**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**Reading Sefer Bereishit: A Literary Approach**

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**Shiur #16: Moral Messages in Biblical Literature**

In his popular work, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now*, James L. Kugel takes a surprising position.

That is to say, the very idea that one should approach the Bible as a great book of divine instruction, and that the purpose of these stories in Genesis is therefore somehow to impart moral lessons or to provide ethical models for readers to imitate, is a creation of the ancient interpreters. This is not an idea that can be located in the words of the book of Genesis itself; and as modern scholars have amply demonstrated, when read without blinders, the stories of Genesis sometimes seem rather lacking in ethical models. (Their purpose scholars say, was to relate history – usually history in the etiological sense.) (James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 79)

Indeed, Kugel follows this exegetical path throughout the volume. He writes that one of the ancient interpreters' four assumptions was that "the Bible was a book of lessons directed to readers in their own day" (Kugel, 15), but that we no longer share that assumption. In chapter after chapter, Kugel describes how ancient interpreters generated religious meaning even in stories that, in his view, were intended to explain place names or reflect power politics, such as Judean authors making Yehuda the hero. The tale of Adam and Chava explains how hunter-gatherers turned into farmers; the nomadic punishment allotted to Kayin actually presents the origin story of a nomadic people named the Kenites. His cynicism extends to the motivations of Biblical characters; for instance, he argues that Yaakov was attracted to Rachel because he saw that she came from a wealthy family. Elsewhere, I have critiqued some of these examples individually (see my review of Kugel in *BDD* 29), but here I will address Kugel’s approach more globally.

Dr. Yoel Finkelman once pointed out to me that even if we assume that Kugel is correct, etiological tales can also express a moral worldview. A story that explains the wandering of the Kenites still conveys an abhorrence towards murder. However, there is no reason to accept Kugel's position to begin with. Kugel writes that the idea of *Bereishit* imparting moral lessons cannot be located in the book itself. This indicates a failure to understand how great literature works. We view it as a weakness if the author needs to take a break in the account to tell us the moral lesson. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an extremely powerful book, but Harriet Beecher Stowe weakens its impact when she tells her readers explicitly how it illustrates the evils of slavery. In contrast, Dostoevsky never states the message of *Crime and Punishment*, but we still understand it as showing how both utilitarian thinking and a notion of a Nietzschean superman could lead a poor university student to murder an old pawnbroker. We consider the later method superior writing.

Although the passage I cited above relates to *Bereishit* alone, Kugel's cynicism carries all through his book. The book of Ruth is not a story about Ruth's dedication to Judaism, her compassion towards her mother-in-law, or the power of *chesed* (a recurring motif in the book), but rather a justification of intermarriage (Kugel, 401-403). The chapter on *Yeshayahu* spends time discussing how many authors composed the book and the cogency of the Christian interpretation of the Suffering Servant motif, but makes no mention of the moral beauty of the book’s salient passages. *Yeshayahu* 56's account of why the foreigner and the eunuch should not feel excluded, and Chapter 58's forceful declaration that the real point of a fast day is about taking care of the poor and destitute, can match any literature for religious inspiration. Kugel shows no interest in this aspect of Tanakh.

The Torah conveys moral messages both explicitly and subtly. In terms of the former, let's begin with the legal sections. The *aseret ha-dibrot* and the numerous references throughout *Chumash* to care for the stranger, the widow, and the orphan make the Torah’s moral stance quite clear. On the narrative side, we see an unambiguous divine abhorrence for murder when God punishes Kayin for fratricide with the exclamation, "What have you done? Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground!" (*Bereishit* 4:10). God also sees *chamas* (probably a form of theft) as outrageous behavior that justifies a deluge. We hear explicitly about the general evil of Sodom (13:13), and Tanakh later illustrates their evil in a story about sodomy, rape, and hatred of hospitality (*Bereishit* 19, *Yechezkel* 16:49). God punishes both Pharaoh and Avimelekh for seizing a woman forcefully and taking her to their respective palaces, and later declares that He selected Avraham because "he will command his sons and household after him to keep the way of God to do righteousness and justice" (18:18-19).

Scripture employs more subtle methods of communication as well. For instance:

And it happened at the turn of the year, **at the time the kings go out**, that David sent out Yoav and his servants with him and all Israel, and they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabba. **And David was sitting** in Yerushalayim. (II *Shmuel* 11:1)

The closing comment, combined with the earlier note that kings usually go out at this time, generates a biting criticism of David for staying home while his men went to battle. Biblical kings always lead their troops in person, but here, David chooses to stay home. As often happens, one bad deed leads to another, and before the chapter ends, David sleeps with the married Batsheva and sends her husband off to the front to be killed. While the end of the chapter provides yet another case of the Bible expressing a clear moral stand – "And the thing David had done was evil in the eyes of the Lord" (11:27) – the opening verse already sets the moral tone in a non-explicit fashion.

In another example of a subtle moral message, *Sefer Bereishit* renders judgment on Lot without saying so. When the time comes to split up, Avraham offers Lot the choice of which area to settle. Lot sees the lush area of the Jordanian plain, which reminds him of Egypt and the "garden of the Lord" (13:10), and he moves to Sodom. The very next *pasuk* says, "Now the people of Sodom were very evil and offenders against God" (13:13). Clearly, Lot has made a bad choice. His selection looks even worse when we realize that Avraham presented Lot with a choice of north or south, and he instead chose east. Furthermore, Lot could have seen from his visit to Egypt that fertile land and moral behavior do not always go together. His poor decision has repercussions in Chapter 14, where Lot is taken captive, and more so in Chapter 19, where Sodom is destroyed and Lot loses family members, including his wife.

In earlier *shiurim* (#s 1 and 13), we have seen further that value judgments can be conveyed through wordplay. Yehuda suggests selling his brother Yosef, and the parallel usages of the phrase "*haker na*" in Chapters 37 and 38 indicates that the Tamar episode serves as his just comeuppance for the sale. There too, one wrongdoing leads to another: Yehuda marries a Canaanite woman, loses two children due to their sins, and sleeps with someone he thinks is a prostitute. Earlier on – we might initially think the *Chumash* approves of Yaakov deceiving his father, but when he later suffers "*mirma*" (the same term employed by Yitzchak in 27:35 to describe Yaakov's deceit) at the hands of Lavan (29:25), who tells him "We do not do this in our place, to give the younger girl before the first born" (29:26), we see that Yaakov's deception was not so innocent and is in fact coming back to haunt him.

An interesting article by Yair Zakovitch will further our analysis of both intertextuality and subtle moral messaging. Zakovitch begins as follows:

It is well known that the biblical narrators leave it to their readers to judge the characters in their writings according to their words and actions. Only rarely is the reader given additional tools to evaluate characters, such as direct comments concerning their inner thoughts or explicit evaluations of their character. I will discuss a strategy used by narrators to aid the reader in evaluating characters, a strategy that is one of the many instances of intertextuality so common in biblical literature. (Zakovitch, "Through the Looking Glass: Reflections/Inversions of Genesis Stories in the Bible," *Biblical Interpretation* 1:2, 1993)

In this essay, Zakovitch limits himself to parallels that highlight the *differences* between two largely similar tales. Ruth's journey from Moav to Canaan resembles Avraham's journey from Ur Casdim and Charan to Canaan. Boaz praises Ruth for leaving her father and her mother and her native land (Ruth 2:11), reminiscent of Avraham being commanded to "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house" (*Bereishit* 12:1). We could say that the comparison equates the two, granting significant status to a female Moavite convert as a worthy successor to Avraham. For Zakovitch, however, the comparison shows us how Ruth's journey is much more impressive than that of our first patriarch. Unlike Avraham, she did not receive a divine command with an accompanying guarantee, nor is she supported by a family and material wealth, yet she charges ahead without hesitation. Thus, the intertextuality conveys subtle additional praise for the character of Ruth.

The inverted comparison between Ruth and Avraham testifies that this Moabite woman, who knows no selfishness, who leaves her country out of commitment to her mother-in-law with no hope to become a mother herself, is a more noble figure that the nations' father Abraham. (Zakovitch, 147)

In another example, it is difficult not to think about Yosef when reading about Amnon’s rape of Tamar. First, she is wearing a *ketonet* *passim* (II *Shmuel* 13:18), which reminds any reader with a modicum of Biblical knowledge of Yosef's special tunic *(Bereishit* 37:3). Less conclusive, but also suggestive, is the fact that the phrase *shenatayim yamim* (two years) appears only in those two stories: Yosef gets out of jail after two years of incarceration (*Bereishit* 41:1), and Avshalom extracts revenge on Amnon two years after the rape (*Shmuel II* 13:23). Obviously, both stories involve sexual assault of one kind or another.

Without excusing Eishet Potiphar, Zakovitch argues that the parallels emphasize a contrast – specifically, the greater severity of Amnon's crime. It is a story of rape rather than attempted seduction; the victim is a sister, which adds to the victim's trauma; and Amnon planned out the crime, whereas Eishet Potiphar may have acted more spontaneously. I think Zakovitch is basically correct, but would complicate the comparative analysis a bit. Unlike Amnon, Eishet Potiphar places the blame on her victim (Zakovitch says she had no choice, given the presence of his garment in her house), and she had clearly attempted to entice Yosef over an extended period of time (*Bereishit* 39:7-10). That being said, I agree that raping a sister is worse and that the parallel brings this to the fore.

In addition to the Yosef parallel, the Amnon/Tamar account offers a clear moral message in itself – that our tradition views rape as a serious offense:

And she said to him, "Don't, my brother, don't abuse me, for it should not be done thus in Israel; don't do this abominable thing. And I, where could I carry my shame? ... And Amnon did not want to heed her voice, and he overpowered her and abused her and bedded her. And Amnon hated her with a very great hatred, for greater was the hatred with which he hated her than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said: Get up, go! ... And he called his lad, his attendant, and said, "Send this [creature], pray, away from me and bolt the door behind her." (II *Shmuel* 13: 12-17, translation based on Alter)

The combination of Tamar's plea, a strong verb describing Amnon's crime, and the powerful portrayal of Amnon's post-act hatred, including a refusal to refer to Tamar by name, indicates powerful condemnation of Amnon's behavior. If our legal sections do not make the horror of rape precisely clear, our narratives do so.

In sum, there is a great deal of moral messaging conveyed in *Sefer Bereishit* in particular, and in Tanakh in general, in both explicit and non-explicit fashion. Kugel's position is untenable.