YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

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**Shiur #08:**

**Biblical Narratives — Fresh vs. Retrospective Reading**

We have devoted extensive discussion to the centrality of the freedom of choice in the Jewish worldview as explained by Manitou. We will now see how this same emphasis on freedom of choice shapes his unique approach to the study of *Tanakh*.

According to the conventional view, the commandments (*mitzvot*) are the essence of the Torah, instructing us as to what we should and should not do, while the narratives are merely appendices. Manitou, by contrast, places the emphasis on the narratives: the Torah describes events in the journey through history. The *mitzvot*, too, are given at specific points along the way; they are not all given and recorded together at the same time. The reader must pay attention to the stage in the story at which each mitzva is introduced. The story is not a framework for or background to the *mitzvot*; rather, the *mitzvot* are an element of the story.

The plot set out in the Torah is familiar to all of us. The main events include the Creation of the Universe; the story of Adam and Chava; the Flood; the selection of Avraham; the stories of the forefathers and their separation from Yishmael and Eisav; the enslavement in Egypt and the Exodus; the Giving of the Torah; and the journey through the wilderness to Eretz Yisrael. All of this is usually read as a given sequence, as though everything happens the way it is meant to. Simply put, this is the process that mankind has to undergo in order to realize God's plan. But is this in fact true? Does everything really have to happen this way?

We might imagine the above perception of the plot set out in the Torah as a train. All the stations are predetermined, and the train passes through each in turn on its journey to its final destination. It follows a set route, on tracks that are fixed in the ground. However, according to Manitou's view, a car would be a more accurate mental picture. While a car, too, travels towards a Divinely-appointed destiny, there is no fixed route that it has to follow. At every junction a left turn or right turn is possible in equal measure.

Our problem, according to Manitou, is that we are already familiar with the narrative. As we approach each new event in the story, we know how it plays out and what the next step will be. Hence, our impression is that the next stage follows on inexorably from the present one. Manitou urges us to stop at each stage and think about all the different directions that the plot could take. Once the plot takes a certain direction, we must think about the ramifications of that development rather than some other:

From a young age, we are accustomed to reading the biblical plot, having in the back of our minds the knowledge of how the story progresses and what direction it takes. We must read every verse in its own right, as though every situation in the Torah may develop in any direction. It all happens in such a way that at every stage there is absolute free choice, such that the story may progress to a host of different destinations.

With hindsight, it seems to us as though the story had to happen in the way it is described, rather than in any other way. It seems as though every part of the story is fixed and inscribed in advance, cast in a fatalistic light, as though it could not have been otherwise; but this feeling is unsuited to the spirit of the Torah. Admittedly, at each stage, the scope of free choice becomes more restricted, but it remains throughout. (*Sod Ha-Ivri* I, p. 105)

Manitou distinguishes two ways of reading the Torah: a retrospective reading or a “fresh” reading. A retrospective reading understands the events of each chapter in light of what happens afterwards. A fresh reading approaches the Torah narrative without reference to what follows. It does not assume that whatever happens is what has to happen; instead, it is aware of the other possibilities that exist, and that outcome is dependent on free choice. It is the free choice of the agents involved that shapes the progression of the plot. Different decisions would lead the story in a different direction.

We have to approach the Torah with the view to a fresh reading, not a retrospective one. We should not regard the events recounted as a train route with fixed stations, but rather as a system of roads where every corner and junction offers different possibilities. Such an approach demands that we study in depth and understand, at every stage, not only what happens, but also what the alternatives were and what else could have happened. Since everything boils down to free choice, every situation in the Torah could develop in diverse ways, and at every stage the story may turn in a different direction, towards a different ending.

The distinction between a fresh and a retrospective reading is somewhat like the distinction between a prophet and an astrologist. The astrologist, the sage of the culture of necessity, foretells the future that has been dictated in advance. A prophet, on the other hand, presents two different futures; the question of which will come to pass is dependent on whether the nation chooses to mend its ways or (heaven forbid) to pursue evil. The fortune-telling astrologist claims to know what will happen; while the prophet declares only “what will happen if,” presenting the possibilities that will result from various human choices.

Prophecy leaves room for repentance; it warns of where the choice to do evil will lead and calls for people to choose a better path. In most instances, prophecies of doom are conveyed with the express purpose that they will not be realized; instead, they are meant to arouse the people to repent and thereby change the direction in which the future is heading.

The prophet Yona, for instance, is well-aware that the possibility of choosing good always exists; thus, the people of Nineveh can wake up and mend their ways in the wake of his warnings. He is also well aware that people nevertheless perceive the prophet as a fortune-teller, and thus after the people of Nineveh have a chance to repent, his prophecy will seem like a hoax, since Nineveh will not be overturned, despite his warnings.

Every event should cause us to draw conclusions with a view to changing the future. The faith of the Torah is optimistic, not pessimistic and tragic. Just as every individual in our world has free choice, and every decision opens the door to a different future, so too the people described in the biblical narratives are always faced with more than one possible path. Each time, their choice influences the direction in which the world progresses.

For Manitou, then, there is a close and intimate connection between the conceptual dimension of free choice and morality, and the exegetical dimension of events recorded in the Torah.

**Examples**

To see an example of this, let us go back to the beginning of the Torah, to the story of Kayin and Hevel. Manitou’s approach opens our eyes to new questions in the passage, in view of the fact that, with his free choice, Kayin may choose not to kill his brother. What happens then? What does God expect of each of them? What is the destiny of each of them? How will humankind develop? These are questions that generally do not occur to us.

We need to guard ourselves against the sense of fatalism that accompanies the story at this stage of human history, because at every stage in the story, both the spiritually-inclined son (the educator, leader) and the nature-loving son (strongly connected to the physical world) may fulfill their respective roles with a commitment to fraternity and unity, and thereby change the end of the story. Therefore, although the drama plays itself out as though in a fatalistic way, seemingly doomed from the start, everything actually only happens after the fact — as a result of their choices. In truth, everything could have been good.

It is specifically our intimate familiarity with the biblical story that hampers us, for we do not try to imagine how the story could have proceeded differently. We know that Kayin murdered Hevel, and that Tuval-Kayin caused Kayin’s death. We know that there was a Flood ten generations after Adam, and that it wiped out all of humanity, with the exception of one family. We are so familiar with the details of the story that it seems to us as though every stage is preordained and inexorable. But the message of our Torah of life is the opposite: that at every stage, humanity has freedom of choice as to how to behave. At every stage, each of the human characters who shape the historical events has the freedom to choose whether to go in the direction of destruction and ruin, or in the direction of building and life.

We find a hint to this in the names of the active agents: each name includes both meanings and both possible directions that the heroes can take. (Kayin derives from *kinyan* [possession] or *nekiyut* [innocence, flawlessness]; Hevel means “breath” [the essence of life] or “transient mist” [see, for example, ibid. p. 128].) Each of these characters choose destruction, and for this reason the situation does actually descend into murderous violence, but only retrospectively. (*Sod Ha-Ivri* I, p. 169)

**Another example from *Sefer Bereishit***

Admittedly, in the story of Kayin and Hevel, the alternative realities are not immediately apparent, but in other narratives they are easier to find, and a fresh reading sheds light on them.

When Noach is born, for example, we are told that he is named with the hope that “this one will comfort us (*yenachameinu*) in our work and in the toil of our hands, which comes from the ground that the Lord cursed” (*Bereishit* 5:29). We usually skim over these words with the thought that this wish has little relevance, since soon afterwards all of humanity is wiped out. Noach does not ultimately bring comfort to the people of his generation; the hope turns out to have been misplaced.

However, reading this verse from a fresh perspective, we understand that when Noach is born, there is indeed great hope for humanity. Noach has the potential to lead humanity back to a reality in which the ground is not cursed; but the people of that generation choose not to allow that potential to be realized, and they pursue a path that pushes the world towards destruction (as we shall discuss in greater detail in the next chapter).

If the biblical narrative were pessimistic from the outset, the Torah would not include it, because the ultimate message of the Torah is not tragic, but rather optimistic. If a story appears in the Torah, the aim is that we should learn a lesson from it, so as to change our future. This is a task; it is a drama, not a tragedy, for in the Torah the process will always end with resolution. *Sod Ha-Ivri* I, p. 105)