**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**Reading Sefer Bereishit: A Literary Approach**

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**Shiur #02: Modern Literary Interpretation**

In the last half century, a novel approach to biblical interpretation emerged. Like the first two approaches, the literary school focuses on the unified text as we have it, and assumes that the *Chumash* is full of literary splendor and ethical insight. It also accepts some of the assumptions of academic Bible scholars, yet moves exegesis in a totally different direction. Their innovation is in the discovery of a number of sophisticated literary techniques that aid in conveying the Bible’smessages. Since subsequent chapters in this series outline at least twenty such techniques in *Sefer Bereishit*, I will hold off on specific examples for now.

This approach frequently differs from the medieval in the sweep and scope of its survey. The *Rishonim* mostly wrote verse-by-verse commentaries and tend to painstakingly analyze smaller units of text. Since the modern interpreters look for larger literary patterns and seek out intertextual allusions, they both investigate larger units and depend more on the broader range of biblical literature*.* As with all generalities, exceptions do exist; for instance, both Ramban and Abravanel looked at longer units and uncovered biblical patterns. (Note their respective introductions to the five books of *Chumash*, and Abravanel’s essays on entire biblical chapters.) Nonetheless, our generality conveys a fairly comprehensive truth. In fact, one can usually identify a teacher’s methodological preference based on which type of *Chumash* they employ. Those attracted to *Chazal* will use a *Mikraot Gedolot*, which includes the midrashically oriented commentaries of Kli Yakar and *Ohr Ha-Chaim*. Those more inclined towards the medieval commentaries will use the *Torat Chaim*, which incorporates Rasag, Radak, and Chizkuni. In contrast, adherents of the modern approach will hold an entire Tanakh in their hand, as they need the larger vision.

Though this modern approach truly took off in the 1970s and 1980s, it has precursors. Martin Buber and Franz Rosensweig noted certain features of biblical literary technique and tried to preserve some of it in their German Bible translation. For example, they attempted to maintain the original puns and wordplay, something extremely difficult to do in translation. Erich Auerbach wrote a famous essay in *Mimesis* contrasting biblical style with that of Homer: where Homer spells everything out, the biblical authors are reticent about the physical characteristics of the characters and the backdrop, as well as about the motivations and thoughts of the characters, yet various literary techniques move the reader to confront motivation and ethical value questions. In that sense, the biblical text is, to employ Auerbach’s terminology, “fraught with background.” Arguably, Umberto Cassuto, Nechama Leibowitz, Meir Weiss, and Shlomo Goiten should also be listed among the precursors.

In the 1960s, Menachem Perry and Meir Sternberg wrote some groundbreaking essays in the journal *Hasifrut* that showed, among other things, how the Bible utilizes gaps and ambiguities to convey its messages. In the next decade, Robert Alter started publishing essays on biblical narrative in *Commentary* magazine; they later developed into *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. Sternberg ultimately published an important volume entitled *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative.* Other names who have made helpful contributions include J. P. Fokkelman, Michael Fishbane, Adele Berlin, and Jon Levenson. It is interesting to notice two prevalent patterns among the contributors. First, Auerbach, Alter, and Sternberg all came from literature departments rather than from the world of Bible scholarship. A scholarly field may develop a certain narrowness, while an outsider can more easily see what else can be done beyond the standard in the field. Professors who were not exclusively focused on the Ancient Near East and carving up the text were able to see the beauty of the Bible for what it is. Second, Levenson and Fishbane are seriously observant Jews. While a critic could claim this biases them in favor of finding religious meaning, one could also say that this motivates them to discover insight which is truly present.

Simultaneously, a revolution in Tanakh study was occurring in the religious Zionist community in Israel. A return to the land of the Bible and a modern sovereign state identifying with the earlier kingdoms of Israel helped motivate a greater emphasis on Bible study in the religious school curriculum. Tanakh study is far more significant in contemporary Israeli *hesder yeshivot* than it was in the pre-war *yeshivot* of Eastern Europe. The monumental lifework of Nechama Leibowitz generated renewed interest in Tanakh even before the rise of Religious Zionist *yeshivot*. Hundreds of people would attempt to answer her weekly *parasha* questions, and she eventually published a series of very popular Studies on *Chumash*. In turn, teachers at these Zionist *yeshivot* moved biblical study in new directions. While Leibowitz focused mostly on analyzing traditional commentaries, Rabbis Mordechai Breuer and Yoel Bin-Nun confronted the biblical text directly. Their students, Rabbis Yaakov Medan, Elchanan Samet, Amnon Bazak, and Menachem Leibtag, have all been influential. Though there are serious differences between these various scholars, it is not crucial for us to explore those differences at present. (Their work can be seen in Machon Herzog’s journal *Megadim* and elsewhere, including on this site.) In this author’s estimation, the greatest figure in this orbit and the one who has contributed the most to a well-grounded literary approach to Tanakh has been Dr. Yonatan Grossman. A prolific author who has already published eight volumes, Grossman has broad knowledge of academic studies and an acute literary sensitivity.

Are these literary scholars opening us up to the wonder of the Bible, or are they forcing into the text things that are simply not there? Addressing this question requires exploring various applicationsof the literary approach and evaluating how convincing they are. It is to this endeavor we now turn. Almost all of our examples will be drawn from *Sefer Bereishit*, in an attempt to narrow the range of our study. The proof of the literary approach will be in the taste of the treats produced in the literary kitchen.

This series will outline at least twenty different literary techniques, with the goal of clearly demonstrating the sophistication and splendor of biblical narrative. Following that, we shall use particular case studies to contrast the academic and modern literary approaches. This admittedly partisan section will show shortcomings and weaknesses of the academic approach. The third section will highlight an erroneous approach to biblical interpretation often found in the Orthodox community – namely, adesire to portray the patriarchs as almost flawless and to present a more black-and-white view of the world ironically ends up undermining the power of *Chumash*. Finally, the closing section responds to moral critiques of the Pentateuch, both in *Sefer Bereishit* and beyond.

Before beginning with the first technique, I note that we will not only be citing Alter, Sternberg, Grossman and their peers. We shall see how midrash and medieval commentaries often picked up on these literary methods, albeit in a less systematic fashion than the moderns.

1. **Word sequence**

The significance of sequence is sometimes quite obvious. In *Bereishit* 33:2, Yaakov prepares to encounter Eisav and his four hundred men by placing the maidservants and their children in front, followed by Leah and her children, followed by Rachel and Yosef. Clearly, this placement reflects a pecking order in which Yaakov values Rachel, his most beloved wife, more than the others. *Chumash* here cleverly refers to Bilha and Zilpa as *shefachot* rather than *nashim* )wives, as in *Bereishit* 37:2) to convey their inferior status in this context.

On other occasions, however,sequence functions more subtly. For instance:

But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, and your sons, and your wife, and your sons' wives with you. (*Bereishit* 6:18)

And Noach went in, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him, into the ark, because of the waters of the flood. (*Bereishit* 7:7)

Go forth from the ark, you, and your wife, and your sons, and your sons' wives with you. (*Bereishit* 8:16)

And Noach went forth, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him. (*Bereishit* 8:18)

The command to enter the ark and the carrying out of that command separate husbands and wives, yet the command to leave the ark juxtaposes them. *Chazal* and *Rishonim* suggest that the break between men and women conveys that they are not meant to engage in martial relations on the ark, while humanity is suffering; as soon as the flood ends, they can resume living as husbands and wives. However, the *pasuk* recounting their leaving returns to marital separation. Why would they exit the ark in separate units? Perhaps Noach was afraid to restart humanity out of fear that it would just end up destroyed (*Torah Temima*). Perhaps he had a degree of survivor’s guilt, especially if he did not pray on behalf of humanity (Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other*). The idea of hesitancy to produce children helps explain the command to procreate at the beginning of the ninth chapter, where we shall encounter some other literary techniques as well.

The beginning of chapter nine utilizes intertextuality, a technique we shall return to in which alater text works off an earlier one.

And God blessed Noach and his sons, and said to them: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, and upon all that roam on the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea: into your hand they are delivered.” (*Bereishit* 9:1-2)

And God blessed them; and God said unto them: “Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creeps upon the earth.” (*Bereishit* 1:28) 

As Radak notes, the post-deluge blessing clearly parallels the blessing at the time of creation, indicating that we now restart humanity with Noach as a second Adam. The subsequent *pesukim* allow humanity to eat animals and affirm the prohibition against murder. According to Abravanel, God relates here to many sources of tension plaguing Noach and his family: they are frightened about the loss of their entire society, the possibility of being attacked by animals since there are so few humans around, the diminished food supply following the flood, and the threat of human murder. The last fear works well with the parallel between Adam and Noach; perhaps another Kayin and Hevel story waits. Again, clever word choice may hint at this theme. One of the *pesukim* about murder utilizes the phrase “at the hand of man’s brother” (*Bereishit* 9:5), perhaps an allusion to the first fratricide.

In Abravanel’s perspective, God reassures the survivors regarding all these concerns: the blessing of fruitfulness will help replenish society; God affirms that the animals will fear them; allowance to eat meat expands the food supply; and He promises to punish the murderer.

In any case, Noach’s family has good reason for trauma and trepidation following a year in the ark. This coheres with *Torah Temima*’s explanation for their reluctance to resume marital relations.

The next example involves similar subtlety:

And Avraham took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Charan; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and they came to the land of Canaan. (*Bereishit* 12:5)

And Avraham went up out of Egypt, he, and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, to the South. (*Bereishit* 13:1)

Why does mention of Lot precede the property when going down to Egypt but follow the property when leaving Egypt? Normally, we would expect people to be listed before things, so it is the second sequence that calls for explanation. Nechama Leibowitz provides an explanation that encapsulates the literary approach:

The sequence of words in a verse is not happenstance. Closeness and distance, progress and retreat, honor and shame, are not expressed via a multitude of words or lengthy psychological explanations…but rather through hints of subtle stylistic differences, with one example being the order of words. (*Iyunim b’sefer Bereishit* p. 89).

The ordering conveys how the wealth they accumulate in Egypt ultimately creates a division between Avraham and his nephew. Indeed, their respective shepherds soon quarrel.

Next week, we will move on to the use of key words in conveying meaning.