**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Reading Sefer Bereishit: A Literary Approach**

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**Shiur #22: Chronological and Thematic Organization**

The Talmud (*Pesachim* 6b) declares that the Torah does not always maintain chronological sequence. For example, *Sefer Bamidbar* begins with a census taken on the first day of the *second* month (1:1), and the ninth chapter opens with an account of ritually impure individuals who are distressed at being barred from the paschal sacrifice on the fourteenth of the *first* month. In truth, however, this case of moving back in history can be easily explained as a flashback necessary for the story of Pesach Sheni, which takes place on the fourteenth of the second month – after the census.

Clearly, the Torah is not a chronological free-for-all in the manner of a David Foster Wallace novel. Narratives of creation, the flood, the patriarchs, the Yosef story, the exodus, and on all portray a linear sequence. However, certain narrative units may be out of chronological order, and we should investigate how widespread this phenomenon is. Ramban famously limits this idea and only allows for it grudgingly, when forced by the *pesukim*. In contrast, Ibn Ezra thinks the Torah frequently deviates from chronological order. According to Ramban, there is little to discuss here in terms of literary technique, but Ibn Ezra's approach opens up more possibilities. An important alternative to chronological ordering is thematic ordering; departures from chronological sequence thus present opportunities to consider what thematic points or connections are at play in each instance.

Lack of chronological order will not always involve deep thematic connections but may simply stem from a narrative tidiness, in which the Biblical account finishes up one character's career before moving on to another. Terach has Avraham at the age of 70 (*Bereishit* 11:26) and then passes away at 205 years old (11:32). The next chapters relate important events that occurred in Avraham's life from the time he was 75 until he was 100. Though Terach was alive for these events, the Torah chooses to close the Terach story and inform us of his death earlier in the book.

In a similar fashion, *Bereishit* relates Yitzchak's death before recounting events for which he was still alive. Yitzchak has Yaakov at the age of 60 (25:26) and then perishes at 180 (35:28), meaning he died when Yaakov was 120. Yaakov meets Pharaoh at the age of 130 (47:9), after twenty years apart from his beloved Yosef – thus Yaakov was 110 when Yosef was sold, and Yitzchak was still alive. Again, the Torah wants to wrap up the Yitzchak story (chapter 35) before moving on the tale of Yosef and his brothers (chapter 37). Perhaps the presentation emphasizes that Yitzchak was not an influential player in the tension between Yosef and his siblings.

Let us move to an example where the thematic motivation goes beyond neatness. In *Shemot* chapter 18, Yitro arrives at the Jewish camp and advises Moshe to institute a more efficient judicial system. The following chapter (19) begins the story of the revelation at Sinai. Not surprisingly, Ramban assumes the Biblical narrative follows a chronological sequence and that Yitro arrived before *Matan Torah*. Ibn Ezra, however, raises several objections to this assumption, one of which is that Moshe tells his father-in-law the people come to him seeking rulings regarding the laws and Torah of God, which makes more sense if the Torah was already given. If we posit a later date for this episode, the question falls away: Am Yisrael needed a good deal of legal guidance, since the Torah had already been given.

Ramban can counter that there were plenty of laws prior to Sinai that would have generated questions, including the Noachide laws, commandments given to Avraham and Yaakov, the statutes and ordinances given at Mara, and the need to address basic civil matters in any society. He then switches from defense to offense, with an argument in support of his own perspective: Ramban notes how the Torah tells us what Yitro heard that motivated him to make the journey (*Shemot* 18:1) and what Moshe informed his father-in-law about when they met (18:1) – and both focus on the exodus from Egypt, with no mention of the giving of the Torah. Surely, such a significant and miraculous event would have been part of their discourse if it had already occurred.

Returning to Ibn Ezra, he must explain *why* the Torah would have chosen to move Yitro’s visit to an earlier point in the narrative even though it happened later. The previous chapter (17) ends with the battle against Amalek, and Ibn Ezra suggests that the Torah wanted to contrast Amalek and Yitro. This can be understood in either a narrow practical or broader conceptual sense. The narrow view would explain that Yitro's descendants would later live near the Amalekites, and it became imperative to distinguish between them so the mission to annihilate Amalek would not spill over into harming the children of Yitro. Indeed, Shaul tells the Keni, Yitro’s relatives, to separate themselves from Amalek before the Israelites attack (*Shmuel* I 15:6). A broader perspective suggests that the Torah juxtaposes these two stories to set up a dichotomy between two kinds of encounter with the gentile world. The Jewish people come across many Amaleks, full of hatred and antisemitism; we also meet Yitros, who share our values and can serve as a source of wisdom. Since some Jews tend to see the entire gentile world as hostile, while other Jews fail to acknowledge the depth and scope of antisemitism, this message appears quite important. Thus, this example indicates how the literary tool of thematic organization can serve the Torah's educational needs.

The most famous example of this technique may be the placement of *chet ha-egel* (the sin of the golden calf). According to the straightforward narrative account in *Sefer Shemot*, God commands the construction of the *Mishkan*, the Jews sin by making the golden calf, and then they build the *Mishkan*. Ramban characteristically assumes that this was the historical sequence of events. Alternatively, Rashi (*Shemot* 31:18) says the sin actually occurred before the command to build the *Mishkan*. Standard presentations of this debate frame it with regard to the question of whether the *Mishkan* (and, later, the Temple) are ideals or historical concessions to human frailty. Those in Rashi's camp will claim that *chet ha-egel* revealed a human need for physical and tangible religious symbols, a need that led to the *Mishkan* directive. Those who reject Rashi’s approach view the *Mishkan* as part of God's plan from the beginning.

This understanding may be incorrect, however, as a number of *pesukim* anticipate a *Beit Ha-mikdash* well before the sin of the golden calf. The song that the Jews sing after the Egyptians are defeated at the Yam Suf references God one day bringing His people to a place He made for His dwelling – a “*Mikdash*” (15:17). Furthermore, the list of *mitzvot* in *Shemot* 23 includes bringing *bikkurim* to “the house of God” (23:19), as well as the three pilgrimage festivals (23:17). Apparently, the *Beit Ha-mikdash* was always intended to be part of the divine system.

Moreover, the standard analysis adheres to a historical sensibility but fails regarding literary sensitivity. Even if the *egel* chronologically preceded the command to build the *Mishkan*, that is not how the Torah presents it to its readers; indeed, the Torah deliberately takes the *egel* out of its chronological order, indicating that the *Mishkan* is *not* simply a response to the sin of the golden calf. R. Menachem Leibtag suggests that the plan always included a *Mikdash*, but that *chet ha-egel* prompted the immediate construction of a portable *Mishkan*.[[1]](#footnote-1) Even if we do not accept his position, we should acknowledge that the Torah does not present the house of God as a concession.

Returning to the Terach story provides another example of the Ibn Ezra/Ramban debate. In *Bereishit* 11:31, Terach takes his family from Ur Casdim, hoping to arrive in Canaan, but ends up settling in Charan. In the next chapter (12:1), God commands Avraham to leave “your land, your birthplace, and your father's house, [and go] to a land I will show you [which turns out to be Canaan].” Following the sequence as presented means that Terach had an aborted journey to Canaan before Avraham embarked on his own successful trip. Both Ramban and Abravanel suggest reasons Terach might have had independent motivations to leave Ur Casdim; perhaps he was fleeing Nimrod (Ramban) or trying to escape a place of bad fortune, where his son had died and his daughter-in-law was barren (Abravanel).

The problem with this view is that Avraham is commanded to leave his land and his birthplace in chapter 12, *after* his father has already moved the family from Ur Casdim to Charan in chapter 11. To maintain the chronology as written, Ramban is compelled to say that the family had originally lived in Charan and moved to Ur Casdim, then Terach took them back to Charan; in this way, he can understand the command to leave “your birthplace” as a reference to Charan. He thus maintains the view that there were two separate journeys towards Canaan.

Ibn Ezra, on the other hand, says the *pesukim* are not telling the story in completely chronological order: the divine charge to Avraham *preceded* the travel and death of Terach, and explains why Terach set out. There was only one journey, which Avraham completed but Terach did not. The Torah wanted to finish its account of Terach before addressing Avraham's life, so it mentions his setting out for Canaan, closing with his subsequent death in Charan, before telling of the actual command to his son.

At this point, we might say that, in Ibn Ezra's view, Terach had no motivation independent of God's command to Avraham. However, the Torah presents Terach as actively taking his family, arguably indicating that he had his own reasons for doing so. R. Mordechai Breuer developed a theory of two *bechinot*, in which the Torah tells the same story or discusses the same mitzva from two differing perspectives. Discrepancies are not contradictions to be resolved, but rather reflections of the complexity of reality. In our scenario, R. Breuer explains that the Torah offers two perspectives on the same journey. Terach set out for his own mundane reasons, while his son Avraham was fueled by a divine directive (*Pirkei Moadot*, 315).

In sum, following Ramban's view means that playing with chronological sequence is not an artistic move of the Torah, as it sticks to a linear timeline. Ibn Ezra's position lends itself to deeper analysis, asking what thematic points or connections the Torah wanted to make by deviating from basic chronology.

1. https://www.etzion.org.il/he/tanakh/torah/sefer-shemot/parashat-teruma/teruma-mishkan-or-after-chet-haegel. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)