the main concerns of the Mikrā', "He has told you man what is good; and what YHWH requires from you only

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<sup>1</sup> All the Biblical verses in this article have been translated by the author.

do justice and love piety, and walk in modesty with your ‘Ēlōhîm.’ (Micah 6:8) For this “modern society” is made up of those “Who trample on the dust of the earth with the heads of the poor, and the way of the humble they turn aside.” (Amos 2:7)

The Mikrā’ condemns judges who take bribes and thus pervert the course of justice. The prophet ‘Āmōs sternly denounces this practice, “For I know your many transgressions, and numerous are your sins; you harassers of the righteous you takers of ransom, and the needy in the gate you turn aside.” (Amos 5:12) In western countries where law cases can be used to reap mass financial profits, we must realise that the legal system is not there for our own means. Any country that separates the concept of justice from its legal system is on a downward spiral towards injustice and the proliferation of inequality.

Rape, adultery, murder, theft and sexual depravity amongst other things are sicknesses that have a grasp upon the society of today no less, in fact even more so, than they did at the time of the prophets. Over the past 50 years there has been a general collapse of morality, especially sexual morality. The morality of man is fickle, changing its course as the wind blows. That which is classified as immoral today becomes legitimate tomorrow. For instance, adultery was once seen as a hideous crime, the adulteress or adulterer being shunned by society. Then it became a civil offence, and now, the committing of adultery is regarded lightly, perceived as if no wrong had been perpetrated. The film industry and television portray it as an every day fact of life something to be even encouraged. Wife swapping parties are even blatantly advertised and those who participate in them even boast of their exploits with no fear of any recrimination, while the Tōrā explicitly states “And a man who commits adultery with the wife of (another) man, who commits adultery with his neighbour’s wife; death is to be put to death the adulterer and the adulteress.” (Lev. 20:10)

What is classified as moral by one culture is viewed as being totally abhorrent by another. A good example of this is cannibalism. Where cannibalism has been socially sanctioned, the reasons for its practice have ranged from a belief in its magico-ritual significance to its necessity as a means of survival. In the cannibalism traditionally practised in Sierra Leone, Africa, by the Leopard Society, members of this secret society claimed they turned into leopards, after which they disembowelled their enemies and ate portions of the corpses. In certain religious festivals of the ancient Aztec people of Mesoamerica, the meat of sacrificial victims was distributed among the crowds congregated around the temples. The Australian Aborigines traditionally did not kill others for the purpose of eating them, but burial cannibalism was widespread. Usually, this involved cooking and eating parts of a corpse to gain strength. In some areas a mother would eat her stillborn child to reabsorb its spirit and later, it was believed, give birth to it again. Human flesh was also eaten in order to absorb some of the dead person’s qualities or to identify publicly with the deceased and so ward off accusations of sorcery. In Papua New Guinea cannibalism was formerly widespread, the Papuans living in the Purari Delta viewed human meat as a food source. In the eastern highlands, the ritual eating and garden burial of dead kin and lineage members were considered significant for fertility, but only enemy dead could be regarded as food. Some of these people exhumed the body of a dead relative in order to eat it when partially decomposed. Of course those Europeans who came into contact with the above societies were absolutely appalled by what they saw, an act that was regarded by those above peoples as being morally correct.

The above two examples of adultery and cannibalism go to prove that absolute morality cannot be defined by man and can only be truly defined by the creator of all things and living 'Elohim, YHWH. In today's western societies laws are partly guided by the Mikrah and partly by human enactments at various periods. They make changes and alterations, accommodating them to the customs of the day and render established principles subservient to temporary whims and arbitrary innovations.

The divine revelation proceeds from Infinite Wisdom and is therefore in itself complete and perfect in its aim, we cannot possibly admit of any change, deviation, addition or diminution, "Everything that I command you, it you shall keep to do; you shall not add to it, and you shall not diminish from it." (Deut. 13:1) "And all that I said to you, you are to keep." (Ex. 23:13) and, "Only be strong and very courageous to keep and to do according to all the Tōrā which Mōshe My servant commanded you, turn not from it to the right or to the left; in order that you may prosper, wherever you go." (Josh. 1:7) As YHWH is synonymous with perfection, His Tōrā is therefore perfect it is not deficient like the laws made by man, for as the Psalmist says, "The Tōrā of YHWH is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of YHWH is faithful, making wise the simple. The orders of YHWH are honest, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of YHWH is clear, enlightening the eyes. The reverence of YHWH is pure, standing forever; the judgements of YHWH are true and righteous altogether." (Psalm 19:8-10) The divine law in its sublime perfection is not to be enlarged or curtailed and much less to be abrogated and superseded for "He has remembered His covenant forever, the word He commanded to a thousand generations." (Psalm 105:8)

From the above verses we can see that we are obligated to keep the Tōrā in its entirety, the keeping of the Tōrā is compulsory to ever Yisrē'ēlī [Israelite] and not if one desires to do so as most people think. If we fail to keep the Tōrā then we will have to bear the consequences with much suffering "And you shall know, that YHWH your 'Ēlōhîm He is the 'Ēlōhîm; the faithful 'Ēlōhîm, keeping the covenant and the piety of those who love Him and keep His commandments to the thousandth generation. And paying those who hate Him to His face by destroying them; He will not delay to him who hates Him, to His face He will pay him. And you shall keep the command and the laws and the judgements that I command you today to do them." (Deut. 7:9-11) and again, "And it shall be if you forget forget YHWH your 'Ēlōhîm, and walk after other 'ēlōhîm [gods], and serve them and you bow down to them; I call witness against you today, that you shall be destroyed destroyed. Like the nations that YHWH is destroying from before you, yes you shall be destroyed; in consequence of you not hearing, the voice of YHWH your 'Ēlōhîm." (Deut. 8:19-20) Great disasters have befallen the Children of Yisrā'ēl on account of the fact that they refuse to keep the Tōrā, all of which was forewarned, see Deuteronomy 28:15-68.

To keep the Tōrā is life itself to go against the Tōrā is death. "I call as witness against you today the heavens and the earth life and death I place before you, the blessing and the curse; and you shall choose life, in order that you shall live you and your seed. For loving YHWH your 'Ēlōhîm, for hearing His voice and for holding fast to Him; for He is your life and length of your days, to be settled on the soil that YHWH swore to your fathers to 'Avrāhām, to Yishāk [Isaac] and to Ya'ăkōv [Jacob] to give to them." (Deut. 30:19-20) "And you shall keep My laws and My judgements, which when a human does them he lives by them; I am YHWH." (Lev. 18:5)

If the Children of Yisrā'ēl would only turn back from their wayward ways and keep YHWH's Tōrā, then great things will be in store for them. "And it shall be in consequence of you hearing these judgements, and you keeping and you doing them; then YHWH your 'Ēlōhîm will keep for you the covenant and the lovingkindness, that He swore to your fathers. He will love you, and He will bless you and He will make you many; and He will bless the fruit of your belly and the fruit of your soil your grain and your new wine and your fresh oil offspring of your cattle and the fecundity of your flocks, on the ground, that He swore to your fathers to give you. Blessed you shall be from all the peoples; there shall not be among you barren male or barren female nor among your beasts. And YHWH will remove from among you all sicknesses; and all the evil diseases (of) Miṣrâyim [Egypt] that you knew He will not put them upon you, but He will place them on all who hate you." (Deut. 7:12-15) "And now if you will hear hear My voice, and you keep My covenant; then you shall be to Me a treasured possession from all the peoples, since all the earth is Mine." (Ex. 19:5), see also Deuteronomy 28:1-14.

In conclusion the basis for the claims of the Mikrā' is made firstly on its claim to deal with perennial problems. There are human issues that recur from one generation to the next. Freedom and slavery, social justice, the great questions of "life after death", "why am I here?" "right and wrong", "what is my purpose?" "What defines morality and immorality?" are all of eternal value. They are the roots of questions asked by successive generations of people. The questions asked at the time of the prophets are the same questions we ask today. In this sense the Mikrā' is relevant. The central claim of the Mikrā' is that its perennial problems were dealt with and answered by the revelation of the eternal 'Ēlōhîm, YHWH. The basis of this claim is that 'Ēlōhîm is not dead, that 'Ēlōhîm is alive and active and still interested in mankind, the answers given by YHWH strike straight to the heart of human problems. Human needs do not change. YHWH as our creator knows the answer to our needs, an answer that YHWH gave at Mount Sînâ [Sinai] and which is still relevant now. It was YHWH who revealed the Mikrā' and as YHWH has eternal value so the Mikrā' has eternal value too, "For this 'Ēlōhîm, is our 'Ēlōhîm forever and ever; He will lead us till death." (Psalm 48:15) "Your throne, O 'Ēlōhîm is forever and ever." (Psalm 45:6)