**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Reading Sefer Bereishit: A Literary Approach**

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**Shiur #11: Purposeful Ambiguity and Dual Meanings**

My discussion of this topic owes a great deal to Yonatan Grossman. See his *Galuy u’Mutzpan: Al Kama Midarkei Ha-itzuv shel Ha-sippur Ha-mikra’i* (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2015, pp. 57-94) and his article on Abravanel: “*Yachas shel Abravanel Le-kiyum Maba Rav Mashma’i Be-mikra – Perspectiva Sifrutit*”(Beit Mikra 52, 2007, 126-138).

Yona the prophet declares: "In another forty days, Ninveh will be overturned" (*Yona* 3:4), yet after the people of Ninveh repent, the city is not destroyed. Should we consider Yona a false prophet? Perhaps prophecies come with an implicit clause, "assuming they do not change their behavior" (see my essay "No Guarantees in Life," *Tradition* Summer 2022), so that once Ninveh repented, the threat of calamity ceased to be operative. Alternatively, Abravanel suggests that the word *nehepakhet*, to be overturned, lends itself to two interpretations. The root *heh, peh, khaf* could refer to the impending destruction of the city, as used in describing the annihilation of Sedom and Amora (*Devarim* 29:22), or to the city turning over a new leaf in its behavior, as used in *Shmuel I* 10:6 and *Eikha* 1:20 with regard to internal transformation. Arguably, Yona intends both, in a purposeful ambiguity. Either meaning may turn out to be correct; it all depends on the reaction of the people of Ninveh.

The same phenomenon may occur in *Chumash*. Rivka is perturbed by her difficult pregnancy and seeks counsel, either from a prophet or directly from God (“and she went to inquire of God” – *Bereishit* 25:22). She hears a prophecy that includes the phrase *ve-rav ya'avod tza’ir* (25:23). This phrase can be understood in two ways, depending on whether or not the reader places a comma after the first word. Does it mean that the elder will serve the younger, or the elder will be served by the younger? Radak explains that *Chumash* purposely phrases it in this ambiguous manner since both ideas will prove true at different moments in history: sometimes the Jewish offspring of Yaakov are ascendant, while at other times, the descendants of Eisav, be they Romans or Christians, dominate.

The fact that *Chumash* could easily have phrased things more clearly supports the idea that the ambiguity was produced deliberately. Radak notesthat a simple addition of the word *et* –“*ve-rav ya'avod et ha-tzair,* with the added word *et* indicating the direct object – would have clearly indicated that the older will serve the younger. R. Naftali Yehuda Zvi Berlin adds that *be-tza’ir* or *le-tza’ir* would also have eliminated any doubts. Not employing any of this clarifying phraseology suggests a desire to maintain both possibilities.

In an excellent article on the identity of Moshe, Yael Ziegler ("*Mi Anokhi*: Who are Moses' Brethren?" *Tradition*, Summer 2016) offers an analysis that opens up a different kind of purposeful ambiguity. Moshe has two mothers, an adoptive Egyptian one and a biological Hebrew one. He is raised in the Egyptian palace, but with his Hebrew mother as wet nurse. Even his name generates uncertainty regarding his identity: Does "Moshe" stem from a Hebrew or an Egyptian etymology, and which of his two mothers actually selects the name? One can easily see young Moshe himself wondering where he belongs. The daughters of Re'uel describe him to their father as an "Egyptian man" (2:19). While this could merely be a depiction of his mode of dress, the phrase could also highlight what was once a possible identity for our great prophet.

And it was in those days that Moshe grew up and went out to his brethren and saw their suffering. And he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man of his brethren. (*Shemot* 2:11)

Who are the brethren that Moshe goes out to? Most commentators assume the verse refers to his Jewish brothers. After all, Moshe is biologically Jewish, and the latter use of "brethren" in the verse clearly refers to Am Yisrael. Nevertheless, Ibn Ezra says the first phrase is about the Egyptians (see his *peirush ha’arukh* on 2:11). From this perspective, when Moshe goes out, he still feels somewhat Egyptian – but he then sees the injustice that his "brethren" mete out on the Jewish people and begins to identify more strongly with his biological brothers.

Different possible interpretations are not the same as purposeful ambiguity. We could debate the correct reading and still maintain that only one interpretation is correct. If so, "brethren" either means the Egyptians or the Jews. I posit that *Chumash* intentionally leaves it open to either interpretation, in order to convey the struggle within Moshe. This differs slightly from our previous two examples, in which humans hear a message that allows for two possible meanings, and humans (the people of Ninveh; the descendants of Yaakov and Eisav) subsequently determine the correct interpretation. Here, the two readings reflect the inner conflict of a Biblical character at a given moment.

In another model, a phrase simultaneously means several things without the correct interpretation being subject to later human behavior. Yonatan Grossman shows that Abravanel sees multiple meanings as a Biblical technique employed on several occasions. For example, Abravanel cites three interpretations of “and Yitzchak loved *Eisav ki tzayid be-fiv* (because hunt was in his mouth)”:

1. Yitzchak loved Eisav because his oldest son brought him dinner from the hunt.
2. Yitzchak loved Eisav because the latter deceived him, “trapping” him with his false tongue.
3. Yitzchak loved the tales of bravery that Eisav related about his hunting.

According to readings 2 and 3, the verse refers to Eisav’s mouth, whereas according to reading 1, it is the father’s mouth. Abravanel posits that the Torah might have intended all of the above (page 299 in the 5744 edition).

Abravanel does not always seize opportunities to suggest multi-level explanations, though. For instance, on the verse "And Yaakov dwelled in the land of his father's sojournings (*megurei aviv*), in the land of Canaan" (*Bereishit* 37:1), Abravanel states three different readings of the phrase "*megurei aviv*.” The simplest translation is *megurei* from the language of *ger*, or dwelling: Yaakov lived in the same areas of Canaan where his father Yitzchak had lived. However, Abravanel adds an alternative, that the word connects to *lo taguru mifnei ish* (*Devarim* 1:17), where it means fear. He also mentions the possibility of strife and quarrel, as in *al titgar bam milchama* (*Devarim* 2:9). Yaakov settled in a location where Yitzchak experienced the tension and difficulties of a frightening dynamic between his two sons, and now Yaakov will begin to undergo a parallel experience. Here, Abravanel presents parallel potential possibilities, rather than contending that *Chumash* simultaneously has multiple meanings in mind (361). I am not sure why Abravanel did not explicitly endorse multiple meanings co-existing in this case.

On some occasions, textual evidence supports bringing in a second layer of interpretation. As the people worship the Golden Calf, the *pasuk* says that Yehoshua hears the voice of the people "*be-rei'o*" (*Shemot* 32:17). Since the phrase describes a voice or sound, the basic reading relates the word to *teru’a*, a shofar sound. Grossman locates evidence for another layer that connects the word to *ra*,or evil. *Ra* is a dominant word in this episode, appearing four times (*Shemot* 32:12,14,22, 33:4) and this creates more justification for hearing “evil” in Yehoshua's description. Furthermore, if the verse referred only to the sound of a ram's horn, the expected grammatical form would have been *be-heirio.* These clues provide good reason to hear both a shofar sound and a hint of evil in this phrase.

Grossman cites another clever example from early in *Shemot*. Moshe's first foray to Pharaoh leads to a worsening of the Israelite situation when the Egyptian ruler decides to make his slaves produce their own materials. The people are quite understandably angry with Moshe and Aharon.

And they encountered (*vayifga’u*) Moshe and Aharon poised to meet them as they came out from Pharaoh. And they said to them: "Let the Lord look upon you and judge, for you have made us repugnant in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants, putting a sword in their hand to kill us." (*Shemot* 5:20-21, translation from Robert Alter)

The root *paga* can refer to a totally neutral meeting, such as in *Bereishit* 28:18 and 32:2. However, it can also mean strike or attack, carrying an association of violent hostility, as in I *Shmuel* 22:18 and II *Shmuel* 1:15. Even more important for our purposes, the word has the latter connotation in *Shemot* 5:3, when Moshe warns Pharaoh to let them out for three days to worship God lest "lest He strike us (*yifga’enu*) with pestilence or a sword." Thus, the very same chapter has the more negative and aggressive form of *paga*. We can now say that *Shemot* 5:20 conveys both that the people encounter Moshe and Aharon and that the meeting involves a good deal of hostility.

Grossman provides one more paradigm, in which the Torah sets up the anticipation of one interpretation only to move on to another.

And Moshe went out and told the people the words of God; and he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people, and set them round about the Tent. And God came down in the cloud, and spoke to him, and took of the **spirit** that was upon him, and put it upon the seventy elders; and it came to pass, that, when the **spirit** rested upon them, they prophesied, but they did so no more. But there remained two men in the camp, the name of the one was Eldad, and the name of the other Medad; and the spirit rested upon them; and they were of them that were recorded, but had not gone out to the Tent; and they prophesied in the camp. And there ran a young man, and told Moshe, and said: “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” And Yehoshua the son of Nun, the minister of Moshe from his youth up, answered and said: “My lord Moshe, shut them in.” And Moshe said to him: “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all God's people were prophets, that God would put His **spirit** upon them!” And Moshe withdrew into the camp, he and the elders of Israel. And there went forth a **wind** from God, and brought across quails from the sea, and let them fall by the camp, about a day's journey on this side, and a day's journey on the other side, round about the camp, and about two cubits above the face of the earth. (*Bamidbar* 11:24-31)

The word *ruach* appears in *pesukim* 25, 26, and 29 with the meaning of “the spirit of prophecy.” Note how the above translation, an adaptation of the old JPS, uses the English word “spirit” for all three verses. When *pasuk* 31 begins with *ve-ruach nasa me'et Hashem*, the reader will likely continue with the previous meaning of the word and think that God here bestows the prophetic spirit. Yet, this thought is shattered in the very next phrase, when we hear about quail being transported and it turns out that *ruach* here simply means wind. Note how the translation above switches from "spirit" to "wind." This unrealized expectation conveys the degradation of Am Yisrael in this episode. Moshe wished that God's people would merit the Divine spirit, but instead, their misbehavior led them to experience Divine anger via a wind that brought the quails. While “the meat is still between their teeth…God’s anger flared against the people, and God struck a great blow against the people” (*Bamidbar* 11:33) Though the false start only lasts for half a *pasuk*, it is enough to make the point.

We have seen versatile usage of these techniques. Purposeful ambiguity can indicate that human action determines the meaning, or that the character himself experiences ambiguity. Alternatively, *Chumash* might include words with intentional dual meanings where both remain correct: Yehoshua hears both a shofar sound and the evil that is emerging in the camp: the Jewish people in Egypt both *meet* Moshe and Aharon and express *hostility* towards them. Finally, *Chumash* may set up a certain expectation only to shatter it with a different meaning. The *ruach* that might have indicated a prophetic expansion turns out to be only a wind, bringing destruction and danger.