**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

**Reading Sefer Bereishit: A Literary Approach**

**Rav Yitzchak Blau**

The first part of this *shiur* was written in the *beit midrash* of Yeshivat Chakhmei Lublin on a trip with Yeshivat Orayta, and the rest was written in a Cracow hotel room. May this series succeed in contributing towards recovering from the loss of Torah in the conflagration that consumed the great Jewish institutions of Eastern Europe.

**Shiur 19: Chiasmus – and Some Hesitations**

Prof. Yonatan Grossman describes three different Biblical structures. Classic parallelism follows an ABCABC pattern, chiastic structures are built as ABCCBA, and concentric patterns run ABCDCBA (see the entire fifth chapter of his *Galuy u-Mutzpan*). (Note that many scholars use the term “chiasmus” for both of the latter categories.) Many modern literary readers are quite enthusiastic about identifying examples of such structures in the Biblical text; this *shiur* will explore the technique, along with some of its strengths and weaknesses.

Concentric structures highlight the middle section, the D, which lacks a parallel. This D likely represents the most significant section of the narrative unit, possibly the turning point of the entire story. Chiastic structures lack that protruding middle but do convey a strong sense of reversal, making them a powerful element in a story with contrasting halves. Let us look at a few examples.

Individual *pesukim*, especially in poetic sections, frequently contain chiasmus. The verse "One who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" (*Bereishit* 9:6) clearly incorporates the pattern of shed/blood/man/man/blood/shed, a design that illustrates a "measure for measure" approach in which those who murder forfeit their own lives. "Length of days is in her right hand; in her left are riches and honor" (*Mishlei* 3:16) is a clear ABBA. However, many scholars also claim to find such structures over larger canvases, which often raises more questions.

The tower of Bavel account is a prime example:

(A) And the whole earth was of one language and of unified words.

(B) And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a valley in the land of Shinar, and they dwelled there. And they said, one to another: “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick as stone, and bitumen was for them as mortar.

(C) And they said: “Come, let us build us

(D) a city, and a tower, with its top in heaven, and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered upon the face of the whole earth.” And God came down to see

(D) the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. And God said: “Behold, they are one people, and they have one language for them all, and this is what they begin to do; and now nothing will be withheld from them that they plan to do.

(C) Come, let us go down, and there confound their language, such that they will not understand one another's speech.”

(B) So God scattered them from there upon the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore was the name of it called Babel;

(A) because there God did confound the language of all the earth; and from there God scattered them upon the face of all the earth. (*Bereishit* 11:1-9)

Here, we have a chiastic structure of ABCDDCBA, with some of the parallels clearly highlighting reversals. The tower builders begin with one language and end with a multitude of dialects. They would like to dwell together in one concentrated area but ultimately are scattered all over the earth. The repeated human call to "come, let us" develop materials and build a tower is negated by the divine call to "come, let us" sabotage their plans. The artistic design of the text enhances the portrayal of how God reverses and undermines this human initiative. While we could view this as a story of sin and punishment, it is also possible that they were not waging war against God but simply trying to concentrate in one location, not realizing God intends for them to settle the earth; Grossman points out that the literary technique works equally well either way (Grossman, *Bereishit: Sippuran shel Toldot*, 271).

Moving much later in the Biblical text, some scholars identify chiastic structures either over the totality of *Megillat Esther* or over large units of it. Grossman, for instance, suggests the following concentric arrangement within the book (Grossman, *Esther: Megilat Setarim* 153):

A: Rebels are hung (2:21).

B: Haman's power (3:1-2).

C: Haman's anger with Mordechai (3:2-6).

D: Haman enters to talk with Achashverosh and they drink together (3:8-15).

E: The dialogue between Mordechai and Esther (*perek* 4).

D: Esther enters to talk with the king and invites him to a party (5:1-8).

C: Haman’s anger with Mordechai (5:9).

B: Haman's power (5:10-13).

A: Zeresh suggests hanging Mordechai (5:14).

Grossman makes several insightful points based on this structure. First, it places the dialogue of chapter four front and center – and indeed, this great conversation deserves prominence:

Then Mordecai bade them to answer Esther: “Think not with yourself that you shall escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish; and who knows whether it was for such a time as this that you came to royalty?” (Esther 4:13-14)

Not only is this a glorious speech, but it also reflects a turning point in the story. Until now, Mordechai has been the leading voice directing Esther, including commanding her not to divulge her ethnic identity. At this moment, Esther takes charge and instructs Mordechai to declare a three-day fast. In fact, the chapter's concluding verse states "And Mordechai went and did all that Esther had commanded him" (4:17).

Moving outward to the D parallels, we find that Esther's entry to Achashverosh ironically subverts Haman's conversation with the monarch. Haman accuses the Jews of not following the king's laws (*datei ha-melekh* 3:8). Esther resolutely decides to enter the king's palace uninvited, violating the norms (*asher lo ke-dat* 4:16) and risking her life. Though Haman endangered the Jews with his accusation of not respecting Persian law, it is precisely Esther's willingness to violate those laws that saves her people. This point emerges from the parallel between the two Ds.

When Bigtan and Teresh are hung, it seems that this is the punishment for rebellion against the king. If so, perhaps Zeresh is suggesting that Haman accuse Mordechai of treason so that he will receive the appropriate punishment. However, once the king hears the historical record, Mordechai cannot be accused of such a crime; after all, he saved the king from a rebellious assassination plot. This point emerges from the parallel between the two As.

In addition to all of the above, the theme of reversal dominates the Purim story throughout. "It was turned to the contrary" (9:1). Haman is hanged on the tree prepared for Mordechai, the signet ring given to Haman now gets handed to Mordechai, Haman hopes to ride on the king's horse but has to lead Mordechai around on that horse, and letters first enable the killing of the Jews before a second set of letters goes out allowing the Jews to rise up against their enemies. Chiastic or concentric structures fit this theme perfectly.

That being said, I will raise a few quibbles. The insightful points about the two As and the two Ds could be said equally well without the larger concentric structure, so the artistic design may not be crucial to the message. More importantly, interpreters get to define the description of each unit, so cheating becomes a danger. Both Haman and Esther have conversations with Achashverosh (the two Ds), but are they truly parallel? Note how Grossman chooses to describe Haman *entering* into Achashverosh's chamber, thus creating a strong association with the queen's *entry*. No doubt, Haman entered the room at some point, but the verb *kaf/nun/samekh* does not appear in the text. Furthermore, with regard to Esther, the entrance itself is significant, as that is what risks her life, whereas Haman’s entrance itself is irrelevant. It may be unfair to describe the third chapter as incorporating an *entry* of Haman.

Another potential method of "cheating" involves skipping over material – so that one might, for instance, analyze ABCCBA when the reality is more like ABDCCBEA. Glossing over an individual verse might work, but what if we are talking about overlooking an entire series of *pesukim*? Grossman suggests the following chiasmus for *Bereishit* 37-50 (Grossman, *Yosef: Sippuran* *shel Chalomot*, 34):

A: Seventeen years of a united family.

B: Yosef’s brothers sell him into slavery.

C: Yehuda establishes a family with two sons, Peretz and Zerach.

D: Yosef is responsible for Potiphar's house.

E: Yosef interprets the butler’s and baker's dreams.

E: Yosef interprets Pharaoh's dreams.

D: Yosef is responsible for Pharaoh's storehouses.

C: Yosef establishes a family with two sons, Menashe and Ephraim.

B: Yosef's brothers refuse to allow Binyamin to be a slave.

A: Seventeen years of a united family in Egypt.

Once again, some important points emerge with or without the larger structure. The brothers have certainly matured since they sold Yosef, and now protect a younger brother despite his preferential status, yet that would remain true even if we do not call these items parallel Bs within a broader framework. Moreover, the parallel between the two Cs only works if I ignore considerable parts of the Yehuda story. Chapter 38 includes Yehuda marrying a Canaanite, the deaths of his first two sons, his putting off Tamar by saying that Shela (his third son) is too young, Tamar taking initiative, Yehuda determining that Tamar deserves the death penalty, and then Yehuda admitting that Tamar is "more righteous than me." Is it legitimate to gloss over all of this and just refer to the two sons born at the very end of the chapter? Leaving out significant sections can be a way of manipulating the material into a larger pattern that really doesn’t quite fit.

Sometimes, a chiasmus may simply reflect a natural progression of events rather than artistic design. We turn to Grossman once again on chapters 37 through 41 (*Yosef: Sippuran shel* *Chalomot*, 205):

A: Yosef is “master of dreams.”

B: Yosef comes to his brothers.

C: The brothers remove his garment.

D: The brothers throw Yosef into a pit.

D: Yosef is removed from a pit (jail).

C: Yosef is given noble clothing.

B: Yosef comes to Pharaoh.

A: Yosef is master of dreams.

This parallel nicely indicates the fall and rise of Yosef – but the CDDC portion is only to be expected. In their anger with Yosef, the brothers will naturally remove the garment symbolizing his favored status and throw him into a pit. When Yosef's status rises, he will understandably emerge from his current pit before receiving new clothes reflecting his new position. Thus, the chiasmus simply shows the ebb and flow of the tides of man.

To be sure, any method can be misused; we can also find poor applications of intertextuality and the like. However, most of the literary techniques we have studied are less prone to misuse. If Scripture usually does not tell us the physical characteristics of its protagonists or the time of day of its events, then we are justified for considering those factors significant when they do appear. A reader cannot cheat too much with juxtaposition, because he or she is constrained by which two narratives actually appear in succession. *Leitwort* and intertextuality are more subject to misuse – but I would distinguish between poor usage and cheating. Claiming intertextuality based on two usages of the word *sadeh* is a weak performance; leaving out large sections and redefining units to make the chiastic structure work is manipulating the evidence and is thus more problematic.

I will conclude on a positive note with one final clever example from Grossman, from the fourth day of creation, that opens up a new angle for what these patterns can convey (Grossman, *Bereishit: Sippuran shel Toldot* 64):

A: And God said (1:14).

B: To differentiate between day and night (1:14).

C: To be for signs and for seasons (1:14).

D: In the firmament of the heavens, to illuminate the earth (1:15).

E: And God made the two great luminaries (1:16).

D: In the firmament of the heavens, to illuminate the earth (1:17).

C: [ ]

B: To differentiate between day and night (1:18).

A: And God saw that it was good (1:18).

The concentric pattern illustrates how God's plans immediately become reality; however, we notice that C lacks a parallel in the section of fulfillment. Grossman explains that signs and seasons are only relevant if creatures exist who can read those signs and act upon them. Thus, until God creates humanity two days later, God's plan cannot achieve complete realization. The lack of parallel informs us about God's dependence on humanity for the fulfillment of His plans.

In sum, chiasmus can be a powerful tool, but its usage requires more caution than other techniques we have surveyed.