YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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LITERARY STUDY OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

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**Lecture #26:**

**The Presentation of Facts in the Narrative (1)**

The last issue that we will examine in this series of lectures is the organization of facts in the narrative. While there are additional ways in which the narrative alludes to hidden readings and to themes lying beneath the surface of the story, the sequence of the narrative and the method by which the scenes are integrated in it has a uniquely important contribution.

The chronological continuity of the story is one of the building blocks of every narrative. Were the events in the narrative presented to the reader out of sequence (ignoring motivation and result, cause and effect, etc.), it would not be possible to follow the narrative at all. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to examine the order in which facts are related in the narrative. This issue is intimately connected to the issue of narrative structure, which we have already discussed, but we will focus on it independently because of its unique significance.

Every narrative is written according to a certain order, and the reader receives the facts according to a blueprint which serves the aim of the narrative. The reader is forced to encounter first things first, and only later does the reader encounter the latter fact. Consequently, the second fact is not neutral; the reader responds to it in light of what has already been revealed in the first detail. The statement, “I had cheesecake and ice cream for dessert, and I enjoyed every bite,” in and of itself, is innocent; the statement “I ate two steaks, and then I had cheesecake and ice cream for dessert, and I enjoyed every bite” is defiant, flouting the dietary traditions of Judaism. The meaning of the statement changes in light of its textual position and in light of its context.

For the most part, the order of facts conforms to the order of events that that narrative describes. Nevertheless, as we shall soon see, facts are often presented to the reader without accommodating the sequence of the plot. This should be viewed as a literary tool that contributes to the design of the story and its theme, and it has a real influence on the hidden reading of the narrative.

We will dedicate our current lecture to studying the view of the Sages of the Talmudic era and of the medieval commentators (through the words of R. Avraham Ibn Ezra) about this topic.

**THE SAGES**

The words of the Sages express a certain dilemma in the question of the narrative’s commitment to the order of events. The question of the significance of the proximity of passages to each other, *semikhut parshiyot*, is raised in the Talmud (Bavli, *Pesachim* 6b) in connection with the dictum, “There is no chronological order in the Torah” (*ein mukdam u-meuchar ba-Torah*).

R. Menashya bar Tachlifa said in the name of Rav: This means that there is no chronological order in the Torah.

R. Pappa said: We only say this about two passages, but within one passage, there is chronological order. Were it not so, [the principle][[1]](#footnote-1) “A generalization followed by a specification, the generalization does not include anything not in the specification” [would be meaningless] — perhaps it is a specification followed by a generalization? Additionally, [the principle] “A specification followed by a generalization, the generalization adds to the specification” — perhaps it is a generalization followed by a specification?

If this is true, even for two passages this should be true. This is consistent with the view that “If a generalization and a specification are distant from each other, we do not apply the rules of generalization and specification’, but can one say this according to the view that do we apply the rules?

Even according to the view that we do apply the rules, this is true only within one passage, but between two passages, we do not apply them.

The dilemma cited in the passage is tied to the question of whether one can apply the rule of “There is no chronological order in the Torah” even within one passage – that is, one small literary unit.

Is the reader compelled to read the fact cited in the beginning of the story before the fact that follows it? Or is the order of writing perhaps merely an exigent element of encountering a written text? In that case, on an essential, thematic level, the facts may be reordered. According to R. Pappa, one may claim that full narratives do not appear in their natural location, but within the process of reading a given isolated unit, one may not claim that certain facts do not appear in an intentional sequence.

I am not convinced that R. Pappa actually believes that facts are never recorded out of their natural order in a given narrative, as it is obvious that there are in fact many examples of this throughout *Tanakh*. It appears to me that Rav Pappa does not deal with the historical-realistic level of the events described, but the interpretative-exegetical stratum. In other words, an exegete may not expound the verse except on the basis of its textual location, even if this is not the real place in which its events occur.

Evidence of this may be found in the fact that R. Pappa supports the limitation that he sets up to the rule that “There is no chronological order in the Torah” by citing the halakhic rules of hermeneutics: “A generalization followed by a specification” or “A specification followed by a generalization.” This indicates that his analysis is tied to the limitations of hermeneutical freedom.

The proposed division according to R. Pappa is an interesting one in terms of following the experience of the reader. This distinction authorizes the reader (or at least the exegete) to ignore the location of the entire story — what precedes and follows it - but the reader (or, as we have said, the exegete) must respond to the narrative continuity and the organization of the acts and the scenes according to their order in the text. In many ways, this distinction seems justified; the theme of a given story is not always tied to the story which appears before it (unless the text actively links them with a heading such as “After these things,” etc.). At the same time, the reader must respond to the experience of reading each individual story within the greater narrative continuity of the unit or book, as one encounters the facts in it.

Opposing R. Pappa’s view, we find that many Sages ask throughout Midrashic literature: “Why is this passage adjacent to that passage?” The basic assumption of this question is that there is significance to the arrangement of the passages and that the reading of one is influenced by its predecessor.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Thus, for example, according to R. Yishmael, the prohibition against priests drinking wine on duty appears immediately after the sin of Nadav and Avihu (*Vayikra* 10:1), interrupting the narrative continuity of the story of the eight day of consecration, in order to allude to the reader that the sin of Nadav and Avihu is tied to alcohol consumption. Similarly, the passage of the nazirite follows that of the suspected adulteress in order to allude to the reader that “anyone who sees a suspected adulteress in her disgrace will separate himself from wine” (*Berakhot* 63a, *Sota* 2a). The command of the priestly blessing is stated after the passage of the nazirite in order to teach that a priest who is about to bless may not drink wine, just like the nazirite (*Taanit* 26b). Many other examples abound. Even if it is difficult to see the simple meaning of the verse in these exegetical exercises, it is clear from them that the Sages recognize the value of the location of a specific passage; thus, its meaning is influenced by its concrete location in the textual continuum.

However, this view is also not accepted by everyone. This is how the Sifri (*Bamidbar* 131) presents the debate:

R. Akiva says: Any passage which is adjacent to another, learn from it.

Rabbi says: Many passages are adjacent to each other while being as far apart as the east is from the west.

In light of this argument, the Sifri analyzes four additional examples. According to Rabbi (Yehuda Ha-nasi), the very fact of juxtaposition of passages does not teach us anything about a connection between them in relation to their content.

In a certain sense, it sometimes appears that these two questions are tied to each other. If the order of the verses is chronological, the very fact of *semikhut* does not teach us anything. The narrative follows the continuity of events, and therefore it comes in this order specifically. However, if “There is no chronological order in the Torah” and the verse frees us from the chronological order of the occurrence of events, there is good reason to examine the reason that one passage appears next to another passage.[[3]](#footnote-3) One example of this is the formulation of the following *midrash* (*Berakhot* 10a):

A certain Sadducee said to R. Abbahu: It is written, “A psalm of David as he fled from Avshalom his son” (*Tehillim* 3:1) and “An ode of David as he fled from Shaul in the cave” (ibid. 57:1). Now, which came first? The incident with Shaul happened first!

He said to him: You do not derive from juxtaposition, so you have a problem. We, who do derive from juxtaposition, have no such problem, for R. Yochanan said: What is the biblical source for juxtaposition? For it says (ibid. 111:8), “They are joined for all eternity, they are done in truth and rightness."

Why is the passage of Avshalom next to the passage of Gog and Magog? If one challenges you by saying that it is inconceivable that a slave would revolt against his master, you may say: Is it conceivable that a son would revolt against his father? If one occurred, the other may as well.

This Sadducee (the Munich manuscript has “sectarian”) asks R. Abbahu why *Tehillim* 3, which deals with David’s flight from Avshalom, appear before *Tehillim* 57, which deals with his flight from Shaul, as David’s flight from Shaul occurred many years before his flight from Avshalom’s rebellion. R. Abbahu responds that indeed, according to the Sadducees, who believe that one should not derive anything from textual juxtaposition, this is a good question, but since the rabbinical tradition is to derive from juxtaposition, it is appropriate to put *Tehillim* 3 after *Tehillim* 2, which opens with “Why are the nations in a tumult?” (The Midrash, ibid. 7b and elsewhere, understands this as a reference to the war of Gog and Magog.)

It is clear according to this *midrash* that only in a place in which the passages are not arranged according to the chronological order of the events is there good reason to use the “Why is this passage adjacent?” device and to wonder about the textual continuity, into which additional ideological messages are woven.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Note that expounding the juxtaposition of passages arises in this dialogue as an argument between the Pharisees and Sadducees, showing that the Sages relate to this hermeneutical approach as one of the methods of expounding the Torah, and this has halakhic significance as well. This is important for our analysis because in halakhic passages, there is no “natural continuity” of the verse. Take the case of *egla arufa*, the heifer which has its neck broken in order to atone for an unsolved murder. This law appears in *Parashat Shofetim*, but it could have appeared in *Parashat Emor* or *Parashat Mishpatim* alongside the laws of murder there. Naturally, the question of whether there is any significance to the placement of the law of *egla arufa* amid the laws of war is a hermeneutical one. When, however, we turn to biblical narrative, where one expects chronological continuity, a variation from the natural order demands explication, and even on the simple level of understanding, one must justify this change.

**MEDIEVAL COMMENTATORS: IBN EZRA**

Beyond the debates in Midrashic literature about the importance of textual order and the reader’s fidelity to it, we find these dilemmas in the writings of the medieval commentators. As a (prominent) test case, we will demonstrate awareness of this phenomenon in the commentary of R. Avraham Ibn Ezra. It is worth noting that Ibn Ezra gives considerable weight to the question of the order of the passages; as Gottlieb notes in his book, ibn Ezra relates to these questions more than 150 times in his commentary.[[5]](#footnote-5)

When it comes to the location of full narratives, ibn Ezra normally frees a story from the chains of the textual continuum. For example, take the story of Moshe’s setting up his tent outside the camp (*Shemot* 33:7-11). This is mentioned in the verse after the description of the nation’s mourning as a result of the Sin of the Golden Calf and its punishment; it precedes the description of Moshe’s experience in the cleft of the rock and the renewal of the covenant between God and Israel. Ibn Ezra claims that this relocation of Moshe’s tent (called “the tent of meeting” — 33:7) actually occurred only after the giving of the second Tablets, although it is mentioned before it (*Peirush* *Ha-arokh*, ad loc.):

This was after he brought down the second inscribed Tablets and Israel started to make the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). He took the name “the tent of meeting” for his own tent until the *Mishkan* was completed. There is no chronological order in the Torah.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This case is an object lesson of ibn Ezra’s commitment to emancipating passages from the chains of the textual continuum. Ibn Ezra does not even bring evidence that the narrative takes place in a different order from that which is written![[7]](#footnote-7)

Usually, however, Ibn Ezra does explain the gap between the historical narrative and the textual narrative, and he even indicates the concept alluded to by this change in order. For example, according to ibn Ezra, the story of Yitro’s arrival at the Israelite camp (*Shemot* 18) is placed into the middle of the story of the Israelites’ journey to Mount Sinai; it does not appear in its proper place chronologically, because Yitro could only have arrived after the Giving of the Torah and the construction of the *Mishkan* (*Peirush* *Ha-arokh*, ad loc.):

The passage of “In the third month” (19:1) should have been written after the matter of Amalek (17:8-16), for there (19:2) it is written, “And they traveled from Refidim [where Amalek attacked], and they came to the Sinai Desert.” If so, why does the matter of Yitro come in between the two passages?

…But in my opinion, he did not come until the second year, after the *Mishkan* had been erected.

In the places in which jumps such as these occur, we should wonder what motivates Scripture to change the natural order. As we have said, often these points contain clues to hidden readings. Indeed, ibn Ezra (ibid.) tries to set out an explanation of the change of sequence in this situation as well:

Now I will explain why the passage of Yitro was inserted here: because we have mentioned above the evil done by Amalek to Israel, here we mention the contrasting good that Yitro did for Israel… And because it is written above (17:16), “God is at war with Amalek”, Israel must fight [Amalek] when God will grant them rest [from their other enemies]. So he mentions the matter of Yitro here, because [his descendants] reside near the nation of Amalek; this will remind Israel of the kindness of the ancestor, and they will not touch his seed.

In Ibn Ezra’s view, there is a special value of placing the story of Yitro near the story of the Amalek War, something which contributes to drawing the reader’s attention to the contrast between them.[[8]](#footnote-8)

However, unlike the abovementioned view of R. Pappa, ibn Ezra argues that also in the continuum of the isolated unit, facts are given to the reader out of the proper sequence of the real events. For example, after the verse notes that Israel sees the manna which has fallen around the camp, Moshe’s explanation appears: “It is the bread which God has given you to eat” (16:15). Ibn Ezra (*Peirush* *Ha-arokh*, ad loc.) explains:

R. Moshe Ha-Kohen says: We already know that there is no chronological order in the Torah, as it says, “And Moshe said to them” — [meaning,] Moshe had already said to them. There are many other examples, even in this passage (v. 20): “And it bred worms and rotted” — [meaning,] it had already rotted. And so it says (v. 24): “And it did not rot; nor was there any worm in it.”

Ibn Ezra does not content himself with the determination that the narrative is not organized in this case according to the order of the events; he seeks also to explain the aim of this change:

The verse delayed telling us the words of Moshe because it had to elaborate, saying (v. 20), “This is the thing which God has commanded.”

In other words, in his view, narrative convenience is the reason for citing all of Moshe’s words together.[[9]](#footnote-9) In this example, the change of sequence is tied to the technical exigencies of the verse. At other times, ibn Ezra sees the change as serving a narrative, values-based aim. So, for example, ibn Ezra explains the locations of *Parashat Behar* and *Parashat Bechukotai* (*Vayikra* 25:1):

“On Mount Sinai” — there is no chronological order in the Torah, and this clearly precedes *Parashat Vayikra* and the ones which follow it, because the communication is upon Mount Sinai. This is when he makes the covenant which is written in *Parashat Mishpatim* (*Shemot* 24:7-8). It mentions it in this place to merge the criteria for the land; just as it says, concerning sexual immorality, that as a result of it the land will vomit them out (*Vayikra* 18:28, 20:22), so it speaks in *Parashat Bechukkotai* (26:34, 43) about the land’s sabbatical years, and here it first mentions the details of these sabbatical years.

Ibn Ezra deals with the difficulty which arises in even a simple reading of the passage. In light of the heading that opens this passage, it is clear that it was said while Moshe was on Mount Sinai, preceding the erection of the *Mishkan* and naturally before the Book of *Vayikra*, which opens (1:1) with God’s words to Moshe from the sanctuary of the *Mishkan*. According to the view of ibn Ezra, the blessing and curses in *Parashat Bechukotai* are part of the covenant described in *Shemot* 24, the “covenant of the bowls.” Why does the Torah push this passage until the end of the Book of Vayikra?

Here, ibn Ezra justifies the juxtaposition of the passage of the blessings and curses to the unit of holiness in the center of the Book of *Vayikra*, which describes how observing the prohibitions of sexual immorality is a condition of living in the Land of Israel. At this time, the verse is trying “to merge the criteria for the land” — that is to say, to note an additional condition for remaining in the land: observing the sabbatical and jubilee years. Since the blessings and the curses are appended to the laws of the sabbatical and jubilee years, and it clear from the language that the reward and punishment relate essentially to these commandments, there is a value to putting *Behar* and *Bechukotai* after the units of sexual morality in the Book of *Vayikra*.

Whether we adopt his view in these examples or not, it is clear that ibn Ezra displays great awareness of the importance of narrative sequence, the importance of the organization of facts within the narrative and the possible contribution of this organization to the broader meaning of these stories.

Ibn Ezra’s commentary is an example of deeper analyses done by the medieval commentaries — analyses which, for the most part, are tied to the question of the relationship between the natural (chronological) order of the narrative and the textual order as it appears before the reader. In modern critical analyses, commentators progress one further level, clarifying the contribution of the organization of facts in a narrative that apparently follows the actual events. We will deal with this phenomenon in our next lecture.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

1. **Translator’s note:** Much hermeneutical halakhic analysis is based on the relationship of *kelal* (generalization) and *perat* (specification). Whether the *perat* is preceded by a *kelal*, followed by a *kelal*, or both will impact the scope of the given law. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Y. Gottlieb, *Yesh Seder La-mikra* (Jerusalem and Ramat Gan, 5769), pp. 70-71, points out that term “*semikhut parshiot*” is not recorded before Rashi, and there are about twenty other expressions in the Sages’ lexicon which express this concept: “It is written afterward;” “Why is this passage adjacent to that passage;” “A verse is expounded in light of its predecessor;” “The passage below will teach us about the above passage;” et al. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gottlieb in his abovementioned book cites the position of the Rosh, who formulates the diametrically opposed position: if there is no chronological order, there is no significance to the order of the verses at all, and the question “Why is this passage adjacent to that passage?” has no meaning (Gottlieb, pp. 4-5). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Compare to Gottlieb (ibid.), pp. 40-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gottlieb, p. 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Indeed, from his *Peirush* *Ha-arokh* to *Shemot* 30:12, it turns out that this passage is in its proper place. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In the *Peirush* *Ha-katzar* (ad loc.), he does bring a reason for the change in order: “The passage is written in this place because of ‘And I will give you rest.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cassuto also adopts this reading, even expanding on the comparison of the two non-Jews under discussion (M. D. Cassuto, *Peirush Le-sefer Shemot*, ad loc.). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibn Ezra does not always give a reason when he argues that a narrative or narrative elements do not appear in chronological order. See, for example, his commentary on the Tower of Bavel (*Shitta Acheret*, *Bereishit* 10:25). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)