**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Reading Sefer Bereishit: A Literary Approach**

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**Shiur #06: Juxtaposition**

The Torah is not always explicit about connections between adjacent passages, but the connections often seem quite meaningful. For instance, *Bereishit* Chapter 15 begins with God reassuring Avraham not to be afraid. Any reader must ask what was troubling our patriarch, such that he required divine reassurance, and the natural place to seek an explanation is in the preceding story. Chapter 15 begins with the phrase “After these things,” which also suggests a link to the previous chapter.

In the previous *perek*, Avraham led a small team of fighters to a military victory over the powerful alliance of four kings. War, even when successful, can certainly be a source of anxiety for various reasons. Rashi suggests that Avraham was nervous that he may have killed innocent people in the battle. Alternatively, Rashi adds, perhaps Avraham worried that this military victory had used up his merits in the divine accounting of the world. R. Ovadya Seforno adds that he may have been concerned about the four kings seeking revenge. Decisive victories do not negate such fears; at times, they even exacerbate them. Note how several Arab countries attacked the state of Israel six years after suffering one of the most one-sided military defeats of modernity

Chapter 20 begins with the following verse: “And Avraham journeyed onward from there to the Negev region and dwelled between Kadesh and Shur and he sojourned in Gerar.” This leads to a wife-sister episode similar to the story with Pharaoh in Chapter 12. There are some striking differences between the two stories, but here we shall only focus on one. Avraham and Sarah descend to Egypt due to famine, but the Torah does not inform us as to the cause of this journey to Gerar. Was it somehow a result of the destruction of Sedom in the previous chapter? The phrase “journeyed onward *from there*” does direct our attention to Sedom and creates a linkage. Rashi explains that the desolation of Sedom and its surrounding cities led to a shortage of local travelers, leaving Avraham without the ability to provide hospitality to traveling guests, an important part of his life’s mission (as illustrated in Chapter 18). Rashi also suggests that Avraham wanted to distance himself further from Lot after the unseemly episode between Lot and his daughters. We can expand the point to a desire to leave an area so ripe with corruption that God chose to decimate it. Refusing to look out daily on desolation, Avraham chose to embark on a journey. Avraham’s failed attempt to intercede on behalf of the people of Sedom may have contributed an additional layer of frustration.

After the *akeida* (Chapter 22), the Torah outlines a brief family tree of Nachor’s children, and the next chapter begins with death of Sara. It seems clear that the entire purpose of the family tree is to record the birth of Rivka. She is the only grandchild and the only female descendent of Milka to be mentioned. In fact, she is the only significant persona in the family tree. Furthermore, “it was told to Avraham” (22:20) stresses the importance of news about his brother’s children reaching Avraham. As Rashi notes, the *akeida* experience could very well have generated in our first patriarch a profound sense of urgency to see Yitzchak married and his legacy living on. Confronting the fleeting nature of existence, humanity wants to leave a legacy. It is also quite tempting to view the death of Sara in Chapter 23 as an outgrowth of the trauma of the *akeida*. Not surprisingly, Rashi cites a *midrash* that makes that very assumption (*Bereishit Rabba* 58:5).

Chapter 24 relates how Avraham’s servant journeys back to his master’s birthplace to find a wife for Yitzchak. It concludes with the following verse: "And Yitzchak brought her into his mother Sara's tent, and took Rivka, and she became his wife, and he loved her. And Yitzchak was comforted for his mother" (24:67). Chapter 25 then opens with Avraham marrying a woman named Ketura. What might be the connection between these two juxtaposed marriages? One *midrash* says Avraham had waited until his son was married off before seeking a new wife for himself (*Bereishit Rabba* 60:16). Alternatively, perhaps once Avraham saw how much his son enjoyed married life, he was reminded of what he was missing and decided to seek companionship as well. Finally, he may have felt lonely because his son was now busy with a beloved spouse.

These connections between adjacent stories are particularly significant in that they suggest Tanakh is best read as a unified entity –not as a patched-together collection of fragmented documents.

Until now, we have discussed examples where one chapter bears a causal relationship with the following chapter. At other times, the adjacent chapters serve as a contrast. *Bereishit* Chapter18 tells of Avraham's hospitality and Chapter19 relates the hospitality of Lot. Lot apparently learned this ethic from his uncle, but did he carry it out in similar fashion? On one level, we could view Lot's efforts as more impressive since he acts hospitability in the hostile environment of Sedom. Indeed, a rowdy crowd looking for trouble soon shows up at his door. On the other hand, Avraham's kindness may outstrip that of Lot, and the proximity of the stories helps bring the reader’s attention to that contrast. In an earlier *shiur*, we noted the many words for haste in the Avraham story; Lot does not exhibit the same enthusiasm. Avraham serves his guests a rich menu consisting of a calf, curd, milk, cakes, and bread, while Lot serves only unleavened bread.

Now this last distinction may fall away depending on how we translate the *mishteh* (“party,” 19:3) that Lot serves. If this term indicates an entire feast, then perhaps Lot's offerings were actually greater than our patriarch's. If it refers more specifically to the serving of alcohol, then *Chumash* may be making a different point. Seforno thinks Lot was too attracted to the bottle, as manifest in his getting drunk two consecutive nights while in the cave with his daughters after the destruction of Sedom. It is not clear, however, if we should read his moral shortcomings in the later story back into this episode. As Seforno himself notes, not every biblical usage of *mishteh* carries negative connotations – after all, Avraham himself makes a *mishteh gadol* on the day that Yitzchak is weaned (21:8).

One last difference between these adjacent chapters may motivate a famous *midrash*. In Chapter18, Avraham engages in hospitality together with his wife and an anonymous youth. In Chapter 19, Lot is a one-man host show, lacking any family support. Perhaps Lot was personally able to maintain some Abrahamic values but was not successful at giving them over to his family within the atmosphere of Sedom. Arguably, this led a *midrash* to suggest that Lot's wife was punished for her lack of hospitability even regarding such a minor thing as salt (*Bereishit Rabba* 50:4).

Another example of artful juxtaposition appears in the middle of the Yosef narrative. The Yosef story runs from Chapter 37 through 50 and is one of the longest running stories in Tanakh. Yet the Yehuda and Tamar tale interrupts the narrative flow between the sale of Yosef (Chapter 37) and the story of Yosef in Potiphar's house (Chapter 39). Indeed, Biblical critics have seen here an interpolation that was not part of the original narrative. However, both *Bereishit Rabba* and Robert Alter give convincing explanations for the placement of this Yehuda story, in which we will find both the causal-relationship juxtaposition as well as the contrasting juxtaposition.

Several linguistic and thematic parallels root the story of Yehuda and Tamar story in place. The brothers dip Yosef's coat in the blood of a goat (37:31), and Yehuda pledges to give the apparent harlot a goat (38:25). The brothers ask their father to "recognize now" (*haker na*, 37:32) the coat that belonged to Yosef, and when Tamar wants Yehuda to acknowledge that he impregnated her, she utilizes the identical phrase: "recognize now” (*haker na*, 38:25) to whom the pledged items belong. Furthermore, both stories involve deception: the brothers mislead their father about Yosef's fate, and Tamar disguises her identity before her encounter with Yehuda.

It becomes quite convincing, especially with these connections, to view the second story as a comeuppance for Yehuda. Though he did ultimately prevent his brothers from killing Yosef, he also initiated the idea of selling their hated sibling into slavery (37:27). Responsible for the great pain he caused his brother and father, he soon finds himself bereft of a wife and two sons, and publicly shamed in the Tamar episode (see *Bereishit Rabba* 84:11-12).Additionally, his lack of emotional response to the death of two sons contrasts sharply with the many verbs of mourning and grief used to describe Yaakov's response to the tragic report about Yosef (37:34-35).

In the following chapter, we return to Yosef as he heroically resists the temptation of Eshet Potiphar. It takes formidable resolve for a young and vulnerable lad confronted by a powerful society woman to exhibit such restraint. In contrast, the older and more powerful Yehuda gives in to sexual enticement quite easily. Thus, Chapter 38 also rebukes Yehuda, by indicating that the very brother he sold as a slave has greater moral character. Beyond the thematic connection, both chapters begin with a descent: Yehuda goes down from his brothers (38:1) and Yosef is brought down to Egypt (39:1).

As usual, Robert Alter deserves a voice.

The first use of the formula [“*haker na*”] was for an act of deception; the second is for an act of unmasking. Judah with Tamar after Judah with his brothers is an exemplary narrative instance of deceiver deceived, and since he was the one who proposed selling Joseph into slavery instead of killing him (Gen. 37:26-27), he can easily be thought of as the leader of the brothers in the deception practiced on their father. Now he becomes their surrogate in being subject to a bizarre but peculiarly fitting principle of retaliation, taken in by a piece of attire, as his father was, learning through his own obstreperous flesh that the divinely appointed process of election cannot be thwarted by human will or social convention. In the most artful of contrivances, the narrator shows him exposed through the symbols of his legal self given in pledge for a kid (gedi ‘izim), as before Jacob had been tricked by the garment emblematic of his love for Joseph, which had been dipped in the blood of a goat (seir ‘izim). Finally, when we return from Judah to the Joseph story (Genesis 39), we move in pointed contrast from a tale of exposure through sexual incontinence to a tale of seeming defeat and ultimate triumph through sexual continence – Joseph and Potiphar's wife (*The Art of Biblical Narrative* 10).

The placement of Chapter 38 generates a causal connection when Yehuda's sinful behavior towards his brother brings about his (temporary) downfall. At the same time, it creates a sharp contrast between Yehuda's transgression and Yosef's superior behavior. As we shall constantly see, *Chumash* often conveys value judgments in subtle and non-explicit fashion.

In addition to the juxtaposition, another factor which we now turn to further indicates Yehuda's descent in the Tamar story.

The theme of avoiding local Canaanite woman as a marriage choice runs through *Sefer Bereishit*. Avraham instructs his servant not to look among the local women for Yitzchak's spouse (24:3). Yitzchak and Rivka tell Yaakov to go to their relative's area for a wife since the Canaanite women are unworthy (27:46, 28:1). Eisav marries two local women, and this pains both of his parents (26:34). After Yaakov receives the blessing, Eisav tries to compensate by marrying the daughter of Yishmael (28:9), but it is too little, too late. In our chapter, Yehuda marries the daughter of a Canaanite (38:2). Though Onkelos and Ramban translate *canaani* here as merchant (based on *Mishlei* 31:24), the simplest interpretation refers to a geographic location and ethnicity. If so, selling Yosef leads to a profound deterioration in the life of Yehuda, beginning with his marrying the wrong woman and experiencing the deaths of two children, and culminating in the Tamar episode. However, once he takes responsibility for his behavior with regard to Tamar, he reverses the trajectory and ends up as father of the monarchy. As we shall see in a subsequent *shiur*, Biblical characters are not static, and Yehuda represents one of the greatest growth stories.