**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**Reading Sefer Bereishit: A Literary Approach**

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**Shiur 25: Cynicism and the Bible**

Those of a conservative bent sometimes cling to traditional positions with unreasonable tenacity, refusing to admit any difficulties with previously accepted opinions. This proclivity distorts analysis as does an opposing tendency. Individuals inclined toward the slaying of sacred cows relish opportunities to undermine religious and moral ideas and texts cherished over the course of human history. Obligatory cynicism stirs in response to any expression of reverence or sanctity. The compulsive need to debunk warps scholarship just as much as a refusal to challenge. (*BDD* Vol. 29)

I wrote this several years ago as the opening paragraph of a review of James Kugel's *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now*. At the time, I thought Kugel's interpretations were quite cynical, but I later discovered a book that makes Kugel look downright reverential. Though I do not suspect most readers will incline in this extreme direction, it is worthwhile to spend one *shiur* exploring the problems of such an approach.

Burton L. Visotzky received a PhD and rabbinic ordination from JTS and has taught Midrash there for many years. In 1996, he published *The Genesis of Ethics* (New York), which brings the cynical approach to Biblical interpretation to a new level. This *shiur* will explore three aspects of his cynicism: the rhetoric employed, negative additions to what the text actually says, and interpretative choices intended to paint biblical characters in the worst light possible.

Let us begin with the mocking terminology. The *Bereishit* stories are "an ugly little soap opera about a dysfunctional family" (9). "Genesis is R, it’s NC-17. Genesis is what spouses hide from the neighbors, hide from the children. The narratives of Genesis are rolling in repressions we refuse to tell our therapists" (ibid.). "God is a mean SOB" (spelled out fully in the original, 37). "There is more than a measure of perversity here" (43). "Even the rabbis of old were shocked at Jacob's insensitivity here" (173).

Now, there are serious moral questions to be asked about the narratives in *Bereishit*,but this is not the way to go about it. Visotzky's language replaces argument with insult and seems intended to shock. Consider our final example in the above paragraph, which relates to the tense exchange between Rachel and Yaakov in the opening two *pesukim* of chapter 30.

And when Rachel saw that she bore Yaakov no children, Rachel envied her sister; and she said to Yaakov: “Give me children, or else I die.” And Yaakov's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said: “Am I in God's stead, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” (*Bereishit* 30:1-2)

One *midrash* (*Bereishit Rabba* 71:7) indeed faults Yaakov for insufficient sympathy towards his wife's suffering – but why does Visotzky write "**even** the rabbis of old," as if shocked that they were sensitive enough to react this way? *Chazal* show compassion for victims all the time, including women! Furthermore, deeper analysis of the story generates sympathy for all involved. A frustrated, barren Rachel watches as her sister Leah, who should not even be married to Yaakov, produces child after child. Poor Yaakov only wanted to be married to Rachel, and he suffers along with his beloved wife from her inability to bear children. To make matters worse, Rachel demands that he solve this shared problem, which is beyond his control. One could easily envision a charitable reading of both spouses in this tension-filled dialogue.

Our second category involves inserting additional assumptions into the text that make the characters look worse. According to Visotzky, Avraham and Sara argued over who was responsible for their lack of children (45), Abraham “knew” Hagar sexually even before they married, when she was a slave in the house (46), Lot abused his daughters when they were little, which is how they came to the idea of getting him drunk and lying with him (84), Yitzchak and Yishmael buried their abusive father with "a barely concealed glee" (109), Avraham had a negative impact on his sons and grandsons ("Broad is the thumb that can quash two subsequent generations," 133), and Yaakov admires Lavan's cunning and guile (164). None of this has any basis in the *pesukim*, and all of it suggests a strong desire to be as negative as possible *Bereishit* 16:2-3 invalidates the claim that Avraham and Sara argued over responsibility for barrenness, as Sara states that God has held her back from having a child and that Avraham should take Hagar as a wife. The entire initiative assumes Avraham is not sterile and, indeed, Avraham and Hagar soon produce a child.

We now move to interpretative choices. Here, we are not addressing arbitrary insertions (no verse gives any indication that Lot abused his daughters; Visotzky simply inserted that wholesale) but rather interpretations claiming to be accurate readings of what Scripture does say. In some cases, Visotzky may be correct, but he does not allow the other side a hearing. Avraham asks Sara to pretend that she is his sister "that it will be well with me for your sake, and I will remain alive because of you" (12:13). As we have discussed (*shiur* 23), this being "well" could refer to staying alive or to receiving gifts. Naturally, Visotzky jumps to the latter: "Tell them you're my sister so I'll turn a profit on it" (25).

Even if we go with Visotzky's reading, it does not follow that Avraham was okay with the Egyptian tyrant bedding his wife. He may have hoped to delay things until they escaped with Sara untouched. Our author has a more cynical suggestion:

But like Uncle Abraham also, Lot has learned an unfortunate lesson about what to do when feeling threatened. Offer your women to those who menace you. In Abraham's case it was his wife, whom he passes off as his sister. Lot offers his daughters, whom, perhaps, he passes off as virgins." (78)

Another debatable reading applies to our third patriarch. "It's just that Jacob was always so damned cocky, plotting with Rebecca" (152). Granted, one could read Yaakov as fully on board with the plan to deceive his father, but another strong possibility is suggested by the fact that not only does Rivka raise the idea, but all the active verbs in the preparation are attributed to her. She takes Eisav's clothes and dresses Yaakov, she gives him the skin of a young goat to change the feel of his arms, and she gives him all the necessary food (27:15-17). This seems to indicate Yaakov's lack of enthusiasm for the project, though he passively goes along.

In the cases of Avraham seeking to be “well” and Yaakov fooling his father, Visotzky may have a case, but in a host of others, he does not. Committed to neutralizing the authentic love between Avraham and Sara, he refuses to take Avraham's eulogy and tears (23:2) at face value. "In modern parlance, 'to eulogize' may have the sense of funeral and burial, while 'to cry' may mean the physical rituals of the mourner" (115). However, crying reflects genuine emotion throughout *Sefer Bereishit*, and this usage should be no different.

In general, Avraham receives plenty of abuse from Visotzky, who assumes the entire wife-sister plot was a scheme to get wealthy and that our patriarch did not truly feel any danger. "In fact, is Avraham emboldened to this scheme precisely because he knows that God will provide the muscle to preclude Pharaoh from keeping his wife and killing him?" (28). In truth, the *avot* express nervousness all the time and do not assume that their relationship with God guarantees their safety.

Visotzky also questions why Avraham stops at ten and does not ask God to save Sodom even for one righteous man. He explains that "maybe Avraham got shy because his naked self-interest at saving his favorite nephew would be all too clear" (65). First, wanting to save your nephew is a noble cause, not some kind of corrupt selfishness. Second, Avraham had been forced to separate from his "favorite" nephew and could have lost enthusiasm for rescuing him, thus his ongoing loyalty to Lot is all the more impressive. Most importantly, why deny Avraham's apparent motivation to save all of Sodom? God says He will inform Avraham about Sodom's impending destruction because He knows that Avraham will instruct his children to preform "justice and righteousness" (18:19). It certainly appears that God evaluates Avraham as a person who acts from ethical idealism.

The attacks on Avraham continue as Visotzky claims that Avraham not going to find a wife for Yitzchak himself in chapter 24 reveals that Avraham is less invested in that mission than in finding a wife for himself, which he does in chapter 25. "It may also, however, indicate a selfishness which values his own comfort over that of his son" (128). This is a very poor reading. The chapter begins by informing us that Avraham was "very old" – not a time for an extended journey, and a good occasion to employ a servant. Furthermore, Avraham only gets married in the next chapter, proving that his first priority is to make sure Yitzchak finds a wife.

According to our author, Avraham had a bad relationship with each of his sons. After all, he and Yitzchak never converse after the *akeida* (109); apparently, Yitzchak was resentful and traumatized. However, Jon Levenson points out that they never converse before the *akeida* either (*Inventing Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Princeton 2012, 86). When one recalls the spare and reticent quality of Biblical narrative, the “not talking” argument loses force.

Avraham's relationship with Yishmael does not fare much better. "What kind of father can send his son to die of thirst with the claim that the command came from God?" (93). According to Visotzky, Avraham gave Hagar and Yishmael a small amount of water and bread merely to save face, fully aware that it would not last them. Again, Visotzky ignores contrary evidence in the story. The narrator informs us that the idea of expelling Yishmael was “very grievous in Avraham's eyes" (21:10). This does not sound like a father indifferent to his child's pain. Furthermore, God tells him both to listen to Sara and that He will make Yishmael into a great nation. The divine plan certainly involves Yishmael's survival and flourishing.

One further example is particularly telling. In Visotzky's version, Eisav “marries out” deliberately to hurt his parents (149). There are two problems with this theory. First, Eisav consistently exhibits concern for his father – feeding him, not wanting to attack Yaakov while Yitzchak still lives, and helping to bury him when the time comes. He does not appear as the type who wants to cause Yitzchak pain. In fact, after hearing that his parents do not like the local Canaanite women, he tries to fulfill their wishes by marrying Yishmael's daughter. It is eminently more reasonable, if one were not *looking* to paint a negative picture, to view Eisav as a son who tries to please his father but gets it wrong. He emulates his father's age of marriage (40) but does not realize that who you marry is far more important than when you marry. He finally gets the point after Yitzchak sends Yaakov away in search of a spouse. but this realization arrives too late.

Several of Visotzky’s more negative interpretations are preceded by a "maybe" or a "perhaps," but this does not truly rectify the tone. There is no need to raise cynical possibilities for every story, and some of them are untenable even as a "perhaps."

Visotzky is not only a bad reader of *Chumash*; he is poor at reading Christian takes on it as well. He cites Jerome as writing that Bible stories are "rude and repellant" (8) but does not inform the reader that Jerome writes of this as his earlier understanding – before he saw the light and appreciated the greatness of Christianity (Jerome, Letter 22).

I usually avoid criticizing other denominations, on the theory that it would be best for all people to start with criticism of their own community. This *shiur* is a bit of an exception. It is astounding that this volume reflects the words of an ordained Conservative rabbi. In a rabbinic context, we expect to find more respect and reverence for the Book of Books. Any denomination that speaks this way about the Torah will soon discover that no one wants to study it. Our students, congregants, and children will not read a bad soap opera just because their ancestors have done so for centuries. Thankfully, reading through *Chazal*, *Rishonim*, and modern interpreters reveals a wealth of inspiration and insight. Just remove the cynical glasses and you will see the radiant sun.