**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Reading Sefer Bereishit: A Literary Approach**

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**Shiur #21: Academic Tanakh, Frum Tanakh, and their Limitations**

This shiur continues our analysis of *Bereishit* 37 from last week and, after noting some additional excellent features of the chapter, presents the weaknesses of two other approaches.

**Character Development**

Both Reuven and Yehuda try to save Yosef’s life (37:21-22, 26-27), but ultimately Yehuda is the successful one. Reuven’s goal is more noble, as he wants to return Yosef safely home, whereas Yehuda suggests the sale; however, Yehuda’s voice carries the day. This sets up a recurring pattern in which each of these brothers attempts to lead and only Yehuda manages to do so. Both brothers endeavor to convince Yaakov to allow Binyamin's descent to Egypt (42:37, 43:8-10), and it is Yehuda who ultimately persuades him. Yehuda is also the one to confront Yosef in Egypt and save Binyamin (44:18-34). Two brothers vie for the leadership role: Reuven cannot get things done, while Yehuda demonstrates the necessary qualities, and the monarchy emerges from his descendants.

In the twin attempts to convince Yaakov to release Binyamin, we clearly see the superiority of Yehuda’s strategy. Whereas Reuven foolishly says that Yaakov can kill Reuven’s two sons if he does not bring Binyamin back (*Bereishit* 42:37), Yehuda speaks in a much more reasonable tone. Furthermore, Yehuda waits until the food situation grows desperate and Yaakov feels more pressure to relent. According to Shadal (commentary on 37:26), the earlier story, of the sale of Yosef, also reveals Yehuda's wisdom:

And Yehuda said unto his brethren: “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood?  Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother, our flesh.”

Yehuda opens with a mercenary calculation, that they might as well as make money off this event. However, his closing words strike a note of compassion for a sibling. He wisely began with an argument that recognized their anger, and then moved on to a more noble appeal to conscience.

As Erich Auerbach points out in his landmark essay “Odysseus’ Scar,” Biblical characters are not static personalities; they develop over time. This stands in sharp contrast to Homer’s work, in which Odysseus and others remain the same in every chapter.[[1]](#footnote-1) Both Yosef and Yehuda mature over the subsequent chapters in *Bereishit*, and perhaps Reuven does as well. Yosef moves beyond his sense of entitlement and does not extract vengeance on his siblings. Yehuda goes from suggesting the sale of Yosef and consorting with someone he thinks is a prostitute to taking responsibility again and again. After Reuven bedded Bilha in an apparent attempt to assert his role as Yaakov’s successor, he arrives at a more mature equilibrium and decides to save Yosef from death despite the concern that Yosef would usurp his position.

**Moral Messages**

Some kabbalistic sources identify Reuven as a *gilgul* of Kayin (R. Shlomo of Radompsk, *Tiferet Shlomo* *Bereishit* 101-102). Even those of us less metaphysically inclined can find meaning in this idea. Throughout *Bereishit*, older brothers struggle when their younger brothers take on a more prominent role. No one wants to be supplanted by a kid brother. Kayin represents the ultimate failure in this regard when he jealously kills Hevel. Reuven’s heroic attempt to save Yosef, despite the possibility of losing his privileged first-born status to Yosef, represents a dramatic *tikkun* (spiritual repair) to the sin of Kayin.

Abravanel (commentary on *Bereishit* 15) speculates that Am Yisrael’s servitude in Egypt is a punishment for the sale of Yosef. The collective trauma of slavery in Egypt would be a fitting measure-for-measure punishment for what Yosef suffered. Abravanel explains that almost everyone in this tale deserves that collective punishment: Yaakov for his favoritism, Yosef for his bragging, and (most of) the brothers for the sale. Only the tribe of Binyamin suffers innocently, as part of the larger Jewish national body.

Beginning with the *midrash* (*Bereishit Rabba* 85:11), many point out literary parallels between the sale of Yosef and the Tamar/Yehuda episode in the next chapter. In the first story, the brothers fool their father and ask him to identify, *haker na*, his son’s tunic (37:32). In the second tale, Tamar tricks Yehuda and asks him to identify, *haker na*, himself as the owner of the pledged items (38:25). This suggests that the Tamar episode serves as some kind of reprisal for Yehuda’s role in deceiving his father. Inserting the Yehuda narrative in the middle of the extended Yosef story also highlights a contrast between them, and Yosef’s superiority, when it comes to confronting a moral challenge: Yehuda succumbs to sexual temptation from a position of strength, whereas Yosef successfully resists, even from a position of great weakness (Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 10).

**Academic Bible**

The above list reveals impressive literary art, moral seriousness, and psychological insight in this Biblical chapter. It does so in part by relating to the text as a literary unity and looking for deeper meaning. We now turn to a rival approach that does not share those assumptions. Classical academic Biblical scholarship sees this chapter as a composite text combining at least two different versions of the Yosef story. It often spends a great deal of energy trying to divide the verses into their hypothesized original parts, remaining indifferent to the kinds of issues addressed above. Analyses of this Biblical chapter composed by John Skinner, E. A. Speiser,[[2]](#footnote-2) James Kugel,[[3]](#footnote-3) and to a lesser degree, Herman Gunkel,[[4]](#footnote-4) follow this trend, focusing primarily on separating strands. A reader will discover almost none of the above insights in their works. Even if they were somehow correct about different authorship, they remain blind to powerful features in the text that do not depend on unified authorship. Ironically, Bible professors mostly miss out on what makes the Bible worth reading.

For example, Kugel fully misses the challenge and heroism of Reuven.

Of all the brothers, the least jealous in such a situation would likely be the oldest: he had, after all, his own privileged status, and he was also the furthest in age from the youngest and thus less prone to rivalry with him than the others. So it was the oldest who intervened to try to save his sibling when his other brothers threatened him. (*How to Read the Bible*, 182).

This comment ignores the theme of competition for the status of *bekhor*, or chosen son, that runs through *Bereishit*. In fact, the oldest son has the *most* to lose if Yaakov favors another! Indeed, according to I *Divrei Ha-yamim* (5:1), Reuven lost the first-born status to Yosef.

Beyond the issue of composite authorship, Bible scholars often feel free to suggest textual emendations and the editorial hand of hypothesized redactors. For instance, several scholars, bothered by Reuven speaking twice in verses 21-22, claim that the first verse initially read Yehuda, but a scribe changed it. As we saw in the previous *shiur*, two better solutions exist which need not speculate about scribal alterations.

In general, their arguments for composite authorship are often quite overstated and fail to acknowledge adequate alternative solutions. Baruch Schwartz is one such overly adamant critic. He writes:

A close reading of the text reveals that the account contains no fewer than four functionally equivalent, competing doublets [i.e., multiple versions of the same story], six irreconcilable contradictions, and eight inexplicable disruptions in the narrative, rendering it unintelligible in its canonical from.[[5]](#footnote-5)

We shall soon see that this is massive rhetorical and numerical overkill.

The first of the “four functionally equivalent, competing doublets” is the recounting of multiple reasons for brotherly enmity: Yaakov’s favoritism, Yosef’s tale-bearing, and the dreams. This argument is certainly not a reason to posit multiple authors since complementary causes might have led to the growing ill will. Furthermore, far from “competing,” the different factors fit together seamlessly, since they each relate to Yosef’s special role in the family and vis-à-vis Yaakov.

Another doublet raises the question of whether Yosef’s savior is Reuven or Yehuda. As we have noted, integrating the two possibilities fits a larger pattern in *Bereishit* in which each tries to save the day and Yehuda succeeds, which also helps us understand why Yaakov selects Yehuda for the kingship. Of the remaining two doublets, the presence of both Ishmaelites and Midianites is a good point that we shall soon address.

Many of Schwartz’s “six irreconcilable contradictions” are similarly weak. He questions whether Jacob’s family were shepherds or farmers – but the only reason to say the latter is the imagery of the first dream, and this imagery is better explained as a reference to Yosef’s later facility with grain. Another alleged contradiction focuses on Yaakov’s awareness of his other sons’ hostility to Yosef and his sending Yosef to check on them. Of course, a father can have some awareness of brotherly tension without imagining that some would consider killing another! Among the other contradictions he raises, one good question is why, if the brothers were all in on the plot together, Reuven returns to the pit unaware of what happened to Yosef.

In a second article on the sale of Yosef, Steiner suggests that it was standard practice in that time period for shepherds to take turns watching the sheep; after all, the animals could hardly be left alone. Thus, the meal did not include every brother, and Reuven was the one away with the animals. *Chumash* does not say this explicitly, but such narrative reticence, argues Steiner, is the Biblical norm.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Rashbam’s famous and innovative reading of this story (commentary on 37:28) solves two of the above problems. According to Rashbam, the brothers planned on selling Yosef, but while they were eating at some distance from the pit, the Midianites came, lifted Yosef out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites. This explains both the presence of these two peoples in the story, and also why Reuven does not know what happened to Yosef. Indeed, none of the brothers know. It is also the simplest reading of verse 28, where Yosef is sold, because the Midianites are the active subject in that sentence.

Upon analysis, Schwartz’s supporting numbers turn out to be far less impressive than as presented. His list of “inexplicable interruptions” also includes the brothers sitting down for a meal, and we have seen how that detail enhances the narrative.

Schwartz’s claims look even more overstated when contrasted to Speiser, who is also a believer in composite authorship but writes in much more measured tones:

An achievement of such literary excellence should be, one would naturally expect, the work of a single author. Yet such is definitely not the case. While P’s part in the story of Joseph is secondary and marginal, J and E are prominently represented throughout, each in his own distinctive way. The casual reader is hardly aware that he has a composite story before him; and even the trained analyst is sometimes baffled when it comes to separating the parallel accounts. All of which points up the skillful and unobtrusive achievement of the complier or redactor…. The remarkable thing is that the whole still appears deceptively smooth, after so much legitimate scrutiny by modern critics.

Speiser acknowledges the art of the product before us in a way that Schwartz does not. Of course, such art may make us suspect that the current form reflects an original unified authorship, but even critics who support multiple authorship would do better to adopt Speiser’s tone when discussing this chapter. Instead, their refusal to look for moral insight, psychological depth, and literary craftsmanship blinds them to important aspects of the text.

We now turn to a very different group of readers, who miss the mark for a totally disparate reason.

**Overly Conservative Interpretation**

Religiously conservative writers on *Chumash* sometimes insist on seeing our Biblical heroes as above regular human emotions and frustrations, an approach both false to the text and which prevents appreciation of the insights explored above. For example, *Beit Ha-Levi* asserts that Yaakov’s extensive sadness was due to the loss of a tribe for Am Yisrael, and not so much because of grief over a deceased son (*Beit Halevi Vayeshev*, s.v. *va-yasem sak be-matnav*). I am unsure why extensive grief over a son is a problematic emotion, especially given the added guilt mentioned last week. This approach neutralizes the very powerful human emotion of sadness for the loss of a beloved son.

R. Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the Alter from Slobodka, insists that no one did anything seriously wrong in the entire story. Yaakov had good intentions in favoring Yosef, Yosef had good intentions in tale-bearing, and the brothers sincerely judged Yosef as a *rodef*. The brothers were punished for the minor flaw of having some jealousy in their hearts, even though that jealousy did not warp their judgment. Based on a *midrash* (*Bereishit Rabba* 84:17), he even finds a positive element in their sitting down to a meal (*Ohr Ha-Tzafun* (Jerusalem, 5738), Part 1, 207-209). Similarly, R. Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht, former Rosh Yeshiva of *Yeshivat Kerem Be-Yavneh,* understands their meal within the approach that justifies the brothers by saying they formed a rabbinic court, trying Yosef and finding him guilty. During legal deliberation, he says, they were forbidden to eat, so they naturally sat down for a meal following the verdict. His interpretation misses out on the subtle use of the meal to indicate indifference to pain.

As noted, these readings do not cohere with the simplest reading of *Chumash*, and thwart appreciation of the psychological and moral insights we noted in the brothers’ sitting down to eat, as well as the potential motivation of the brothers according to Malbim and Chizkuni, their quick ripping off of Yosef’s tunic, and the comeuppance for Yehuda in the subsequent chapter. Moreover, the overall approach deviates from the standard language of the major *Rishonim*. Note, for instance, Abravanel’s comfort in attributing significant blame all around.

R. Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler follows the path of the Alter. Yaakov had a metaphysical right to grant Yosef more honor, but he sinned slightly in allowing personal affection into the picture as well (*Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu*, Part 2, 175). As with *Beit Ha-Levi*, his approach seems to not value the most authentic human emotions. R. Dessler also attempts to justify Yosef’s relating his irritating dreams to his brothers. The truly righteous are so involved in otherworldly thoughts that they only get by in this world due to divine assistance. Since God wanted the Egyptian exile to begin, He removed His protection from Yosef, who then innocently told his brothers about the dreams (*Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu* 228-229). In contrast, I suggest that a *tzaddik* very much needs to understand human interaction even without God’s help.

The Bible has inspired readers for thousands of years because of its outstanding moral and literary qualities. Unfortunately, neither those obsessively focused on dividing the text, nor those concerned with ensuring that the message remains *frum* enough, can appreciate these qualities. Fortunately, many great voices in our tradition do not think in those terms, and modern literary interpreters are not stuck in the critical mode once dominant in the academy. Relying on such voices enables us to appreciate the greatness of *Bereishit* 37 and the rest of Biblical literature.

1. Erich Auerbach “Odysseus’ Scar,” *Mimesis*, tr. Willard Trask (Princeton, 1953). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. E. A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible Genesis* (NY), 292-294. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (NY, 2007), 176-183. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, tr. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, 1997), 387-395. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Baruch J. Schwartz, “How the Compiler of the Pentateuch Worked: The Composition of Genesis 37*,” The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, ed. Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr, and David L. Peterson (Leiden, 2012), 263-278. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Richard Steiner, “Contradictions, Culture Gaps, and Narrative Gaps in the Joseph Story,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 139:3 (2020), 439-458. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)