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LITERARY STUDY OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

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**Lecture #27:**

**The Presentation of Facts in the Narrative (2)**

**MODEL-BASED REASONING AND REASONING BY THE READER**

As we have seen in the previous lecture, the Sages and the medieval commentators discuss the location of the narrative and the issue of the chronological continuity of the narrative cycle.

In the new criticism and modern theories of literature, these questions have received a place of honor. In an important essay dedicated to the issue of organization of facts in the narrative, Menachem Perry points to two basic models that may justify the order of the narrative. First and foremost, of course, is the “natural order” – that is, the narrative as arranged in a chronological manner, so that it reflects the occurrence described in the narrative. (Perry calls this “model-based reasoning.”) On the other side is the “rhetorical order,” according to which certain facts are conveyed to the reader of the story out of the chronological sequence of the plot. In these cases, the change in sequence has a literary-rhetorical aim (in Perry’s words, “reasoning at the reader”).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Because of the possible distinction between the chronology of events described in the narrative and the organization of the narrative in a different order, literary critics coined two different definitions of the plot. The fabula or fable is the plot according to its chronological order, which the reader reconstructs at the conclusion of the story. The sujet, on the other hand, is the plot in the order in which it is realized in the text, the order of facts that the reader encounters while reading the narrative.

**THE NATURAL ORDER**

Our essential analysis will be dedicated to what we may call the disordered order, the sujet, which is tied to the hidden themes of the narrative; the hidden themes are alluded to through the surprising sequence. We will first note, however, that in his analysis of the natural order of the narrative (without jumps forward or backward), Menachem Perry distinguishes between two different types of justification of the order of the narrative:

1. The details of the story can imitate reality. The creation on the second day is described before the creation on the third day because this is how it happened — at first, God created the sky on the second day, and only after that did He expose the dry land on the third day. Similarly, at first Avshalom rebelled against his father and seized the throne, and only after that did he sleep with his father’s concubines, etc.
2. The details of the story can be delivered according to set literary models, literary conventions, or literary structures. We see, for example, in narratives of the consecration of prophets or emissaries that after God appoints them, they refuse, and after they refuse, God gives them a sign; the manifestation of the sign will be mentioned after the refusal because this is a literary convention.[[2]](#footnote-2) Of course, it is clear that a narrative such as this imitates reality and tells the reader what has occurred; however, the justification of the internal order in it relies, in this case, on the general biblical convention.

These two reasons for the order of the text are tied to a natural order that forces itself upon the narrative — whether a realistic order or a literary order.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, even if the order of the narrative echoes the actual chronology of the occurrence of the events described, one should take into account the special weight given to the order that the reader encounters the different facts of the narrative. This concept is clearly cogent when the natural and continuous order of the narrative is broken; in such cases, the reader must give some thought to another approach that could explain the variable order. But even if the reason for the order of the narrative is clear of its own accord, the presentation of facts still has a great influence on the experience of reading and the significance of the story.

In Menachem Perry’s essay on this topic, he cites a number of psychological experiments that prove the significance of the order of the reader’s encounter with the facts. In this context, we will briefly mention two of these experiments:

1. A famous experiment was conducted with E.W. Hill’s picture, “My Wife and My Mother-in-Law,” an image that may be seen as the face of either a young woman or an old woman. When this picture (known as a Boring figure after Edwin Boring) was shown to test subjects and they were asked to describe what they saw, sixty percent initially saw the young woman, while forty percent saw the old woman. However, when the two faces were isolated from each other and a group of subjects were allowed to see the part of the image portraying the young woman first alone, a full hundred percent (!) of the observers could only see the young woman when they were later shown the entire image. When a different group of subjects were originally shown only the part that suggested the older woman, ninety percent (!) of them saw the old woman alone even when they were late shown the entire image. In other words, the earlier encounter with the picture of the young woman or the old woman influenced in a noticeable way the interpretation of the complex picture.[[4]](#footnote-4)
2. Two groups of subjects were asked to look at a list of six character traits attributed to a certain person, and they were then asked to express their opinion of that person. The first group’s list was: intelligent, industrious, impulsive, critical, stubborn, and envious. The second group’s list was written in reverse: envious, stubborn, critical, impulsive, industrious, and intelligent. The traits mentioned at the beginning of the list noticeably influenced the general impression that the subjects had of the character, and their initial impression even influenced the interpretation of the traits appearing at the end of the list. The first group tended to see the person described with these traits as capable; the admitted drawbacks did not overshadow the positive attributes. The second group, on the other hand, saw the person as problematic, with abilities dimmed by faults. Furthermore, being impulsive and critical were interpreted as positive traits by the first group (which began with a positive feature), while these traits were interpreted as negative traits by the second group (which began with a negative characteristic).[[5]](#footnote-5)

These experiments (among others) prove beyond any shadow of a doubt that there is a certain significance to facts that a person encounters first, and that these facts influence the way one appraise the following details. If a certain fact is revealed “late’ or “early” in terms of the natural order of the plot, it certainly influences the reading of the narrative and the process that the reader undergoes in relationship to the story. This is true even in terms of organizing a narrative according to the natural order, without any special leaps. There as well, the reader is inclined to understand the significance of the facts that he encounters in light of their location in the text. As we shall see below, part of the significance of the story is tied to the process that the reader undergoes throughout the duration of the reading, and this is usually utilized in biblical narratives to assimilate hidden readings.

**Skipping Ahead or Falling Back**

Since this phenomenon is particularly noticeable in cases in which the facts are moved from their natural place according to the chronological continuity, we will open our analysis with the manifestations of this type. In biblical narrative, we find literary facts that are inserted out of their proper place in two directions: facts that should have been mentioned at an earlier point of the narrative and facts that should have appeared only at a later point.

**Flashback**

We use the term “flashback” here to refer to the revelation of a fact that has already taken place at an earlier stage in the narrative.

For example, the aim of David’s journey to Naval is noted in the narrative after he has already set out and after Avigayil has heard about his journey, gone out to meet him, and confronted him (I *Shemuel* 25:20-23):

And it was, as she rode on her donkey, that she came down by the covert of the mountain, and, behold, David and his men came down towards her; and she met them. Now David had said: “Surely in vain have I kept all that this man has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that was his; but he has returned me evil for good. Thus may God do to all of David’s enemies and thus may He add, if I shall leave by the morning light of all that is his even one who urinates at the wall!” And when Avigayil saw David, she hurried and came down from her donkey, and she fell before David on her face and bowed down to the ground.

Indeed, it is already clear to the reader that the aim of David’s journey is to wage war with Naval, as the description of David’s departure to meet Naval includes the following (v. 13):

And David said to his men: “Gird every man his sword.” And they girded on every man his sword; and David also girded on his sword; and there went up after David about four hundred men…

If David takes four hundred men with him and they all wear swords, it is clear what his aim is.

Despite this (and perhaps because of this), David’s clear statement of purpose is delayed; it is mentioned “not in its proper place,” but rather interrupting the meeting between Avigayil and David. The verse does not attempt to present David’s words as if they were truly stated in the encounter with Avigayil; the language of “And David had said” indicates something said in the past – he actually said this (if only in his own mind) before he set out on his journey to Naval’s estate.

Naturally, there is a unique aim in citing this fact only now, not in its natural place. When the reader encounters this statement in the midst of the description of the encounter between David and Avigayil, he is compelled to respond to the meaning of the fact as mentioned in a new context. In the case before us, citing David’s scheme before Avigayil opens her mouth contributes to the great tension and the urgent need of Avigayil to appease David. We are not talking about an expedition with the aim of intimidation or harassment, but an impending massacre! In the language of an oath, David later explains the point of his journey (v. 34):

“Indeed, it is true, as the Lord, God of Israel, Who has withheld me from hurting you, lives: Had you not hurried and come to meet me, surely there one would not have been left to Naval by the morning light even one who urinates at the wall.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Inserting this fact here is not only important in understanding the urgency of appeasing David; it also underscores the great wisdom of Avigayil. Despite the fact that David is eager to exterminate the house of Naval, Avigayil succeeds in her mission and appeases him.

**Looking Back**

This case is an obvious example of this phenomenon: the verse is alluding to the reader that incidents reported now have in fact taken place before this time. Sometimes, the integration of a flashback is included in the verse in a more delicate way, woven into the continuity of the plot. In these cases, it may be that the term used by Weiss, “a look back,” is more precise than the accepted term of the “flashback.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Thus, for example, when Yosef’s brothers stand in front of the Egyptian ruler who is treating them harshly, they say (*Bereishit* 42:21), “We are surely guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he beseeched us, and we would not listen; therefore is this distress come upon us.” Only now does the reader hear for the first time that when Yosef was cast into the pit, he begged his brothers for mercy, to no avail. This fact is well integrated into the place where it is mentioned; at the time it is noted, the brothers are recalling this matter, and the verse is relating their thoughts and words. However, from the viewpoint of the reader, this is a fact that completes something which has happened long before and is not mentioned in its “natural place.”

Why was the mention of Yosef’s supplications delayed until this point? Meir Weiss writes: “By way of filling in a detail not known until this point, this look back gives us an opportunity to turn our attention to the brothers’ conscience.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In other words, were this fact mentioned at the time that Yosef was actually thrown into the pit (chapter 37), this would be another fact among the plot elements, presumably stressing the great cruelty of the brothers and the difficult situation of Yosef. By delaying the revelation of this fact until this stage, the brothers get to accept their regret, so that Yosef’s supplications are integrated in the context of their repentance, stressing the guilt and remorse they are feeling. They do not regret only their external acts, but also the internal, mental anguish to which they subjected their brother.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In cases such as these, one may generally justify delaying the revelation of a fact from two different directions. One may explain the new significance in light of its textual location (as we have proposed now). Alternatively, one may justify the delay of the revelation not in its new location, but rather in its very displacement. Ignoring the fact at the proper chronological stage may have its own benefit. In our context, one may debate whether the intent of the Torah is to delay the revelation of Yosef’s supplications to a later point in the story in order to conceal his pleas in the narrative of the sale and to create a screaming silence in the tale itself. According to the narrative of the sale, there is no communication between Yosef and his brothers; they do not accuse him, and he does not beg for his life. Indeed, Yaakov’s sons do not talk with each other either from the point of Yosef’s arrival until Reuven’s return from the pit. In an earlier point in the narrative (v. 4), Scripture attests: “And they could not speak peacefully with him…” Now, at the time of the sale, they cannot speak at all.

The poet Uzi Shavit had this point in mind when he wrote the following poem about the sale of Yosef:

When he reached the field,

The ten surrounded him.

He neither appealed nor grieved,

Nor did he shout bitterly.

He did not raise his voice to cry

When they stripped him of his robe;

He did not open his mouth to beg

When they threw him into the pit —

He only wondered: how strange

Are God’s ways;

How isolated

One man can be

Among ten brothers.

In terms of the fabula, the sequence of events in this poem is in error, because at the end of the day, the reader knows that Yosef begs his brothers for mercy. However, the poet is justified in his artistic expression because the Torah delays the revelations of this fact to a later point in the story. In fact, the reader does experience the feeling — in terms of the body of the narrative — that “He did not open his mouth to beg.”

**Skipping Ahead**

Sometimes, the mentioned fact does not point backward and fill a lacuna that has been opened in a previous stage of the story, but rather jumps forward and mentions something that, according to the continuity of the plot, has not yet occurred. This, for example, is how one should ostensibly interpret the mention of Avshalom’s sleeping with his father’s concubines (II *Shemuel* 16:20-22):

Then said Avshalom to Achitofel: “Give your counsel as to what we shall do.”

And Achitofel said to Avshalom: “Go in to your father's concubines that he has left to keep the house; and all Israel will hear how you contemn your father; then will the hands of all that are with you be strong.”

So they spread for Avshalom a tent on the roof of the house; and Avshalom went in to his father's concubines before the eyes of all Israel.

Before Achitofel’s advice is noted, the chapter describes how Chushai arrived at the palace. Immediately after the description of Avshalom’s seizure of David’s concubines (“So they spread for Avshalom a tent on the roof of the house…”), we find Avshalom’s conversation with Chushai and Achitofel; from its content, it is clear that this conversation took place immediately upon Chushai’s arrival, while David was still fleeing. Clearly, Achitofel’s advice was offered at this stage of the narrative, so its realization — a description of Avshalom’s seizure of David’s concubines — is certainly not mentioned in its proper place. Rather, the event took place at a later stage, after Chushai’s counsel had already been accepted.

Why, then, does the narrative ignore the sequence of events and advance this detail out of order? It is logical that the tendency is to present the realization of Achitofel’s counsel next to the giving of the advice; the impression which is created is that immediately after Avshalom heard the counsel of Achitofel to sleep with David’s concubines, he did so. This is also stressed in the narrator’s note, which closes this scene (v. 23):

Now the counsel of Achitofel, which he gave in those days, was as if a man inquired of the word of God; so was all the counsel of Achitofel both with David and with Avshalom.

Furthermore, mention of Achitofel’s suggestion and Avshalom’s praise of it, as cited by the narrator, ratchets up the tension in light of the second proposal of Achitofel — to pursue David immediately — which Chushai opposes. It makes sense that the challenge that Chushai faces is almost impossible, and only because of God’s will (ibid. 17:14) and Chushai’s resourcefulness and wisdom is Achitofel’s counsel nullified and David saved.

**The Narrator Breaks In**

The example of Achitofel’s advice can clarify an additional important point – it makes sense that the order of the facts is not tied only to the plot elements (when something happened and when it is written), but also to the notes of the narrator, which are inserted in certain places in the narrative. In the example before us, this matter is perceptible through the narrator’s intrusion into the narrative and in the assimilation of the unique evaluation of Achitofel’s counsel. This outburst, in this specific pace, creates a process of reading which responds to this evaluation in between the two pieces of advice given by Achitofel. The order of the verses is the following:

1. Chushai comes to Avshalom (16:16-19)
2. The first counsel of Achitofel and its execution — to sleep with David’s concubines
3. **The narrator’s evaluation of Achitofel’s counsel — “as if a man inquired of the word of God” (16:23)**
4. The second counsel of Achitofel — pursuing David — and its nullification by Chushai (17:1-14)

The insertion of the evaluation of Achitofel’s counsel immediately after his recommendation that Avshalom should sleep with David’s concubines and the execution of this proposal and one moment before the reader hears his second piece of advice (which, had it been fulfilled, would have resulted in David’s defeat) is deliberately placed.

This evaluation makes a double contribution to the hidden reading. First, it increases the tension as Achitofel’s presents his second piece of advice — not only has his first piece of advice been accepted by Avshalom (even Avshalom and David trust him implicitly, as the narrator stresses: “both with David and Avshalom”), but everyone relates to this counsel as if it were the word of God! Moreover, it alludes to a wider interpretation of Achitofel’s advice to Avshalom to sleep with David’s concubines. As it were, the verse alludes to the understanding of this advice: **“as if a man inquired of the word of God”** — i.e., this comes from God.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This allusion is naturally tied to Natan’s prophecy to David after the sin with Bat Sheva (ibid. 12:11-12):

“So says God: ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house, and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before the eyes of all Israel, and before the sun.’”

Now, Avshalom sleeps with David’s wives, and the verse notes that this is “before the eyes of all Israel” (16:22); it is logical that the intent of the verse is to allude to the realization of Natan’s prophecy. Naturally, the integration of the innocent evaluation of the narrator that Achitofel’s counsel is as reliable as the word of God alludes to the divine causality which propels the story forward, alongside the political reality, which is tied to the wars over the inheritance of David’s throne.[[11]](#footnote-11)

An additional advantage in this reading relates to the difference in Avshalom’s actions as regards Achitofel’s two pieces of advice. As we have said, the narrator’s words appear between the two pieces of advice, one of which is accepted and the one of which is rejected by Chushai. It is worth noting that Achitofel’s first piece of advice (to sleep with David’s concubines) was also said after Chushai has already reached Avshalom. Moreover, Avshalom phrases his question in the plural, “Give your counsel as to what **we** shall do” (v. 20), and the reader sees Achitofel, to whom the question is addressed; however, Chushai too stands before Avshalom.[[12]](#footnote-12) The reader’s anticipation of hearing the rejection of Avshalom’s counsel by Chushai — after all, this is the reason he goes to Avshalom — is disappointed. Avshalom does not turn to Chushai (as he does regarding the second piece of advice), and Chushai does not say anything. This matter on its own hints to the reader that even Chushai cannot overcome the first recommendation, for even if Achitofel himself is not aware of this, this is a divine counsel, just as a person might ask of God.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Jumps such as those mentioned above appear also in complete units, when the unit does not occupy its “natural place” according to the order of events.

In these cases, the reader’s inclination is to investigate the juxtaposition of passages. Why does Scripture see fit to move a story from its proper place and put it next to a different narrative?

Naturally, any analysis of the organization of facts in biblical narratives must investigate the design of the lone story and the order of the facts included in it, as well as the issue of juxtaposition of passages — the influence of the order of the narrative on the significance of one story or another. We will demonstrate this, God willing, in the next lecture.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

1. M. Perry, *“Ha-dynamica shel Ha-text Ha-sifruti: Eikh Kovei’a Seder Ha-text et Mashmauyotav,” Ha-sifrut* 28 (5739), pp. 6-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hermann Gunkel’s form criticism accords with this beautifully. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “The order within the group of elements in the text is justified by seeing of the text as bowing to a certain order recognized by the reader, an order which is perceived as existing outside the text and which the continuity of the text obeys or imitates;” Perry, ibid., p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The experiment was done by Robert Leeper; see Perry’s observations, ibid., pp. 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The experiment was done by Solomon Asch in 1946; see Perry’s observations, ibid., p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “David said these things before this time, and they are cited here in order to heighten the tension approaching the fateful meeting between the two sides;” S. Bar-Efrat, *Mikra Le-yisrael* (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 5756), p 318. Similar points are made by J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* (1981), vol. 1, p. 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. There is no “falling back” here, as the occurrence described here indeed happens in the present, as it is being told. Nevertheless, the present dialogue reveals a previously unknown fact about the past to the reader. See M. Weiss, *Mikraot Ki-khvanatam* (Jerusalem, 5748), pp. 312-334. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Weiss, ibid., p. 331. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Many have asked why the brothers regret not listening to Yosef’s supplications and not the actual sale. (See the Ramban ad loc. and R. E. Samet’s *Iyunim Le-parashat Ha-shavua*; this is cited as a proof of the view of the Rashbam that the brothers are not the ones who sell Yosef as a slave, but rather the Midianites). In my view, this question depends on a flawed assumption that in the context described in the narrative, the selling is worse than the ignoring of their brother’s pleas. In legal contexts, this is certainly true; however, the narrative expanse is not a courthouse, and in terms of the brothers, whose worldview is expressed in these verses, ignoring their brother’s supplications is more serious than actually selling him to Egypt. When the brothers wake up in the night from their nightmares, they hear Yosef’s cries, not the sound of the caravan which took him away. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Polzin suggests a diametrically opposed reading. According to him, the narrator’s stress on David and Avshalom as those who relate to the advice of Achitofel as the word of God is meant to exclude the viewpoint of the narrator himself, who does not value the counsel of Achitofel: “As a matter of equivalence, Ahithophel's counsel is certainly not equal to God's word" (R. Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist: 2 Samuel* [Bloomington, 1993], p. 173). However, the internal tension of the narrative relies on the assumption that Achitofel’s counsel, if accepted, would lead to Avshalom’s victory over David. Thus, there is no criticism of Achitofel’s counsel — as the narrator states, on the contrary, at least his first counsel is the realization of Natan’s prophecy to David. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Readers interested in reading further on this matter may read my essay, "The Design of the 'Dual Causality' Principle in the Narrative of Absalom's Rebellion," *Biblica* 88 (2007), pp. 558-566. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Fokkelman explains the plural language as directed to the official council of Avshalom, and not to Chushai; however, it is more logical that this plural language alludes to Chushai, because his arrival has just been mentioned (following the view of M. Garsiel, *Shmuel, Olam Ha-tanakh* [1993], p. 141). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Compare to S. Halperin’s “*Ha-aspect Ha-tragi shel Sippur Mered Avshalom,*” *Sefer Bar Ilan*, 18-19 (5741), pp. 307-313. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)