**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Reading Sefer Bereishit: A Literary Approach**

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**Shiur #15: Intertextuality (2)**

Last week's *shiur* dealt with two highly convincing examples of intertextuality (Sodom and the concubine in Givah; Yosef and Esther). Each of those parallels involves a wealth of thematic and linguistic parallels, but in some cases, the intertextuality is clear even though the similarities are limited to one item.

After the sin of the Golden Calf, God teaches Moshe the thirteen attributes of mercy:

The Lord, the Lord! A compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding kindness and good faith, keeping kindness for the thousandth generation, bearing crime, trespass, and offense, yet He does not wholly acquit, reckoning the crime of fathers with sons and sons of sons, to the third generation and the fourth. (*Shemot* 34:6-7, trans. Alter)

Most of this list reflects God’s compassionate nature, although the last section (beginning with "yet") may convey divine justice and punishment. (It is not accidental that our ritual recital of these attributes in *selichot* stops before the end of the verse.) Interestingly, Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni both offer readings in which the entire passage reflects compassion, including even "reckoning the crime of fathers with sons," which may indicate a spreading out of punishment that lessens its intensity (see their commentaries on 34:7). In any case, this text became something to recite at times of beseeching God for mercy.

After the spies’ transgression, Moshe utilizes a shortened version of this prayer.

The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in kindness, bearing crime and trespass, yet He does not wholly acquit, reckoning the crime of fathers with sons, with the third generation and the fourth. (*Bamidbar* 14:18).

Clearly, he is referencing, and abridging, the divine attributes, but why? Ramban explains the various deletions. For instance, Moshe mentions "kindness" but not "good faith" (*emet*) as the trait of truth would not currently work in their favor since they truthfully deserve a severe punishment. He also leaves out "keeping kindness for the thousandth generation” because that refers to relying on *zekhut avot* (the merit of our forefathers), an inappropriate strategy in this scenario; the patriarchs had eagerly received the promise of the Land of Canaan, and now their descendants, the people and especially the spies, were bemoaning this precious gift. Finally, the list of sins God bears drops "*ve-chata'a*" but retains "*avon*" and "*pasha*." Ramban suggests that *chet* refers to crimes of negligence, while the sin in question was fully intentional. In sum, the attributes of mercy appear here as a flexible tool that can be applied in case-specific fashion (Ramban's commentary on *Bamidbar* 14:18).

Another version, even shorter, appears towards the end of *Sefer Yona*, when the prophet explains his anger and his initial flight from his prophetic mission.

Therefore did I hasten to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God. Slow to anger and abundant in kindness and relenting from evil. (*Yona* 4:3).

Yona mentions several of the attributes, but pointedly leaves out *emet* and adds "relenting from evil." The prophet apparently objects to God's compassion for Nineveh and believes in immediate retributive justice rather than a compassionate possibility for repentance. Unlike Moshe, he is not praying to God with this list but complaining about the fact that God functions in accordance with it. Yona does not leave out *emet* as a prayer strategy; rather, he implicitly criticizes God for *lack* of commitment to truth. After all, in his view, the *truth* of the people’s sins must be upheld and addressed. The added phrase, "relenting from evil," conveys the essence of his complaint. This fits with Yona's name; he is called Yona *ben Amitai*, a son of truth (see *shiur* 7 on the meaning of names in Tanakh).

The Yona narrative also exhibits an example of another literary technique: the withholding of information until a later point. Yona runs from his mission in the opening chapter, but that section gives no hint as to his motivation. This led some commentators to explain that he was afraid of being termed a false prophet and others to suggest that he did not want Am Yisrael to look bad in comparison with the people of Nineveh. In truth, the final chapter offers the definitive answer – that Yona objects to divine compassion towards sinners. It is no accident that *Chazal* associate Yona with Eliyahu, another prophet who prized truth and justice over mercy.

In fact, a different example of intertextuality make a similar point about Eliyahu. Chapter 19 in I *Melakhim* follows upon Eliyahu's great success at Har Ha-carmel, against the prophets of Baal. He achieves temporary reconciliation with King Achav but soon discovers that Queen Izevel still seeks to kill him. Distraught, he even expresses a death wish. Directed by an angel, he eats a meal that enables him to survive for forty days, until he reaches Chorev (Har Sinai). With the combination of forty days without eating, plus the location at Sinai, a connection to Moshe at Sinai is inescapable.

Eliyahu retreats to a cave, where God tries to teach him that His presence may be found in “a still small voice” rather than in powerful winds or consuming fires (19:11-12). Eliyahu fails to understand the message that he must soften his approach towards the sinful people, and God informs him that he will be replaced by Elisha as the prophet of the day.

Several other features further the parallel between the stories of Moshe and Eliyahu. Moshe also expresses a desire to die (*Bamidbar* 11:15), both command the killing of the opposition at a moment of revelation, be it calf worshipers or Baal prophets. Like Moshe, Eliyahu splits a body of water (the Jordan River, II *Melakhim* 2:8) and they both die in ways that leave their burial places unclear – the Torah explicitly informs us that we cannot locate Moshe's burial location, and Eliyahu rises up in a storm to the heavens (*Devarim* 34:6, II *Melakhim* 2:11). (For a list of such parallels, see Alex Israel, *Kings: Torn in Two*, Maggid: 2003, p. 268.)

God also places Moshe in the "cleft of the rock" (*Shemot* 33:22), which could be viewed as a parallel to the cave where Eliyahu resides. It is in that context that God reveals His attributes of mercy to Moshe. Thus, the comparison would highlight that Moshe appreciates the need for mercy – indeed, he frequently stands up for Am Yisrael when they transgress – while Eliyahu lacks that understanding. Both Yona and Eliyahu cannot get beyond the “angry prophet” mode.

*Sefer Yona* also presents a more extensive example of intertextuality in its many similarities with the flood in the time of Noach. Both stories involve a society threatened with destruction for engaging in acts of *chamas* (*Bereishit* 6:11, *Yona* 3:8). Both have a significant period of forty days – in one, it is the period of time for Nineveh to repent (*Yona* 3:4); in the other, a torrential rain lasts for forty days (*Bereishit* 7:12). The bird called a *yona* plays a prominent role in the flood story (*Bereishit* 8:10), which obviously links with our prophet's name.

As noted previously, many similarities serve to emphasize the differences. The predicted destruction of the world by flood takes place, whereas the impeding destruction of Nineveh is forestalled by their repentance. Not only that, but while God does not make a clear effort in the text to warn the generation of the flood, He does send Yona, kicking and screaming, to warn Nineveh. Judy Klitsner sees this as a development within God himself, as He moves to a more forgiving stance (Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other*). Those who find this too theologically bold might instead talk about how Nineveh shows an alternative model to the generation of the flood, in which it is possible to make a moral turnaround.

Intertextuality can sometimes set the theme for an entire book. "And the people of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and grew very vast, and the land was filled with them" (*Shemot* 1:7). Three of these words appear in the account of the creation of humanity: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and conquer it" (*Bereishit* 1:26). That first chapter of the Torah also contains a running refrain: "and God saw that it was good," and a similar phrase appears when Moshe is born: "and she saw him, that he was good" (*Shemot* 2:2). Many commentators wonder what this means; after all, all mothers think their babies look endearing. Perhaps the parallel to creation is actually more important than the specific interpretation of what made Moshe’s appearance different from other newborns. The beginning of *Shemot* resembles the start of *Bereishit* because each depicts a creation tale: first, the world/humanity is created, and then Am Yisrael is created.

In a characteristically excellent chapter, Yonatan Grossman discusses how intertextuality works and makes an interesting analogy to *Chazal*. The Talmudic Sages identify and learn from connections between similar words in both narrative and legal sections of the Torah (such as the mechanism of *gezeira shava*). He cites scholarship that the *gezeira shava* is often not just a random word-based connection but reflects thematic linkage as well – such as the *gezeira shavas* between Pesach and Sukkot and between a nazarite and the High Priest. Thus, *Chazal* already showed awareness of the literary impact of parallel wording (Yonatan Grossman, *Galuy u-Muzpan*, Chapter 7).

Grossman further notes the impact intertextuality can have when deciding between two readings. At the beginning of *Sefer Yehoshua*, two spies stay at the house of Rachav *ha-zona* –which can be translated either as innkeeper or prostitute. Two different phrases in that account may have sexual resonance: *vayishkevu shama* (“and they lay there,” *Yehoshua* 2:1) and *ha-ba’im eilayikh* (“that came to you,” 2:3). If we were to discover literary parallels between the account of the two spies and the episode of two guests who came to Lot, perhaps, then there would be more reason to adopt the sexual interpretation, since the Lot story involves the townspeople asking to bring out the guests so that they may "know them."

**Withholding Information**

We mentioned the technique of withholding information, such as the reason for Yona's reluctance to deliver a divine message to Nineveh. What does this accomplish? We could restrict the purpose to building suspense, but it may do far more than that. Some suggest that it allows a clear demarcation between two different themes: the first part of *Sefer Yona* teaches the futility of fleeing from prophecy, whereas the later part teaches the error of Yona's rejection of compassion and repentance; from this perspective, Yona's complaint about the divine attributes belongs in the later section.

Another good example of this technique emerges from Avraham and Sara's trip to Gerar (*Bereishit* 20). As in Egypt, Avraham says that Sara is his sister, and the king seizes her. Although God instructs Avimelekh to return Sara and have Avraham pray for him, we do not hear anything about an illness in the palace until *pesukim* 17 and 18:

And Avraham prayed to God, and God healed Avimelekh and his wife and maidservants, and they gave birth. For the Lord had shut fast every womb in the house of Avimelekh because of the matter of Sara, Avraham's wife.

Why wait until the end of the story to inform readers that a plague afflicted the palace? Robert Alter notes a theme of procreation running through several consecutive chapters. In Chapter 17, God tells Avraham that he and Sara will have a child, and then the three visitors share the same news with Sara in Chapter 18. In Chapter 19, Lot's daughters manipulate their father into sleeping with them in order to produce offspring. Chapter 21 begins with the birth of Yitzchak. Withholding information about the closed wombs in Gerar until the end of Chapter 20 creates a direct juxtaposition between the difficulties in Gerar and the successful birth of Yitzchak (Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*; *The Five Books of Moses*, p. 67-68, note 18). Rabba bar Mari picked up on the connection between these two chapters when he derived from them that a person with a problem who prays for another with the identical issue will be answered first (*Bava Kama* 92a). Avraham helped the Gerarites overcome their infertility, and he was immediately blessed with the birth of a son. Thus, as with other techniques we have discussed, withholding information can serve several purposes.