**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Reading Sefer Bereishit: A Literary Approach**

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**Shiur #04: Word Choice as a Versatile Literary Tool**

**Unusual Word Choice**

When Tanakh uses an unusual word, particularly when more common words were readily at hand, we should ask what motivated that choice. For example, when Eisav comes in tired and hungry from the field and sees the stew prepared by his brother Yaakov:

And Eisav said to Yaakov: “Let me swallow, I beseech you, some of this red, red pottage; for I am faint.” Therefore was his name called Edom. (*Bereishit* 25:30).

As Ibn Ezra notes, the word *hal’iteini* (“let me swallow”) is a hapax legomenon, appearing only once in Scripture. When Rashi wants to find the word in another context to help elucidate its meaning, he is forced to turn to the Gemara (*Shabbat* 155b), which employs the term in reference to feeding a camel. Surely, the Torah could have utilized some conjugation of the much more common verb *a/ch/l* if it merely wanted to denote consumption. On the other hand, if the word *hal’iteini* connotes a more animalistic type of eating, the choice makes sense. Eisav is impulsive and aggressive, and those character traits manifest themselves in his approach to food consumption. He does not simply wish to eat, but to gobble the food down.

Other textual clues add to this character assessment of Eisav. His very decision to sell the birthright for pottage indicates severe short-term thinking. I am assuming that Eisav is not actually in immediate danger when he speaks about his imminent death (25:32). Rather, as many of the medieval commentaries suggest, hunting is a dangerous profession; therefore, his life bears a precarious quality. Repetition of the word “red” enhances the portrait of a hurried fellow; as Rashbam correctly comments, “it is the way of someone in a hurry to double his words when making a request. He was tired and hungry and was saying quickly give me something to eat.” Furthermore, the rapid-fire use of five consecutive verbs –“and he ate, and he drank, and he got up, and he went his way, and Esau despised his birthright” (25:34) – indicates a man acting with great haste.

As usual, Robert Alter catches it all and expresses it well.

Esau asks for the stew with a verb used for the feeding of animals (*hil’it*) – one might suggest the force of the locution in English by rendering it as “let me cram my maw” – and, all inarticulate appetite, he cannot even think of the word for stew but only points to it pantingly, calling it “this red red stuff.”….Esau’s precipitous character is mirrored stylistically in the rapid chain of verbs – “and he ate and he drank and he rose and he went off” – that indicates the uncouth dispatch with which he “spurned,” or held in contempt the birthright…. Esau, the episode makes clear, is not spiritually fit to be the vehicle of divine election, the bearer of the birthright of Abraham’s seed. He is altogether too much the slave of the moment and of the body’s tyranny to become the progenitor of the people promised by divine covenant to have a vast historical destiny to fulfill. His selling of the birthright in the circumstances here described is in itself proof that he is not worthy to retain the birthright. (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 51-52)

One more item may also indicate Eisav’s lack of discipline. Eisav “says in his heart” that he plans on killing his brother after Yitzchak dies (27:42). Yet despite the apparently secret nature of this plan, the plot “is told” to Rivka in the very next verse. Rashi, citing a *midrash* (*Bereishit Rabba* 67:9), says our matriarch knew through divine inspiration. Alternatively, several commentators suggest that Eisav himself ultimately spilled the beans. Meir Sternberg conveys his preference for the latter approach: “The naturalistic insistence that the plan leaked out because Esau could not keep his own counsel is both simpler and more in character” (*The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 250-251).

Another example comes from Sara’s expression of joy in having a baby.

And she said: “Who would have said to Avraham, that Sara will nurse children, for I have given birth to a son in his old age!” (*Bereishit* 21:7)

“Who would have said (*milel*) to Avraham?” There are many Biblical terms for verbal communication including *amar*, *diber*, and *higid* – so why select an unusual verb, ”*milel*,” that appears only four times in Tanakh? Perhaps the answer relates to the form of Sara’s exclamation. The verse has a poetic quality, as our matriarch bursts out in joy, and all three other usages of this verb appear in poetic books (*Tehillim* 106:2, *Iyov* 21:7 and 33:3). It is well known that poetry, and Biblical poetry in particular, calls for a wider vocabulary than prose. For this reason, the poetic books of *Shir Ha-shirim*, *Yeshayahu*, and *Iyov* contain many hapax legomena. *Milel* may have been chosen simply because it is more poetic than the alternative synonyms.

My student, Jacob Glassman, noted that two verses earlier, the Torah relates how Avraham circumcised his son Yitzchak. Thus, *milel* may also be a play on words, connecting to “*vayamal*.” My son, Mordechai Blau, added that the wordplay continues in the next verse with the word “*vayigamal*.” The verb choice thus adds a poetic sound and generates the aesthetic quality of an extended play on words.

**Puns or Plays on Words**

On other occasions as well, unusual word usage helps with puns and plays on words. In talking to God about his lack of children, Avraham says, “O Lord God, what will you give me, seeing I am going to my end childless, and the steward of my household (*ben meshek beiti*) is Eliezer of Damascus?” (15:2). The middle word in the phrase “*ben meshek beiti*” is certainly uncommon and may even be a hapax legomenon (scholars debate if it is the same root found in the phrase “*al pikha yishak kol ami*” (41:40), when Pharaoh hands over the economic reigns of Egypt to Yosef). Either way, it is not the obvious word choice. However, *Chumash* could not resist the word play between “*meshek*” and “*damesek*.”

Several other plays on words appear in *Sefer Bereishit*. Noach “finds favor (*chen*)” (6:8, *n/ch* and *ch/n*) in the eyes of God. Er is “evil (*ra*) in the eyes of God” (38:7, *a/r* and *r/a*). Adam and Chava are innocently naked (2:25, *arumim*) one verse before we hear about the snake being more cunning (*arum*) than all the beasts of the field (3:1). What does this linguistic playfulness accomplish? It could be purely for the reader’s aesthetic pleasure. A more beautiful work is a more memorable work – and readers will now hear a resonance of evil in the very name Er.

Yet perhaps the plays on words can have even deeper significance. Yonatan Grossman (*Bereishit: Sippuran shel Hatchalot*, 97) raises a clever suggestion that allows the last example to impact on the meaning. He notes that eating from the tree of knowledge seems to grant Adam and Chava both sexual awareness and a greater degree of knowledge. Rather than choosing one element and neutralizing the other, Grossman contends that both are significant, and relate to a growing maturity. If so, the two words involved in this word play relate to the same duality: nakedness connects with sexuality, while craftiness has to do with knowledge. Here, the word play may aid in conveying the twin aspects of this Biblical account.

In another example, *Chumash* again goes with a rare word to create playful language. After Avraham defeats the four kings in battle, Malki Tzedek gives him a blessing: “And blessed be E-l Elyon, who delivered (*migen*) your enemies into your hands” (14:20). We would have expected a more common verb such as *natan* (gave) in place of *migen*. Clearly, Scripture intended to link this word with God’s reassurance to Avraham at the beginning of the next chapter, that he should not be afraid because “I will protect (*magen*) you” (15:1). Beyond the pun, the connection here highlights the cause of Avraham’s trepidation. In characteristic fashion, Tanakh does not inform us of the basis for his fear and we need to piece it together from context. The word parallel gives us reason to locate the source of his fears specifically in the previous episode: having dramatically defeated several monarchs at once, Avraham remains nervous, perhaps about the possibility of revenge attacks, the fear that he shed innocent blood, or the depletion of his stored-up merits for divine assistance.

**Resonant Word Choice**

We have already discussed *leitwort* and unusual word choice. The present category is not about a word repeated often in one section or about an extremely rare word, but about a word with particular resonance. In some cases, it is also an example of intertextuality, as the later word may connect with an earlier usage of the identical word.

For instance, note the wording of Yosef’s complaint to the butler about how fate has treated him:

For indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews; and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit. (*Bereishit* 40:15)

Instead of the words *mishmar* (see 40:3) or *beit ha-sohar* (39:20-23), Scripture here utilizes the word *bor* (pit) to refer to prison. Yosef relates that he did nothing wrong here and yet finds himself behind bars. Indeed, Eishet Potiphar’s evil design and false accusation brought about his incarceration. Yonatan Grossman (*Yosef: Sippuran shel Chalomot*, 161) notes the power of the selected word “pit” in place of the Biblical alternatives: since Yosef was placed in a pit by his brothers, using this particular term ties together two distinct Yosef episodes. Yosef was lowered into a pit by his brothers and was later lowered into the prison dungeon by the Egyptian authorities. In both instances, he sees himself as an innocent, victimized by external forces. The specific word “pit” adds depth and breadth to Yosef’s complaint.

A subtle example can be seen in a dialogue between Yaakov and Lavan. When Yaakov complains that Lavan dishonestly switched his daughters under the wedding canopy, Lavan defends himself:

And Lavan said: “It is not done so in our place, to give the younger before the first-born.” (*Bereishit* 29:26)

Many modern scholars see this as a comeuppance for Yaakov, who stole the blessing and birthright from his older brother Eisav. Lavan reminds Yaakov that it flouts communal norms for a younger sibling to come before an older sibling. This idea actually goes back to R. Eliezer Ashkenazi’s *Ma’asei Hashem* in the sixteenth century. R. Ashkenazi brings strong support for his reading from the choice of the words *tze’ira* and *bekhira*. Earlier in the chapter (29:16), the two daughters are referred to as *gedola* and *ketana*. The shift in terminology creates an association with the *bekhora* that Yaakov took from Eisav. Thus, even if Tanakh does not take an explicit stand on Yaakov’s actions, an implicit criticism can be found in the precise wording of Lavan’s retort. Perhaps Scripture faults Yaakov for the barter of the *bekhora*, and/or for impersonating Eisav in order to steal the *berakha*.

Martin Buber (“Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative,” 121-122) points to another word choice that strengthens this idea. Yitzchak says that “your brother came in deceit (*mirma*) and took your blessing” (27:35). Yaakov uses the same word when he asks Lavan “why have you deceived me” (*rimitani*, 29:25). There is poetic justice in the deceiver being deceived – though it seems that Yaakov does not remain a deceiver. After Yaakov’s trickery with the blessing, Eisav says Yaakov’s name reflects his dishonest nature (27:36); later, when Yaakov wrestles with the *ish*, the latter both gives him a blessing and changes his name from Yaakov to Yisrael (32:27-30). For Buber, this reflects Yaakov shedding his old *mirma* identity and earning a blessing deservedly. Eisav’s critique no longer applies.

Another word shift relates to Yaakov repairing his relationship with his brother. Yaakov prepares for meeting Eisav after twenty years away by sending him an elaborate gift that is referred to five times as a *mincha* (32:13, 18, 20, 21; 33:10). When speaking directly with Eisav, however, Yaakov suddenly switches words and asks Eisav to “please take my blessing (*birkhati*) that was brought before you” (33:11). This shift may convey the idea that Yaakov was never really able to remove Eisav’s blessing, or that he is currently returning it. In either case, we see how careful word choice can produce significant meaning.