**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Reading Sefer Bereishit: A Literary Approach**

**Rav Yitzchak Blau**

**Shiur 10: Type-Scenes**

Robert Alter's outstanding discussion of this topic in Chapter 3 of his *The Art of Biblical Narrative* does all the heavy lifting and I will mostly base myself on his keen analysis. Alter notes how genres of literature work with certain conventions and rely on tacit agreements between artist and audience. Classic scenes often appear repeatedly in various works. In 1933, Walter Arend coined the term "type-scene" to describe this phenomenon in Homer. In one familiar Biblical example that transcends disparate cultures, a patriarch close to his end gives a final deathbed message to his children (Yaakov to his sons, David to Shlomo). Other Biblical type-scenes include barren women ultimately giving birth (Sara, Rivka, Rachel, Eshet Manoach, Chana), annunciation scenes that launch prophetic status (Moshe, Shmuel, Yirmiyahu), and patriarchs claiming their wives are their sisters to avoid danger (Avraham, Yitzchak). Such patterning serves two purposes. First, it generates a sense of continuity and tradition. Second, discrepancies between the basically similar stories highlight salient characteristics of individual characters.

**Romance at the Well**

In *Chumash*, three different people meet their spouses at a well. Water is drawn and the bride runs home to tell her family. This is the model for Avraham's servant finding Rivka, for Yaakov and Rachel, and for Moshe and Tzippora. Though we shall investigate several discrepancies between the three stories, the biggest difference is that Yitzchak is the one groom totally uninvolved in finding his own mate. In his stead, Avraham sends a loyal servant to do the job. Why? Alter explains that Yitzchak is a more passive figure than his father or son. He is all about continuity and not about innovation; he digs the same wells his father dug and gives them the same names. In his doctoral dissertation, David Sykes disagrees and contends that Yitzchak did not travel to his cousins because, unlike the other patriarchs, he was not allowed to leave the land of Israel: “And God appeared to him and said: Do not descend to Egypt; dwell in the land that I will tell you” (*Bereishit* 26:2). Alter's analysis is sharp, but Sykes relies on a point explicit in the *pesukim* (*Patterns in Genesis*, Bernard Revel, 1985).

The flip side of Yitzchak's passivity is Rivka's alacrity and initiative. While Yaakov and Moshe draw the water in their respective well encounters, Rivka does the drawing in place of Avraham's servant. In Alter's words: "The most potent of the matriarchs…she dominates the betrothal scene” (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 64). A few chapters later, she will prove more influential than her husband regarding giving out *berakhot*.

The other two stories also sound individualized notes. Yaakov has to overcome an obstacle, a large stone that usually requires multiple people to lift, in order to draw the water. This final patriarch indeed lives a lifetime of struggle and frequently encounters "the hard and unyielding nature of things" (Alter, 66). I have already cited J. P. Fokkelman noting stones as a repeated motif in the Yaakov stories. Yaakov sleeps on a stone when leaving Canaan, erects a stone monument, and builds a stone structure to symbolize his covenant with Lavan. Naturally, his type-scene is the one with a stone blocking the well (*Narrative Art in Genesis*).

Tzippora does little in her type-scene, or in *Tanakh* in general. Yael Ziegler goes so far as to argue that this well encounter is more between Moshe and Yitro than between Moshe and Tzippora (Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, 278-279). Moshe and Yitro's ongoing relationship includes two highly significant conversations (*Shemot* 19 and *Bamidbar* 11) and Yitro provides important advice to his son-in-law about running an efficient court system. For another individualized note, Tanakh describes Moshe as someone who saved Yitro's daughters (*vayoshiun* – *Shemot* 2:17) from the local thugs – and Moshe will ultimately save Israel from Egyptian bondage. One more aspect unique to Moshe’s encounter at the well is that it connects to a broader theme about the greatest prophet and water. Moshe's life is saved in the Nile River, the sin that prevents him from entering Israel involves desire for water, and he here meets his wife at a well.

How did Bible scholars address these repeated scenes before this literary methodology took off? They sometimes attributed the various stories to different sources or saw them as products of the imprecision of oral transmission. Scholars who analyzed the transmission of Homer explained that bards asked to memorize huge amounts of material would often improvise from a selection of stock phrases and the tale would not include the same words each time. Alter argues that were the latter true for the Bible, the variations should be random – but we actually find them full of purpose and meaning. The above paragraphs indicate how the details of each story fit the protagonists involved.

Alter cleverly uses the stylized Western to illustrate his argument. In one convention of this genre, the good guy faces several bad guys but is able to draw his pistol quickly enough to defeat them all. Imagine that we make ten films utilizing this model, and then an eleventh in which the noble sheriff has a withered hand and has to carry a rifle on his back. Despite this difficulty, he succeeds in mobilizing his rifle quickly enough to neutralize the desperados. Alter correctly says that instead of talking about a "different cinematic tradition," it makes more sense to say that this last film purposefully relies on the convention only to deviate from it for its own purposes.

When we shift our focus to Nakh, do we have any further examples of the betrothal scene? Alter suggests a number of scenes that relate to our type-scene to some degree. Though they do not quite meet at a well, Boaz does say to Rut, "Should you be thirsty, you shall go to the pitchers and drink from what the lads draw from the well" (*Rut* 2:9). However, this chapter reverses the type-scene: the bride travels to the groom, rather than vice versa, and the travel is to Canaan, rather than away from Canaan as in the examples of *eved* Avraham and Yaakov. Alter emphasizes the significance of the similarities, not just the differences:

The type-scene is not merely a way of formally recognizing a particular kind of narrative moment; it is also a means of attaching that moment to a larger pattern of historical and theological meaning. If Isaac and Rebekah, as the first man and wife born into the covenant God has made with Abraham and his seed, provide certain paradigmatic traits for the future historical destiny of Israel, any association of later figures with the crucial junctures of that first story…will imply some connection of meaning, some further working-out of the original covenant. In the foregoing discussion, I have been stressing the elements of divergence in the various invocations of the convention in order to show how supple an instrument of expression it can be. The fact of recurrence, however, is as important as the presence of innovation in the use of the type-scene…the alignment of Ruth’s story with the Pentateuchal betrothal type-scene becomes an intimation of her portentous future as progenitrix of the divinely chosen house of David. (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 72)

Alter also writes that a youthful King Shaul has an aborted type-scene when he meets young women drawing water from a well as he seeks out Shmuel (*Shmuel* I 9:11). According to the convention, Shaul should marry one of these women, but he does not do so. This foreshadows how Shaul’s entire monarchial endeavor will be aborted as he loses the kingdom to his rival, David.

Beyond aborted type-scenes, Alter also includes a category of totally suppressed type-scenes. In theory, King David, the paradigmatic Jewish monarch, should meet his spouse at a well, but he encounters his wives in far less pastoral, even violent settings. He slaughters two hundred Pelishtim to wed Michal (I *Shmuel* 18:27), threatens to kill Naval and then marries Naval's widow Avigayil (I *Shmuel* 25:13), and has Uriya sent to the front to be killed in order to facilitate his own marriage to Batsheva (II *Shmuel* 11:15). Perhaps this is a deliberate counterpoint to the well motif.

Admittedly, the Nakh examples are less convincing, but the three scenarios from *Chumash* do a fine job of establishing this type-scene, and we can appreciate the Nakh examples within that framework. We now turn to the three wife-sister stories to explore another use of this kind of convention.

**Wife or Sister?**

Abraham claims Sara is his sister in Egypt and in Gerar; both times, the local monarch seizes her before God steps in to punish the king. Yitzchak tries the same strategy in Gerar but, before attempting any action, Avimelekh looks through a window and discovers that Yitzchak and Rivka are married. The Yitzchak version is clearly qualitatively distinct, and a close comparison of the two Avraham episodes reveals several differences between them as well – beginning with the fact that Avraham and Sara descend to Egypt due to a famine, but it is unclear why they travel to Gerar. Further, the entire population of Egypt notices Sara's beauty and Pharaoh's officials praise her looks before their king, whereas in Gerar, only Avimelekh is involved. Pharaoh gives gifts to Avraham at the start to win him over, but sends him away angrily once he discovers the truth. In contrast, Avimelekh gives parting girts after he discovers the marriage. God speaks direct words of warning to the king of Gerar, while Pharaoh simply receives *nega’im gedolim* (“great plagues”), absent divine communication. Only at the very end of the account does the reader discover that the Gerar royal house also experienced physical affliction (20:18).

As *Bereishit Rabba* (40:6) notices, the first story foreshadows the Jewish people in Egyptian exile: they travel to Egypt due to a famine, the men feel more threatened than the women (only Abraham is in danger of death; only the male babies were thrown into the river), the Egyptians suffer from some kind of plague, and the Israelites leave with great wealth. *Bereishit Rabba* adds several word parallels between the two stories, and Ramban mentions this connection as an example of his theory of *ma'aseh avot siman la-banim* (“the stories of the fathers are a symbol for the children,” commentary on 12:10).

Our moral evaluation of the two monarchs and their kingdoms may also differ greatly. The national discussion about Sara's looks indicates a lascivious quality to Egyptian culture not found in Gerar. Furthermore, God speaking to Avimelekh and not to Pharaoh conveys a divine preference for the Pelishti king. Ramban comments on the relatively superior culture in Gerar (commentary on 20:2) and Radak says that, unlike Avimelekh, Pharaoh was unworthy of divine communication (commentary on 20:3).

In an article in *Commentary* (“Interpreting the Bible,” March 1990), Alter sums up the distinct purpose of each of the twin tales:

The first version…does everything possible to maximize the force of the story as a foreshadowing of the sojourn in Egypt that will be the fate of Abraham’s progeny….Abimelech is most unpharonic in appearing as a man of conscience, more sinned against than sinning, whose castigation of Abraham for deceiving him about Sarah’s identity momentarily puts the patriarch at a loss for words.... He is vouchsafed a night-vision colloquy with God. “Will you also slay a righteous people?” pointedly makes a link between this story and the immediately preceding one, the destruction of Sodom…. Finally, the remission of the plague of sterility…connects the whole episode with the concern about procreation that dominates the chapter.

In addition to the points we made above, Alter here adds insight into how the Avimelekh story coheres within a larger thematic context. Avraham questions the justice of God – in the Sedom episode (18:23-25) – and so does Avimelekh (20:4). Sara is promised a child during the visit of the three men (18:10), and she has a child immediately after their sojourn in Gerar (21:1-2). This latter theme can also explain why we only hear about the punishment of the Avimelekh household at the end of Chapter 20: the punishment was a shutting up of the wombs, and thus connects with the sudden fertility of our matriarch at the beginning of the following chapter.

Again, we have a conventional pattern with differences tailor made for each individualized story. When we get to the *shiur* on intertextuality, we will see how type-scenes differ from this other important literary tool.