YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS**

**By R. Yehuda Rock[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Lecture #31:**

**R. Mordechai Breuer**

**A. Foreword**

Yeshivat Har Etzion’s Virtual Beit Midrash, under which this series of *shiurim* appears, is part of a broader world of intensive *Tanakh* study emphasizes *peshat*, the simple meaning, of the verses. This world, which is nowadays centered around Yeshivat Har Etzion and Herzog College, has been deeply influenced by my mentor and teacher, R. Mordechai Breuer, zt”l. Many of the teachers of *Tanakh* in Herzog College and in the Virtual Beit Midrash are his students, or his students’ students. They do not all write and teach precisely according to his method of biblical analysis, which we will discuss below, but they have all been influenced, either directly or indirectly, by the approach to *peshat* which he inspired and taught through his *shiurim* in Yeshivat Har Etzion over the course of more than three decades.

**B. Introduction**

R. Mordechai Breuer was born in Germany in 1921. Through his grandmother, he was a great-grandchild of R. Shimshon ben Refael Hirsch (in fact, R. Breuer translated parts of his great-grandfather’s commentary into Hebrew). At age twelve he made aliya, studying in the Chorev High School in Jerusalem, and subsequently in Yeshivat Kol Torah and Yeshivat Chevron. In 1947 he was a Rebbe in Yeshivat Bnei Akiva Kfar Haroeh and was sent by Bnei Akiva to the detention camps for Jewish refugees which the British established in Cyprus. During the War of Independence, he was the instructor for the Bnei Akiva unit which protected Birya in the Galilee.

From 1949 to 1965 he taught in Yeshivat Hadarom in Rechovot together with his close friend, HaRav Yehuda Amital, and with Rav Shach. He taught *Tanakh* for years in Mikhlelet Yerushalayim Le-vanot, in Yeshivat Har Etzion and in additional institutions. Hebrew University conferred on him an honorary doctorate, and in 1999 he received the Israel Prize in Torah Literature.

Rav Breuer lived in Jerusalem’s Bayit Vegan neighborhood, where he taught *shiurim* in Torah and Gemara. He passed away in 2007.

**Main Contributions of R. Breuer**

R. Breuer made significant contributions to three areas in the *Tanakh* world, each of which he revolutionized. The main topic of this lecture is his interpretive method, but we will first briefly address his two additional spheres of activity.

The first area is that of the biblical Masoretic text. R. Breuer was the first to scientifically prove the unique quality of the Aleppo Codex, an ancient biblical manuscript. He established a clear methodology for determining the biblical text, based on the Aleppo Codex and similar manuscripts, which is accepted nowadays both in the yeshiva world and in the academic world as the authoritative method for precisely determining the Masoretic text. He defined the text which is used in the various Mossad HaRav Kook editions (their complete *Tanakh*, as well as the *Da’at Mikra* and *Torat Chayim* series). Later his textual version was published by Chorev Publishing. A decade ago, *Tanakh Keter Yerushalayim* was published by Hebrew University, edited by his student Professor Yosef Ofer and based on the Chorev edition, according to R. Breuer’s methods and in consultation with him. This *Tanakh* is considered to be the most precise version which we have access to in the modern day.

The second sphere of activity for R. Breuer was that of the cantillation notes, *ta’amei ha-mikra*, the ancient system of musical notation for reading the biblical text aloud. Aside from determining and verifying *ta’amei ha-mikra* throughout *Tanakh* in in the context of his Masoretic research, R. Breuer discovered rules governing *ta’amei ha-mikra*. Of course, some of these rules were known before R. Breuer, but he improved and sharpened them, to the smallest detail, both in terms of the standard *ta’amei ha-mikra* used in most (twenty-one) of the books of *Tanakh* as well as the variant which is used in three books, *Iyov, Mishlei* and *Tehillim* (colloquially referred to as *Sifrei Emet*, which literally means the Books of Truth, based on the initial letter of each). His detailed rules are detailed in his book, “Cantillation Notes in the Twenty-One Books and in *Sifrei Emet*” (Jerusalem: 1982). These rules are summarized in the *Da’at Mikra* series, in the introductions to *Bereishit* and to *Tehillim*.

In the sphere of interpretation, the third area of biblical study which R. Breuer dealt with, his basic innovation was in disseminating the pursuit of *peshat* within the community of those studying *Tanakh*. Before R. Breuer, the study of *Tanakh,* within the religious Jewish world in general and the yeshiva world in particular, was focused mainly on the Midrashic expositions of *Chazal* and more recent compositions of the sort (e.g. in the Chasidic world); or on studying the classical biblical commentators (e.g. following the method of Nechama Leibowitz). R. Breuer taught in Yeshivat Har Etzion and other places, and it is to his credit that it is now commonplace in the yeshiva world to study *Tanakh* by treating *peshat* as having independent and primary meaning. This approach to *peshat* is of course not the excusive innovation of R. Breuer, but in practice it appears that the widespread adoption of the study of *peshat* in the yeshiva world is ultimately a result of his efforts, directly and through his students.

**B. *Shitat ha-bechinot* & the Documentary Hypothesis**

Beyond his general *peshat*-based approach, R. Breuer’s innovation is a specific interpretive method called aspect methodology, *shitat ha-bechinot*. This will be our primary focus for this lecture.

**Documentary Hypothesis**

Historically speaking, *shitat ha-bechinot* is based on the documentary hypothesis propounded by biblical critics. In order to understand *shitat ha-bechinot*, then, we must first be familiar with the documentary hypothesis.

The documentary hypothesis argues, based on considerations of style and narrative flow, that the Torah is a compilation of several different documents, written by different authors in different historical eras. Bible critics who propound this idea even analyze every section of the Torah to identify the documentary source of each chapter and verse. The divergent sources of the different documents serve to explain variations in style, and contradictions and repetitions in narrative and legal sections of the Torah. Sometimes, multiple stories are combined in order to create a sequential narrative, alternately presenting a piece from one and a piece from the other. The combined narrative blurs the points of transition from one narrative to another while still maintaining the difficulties of these transitions, as well as the differences in content.

The most distinctive examples of contradictions which support the layered structure posited by bible critics are found in *Bereishit*. For example, in *Bereishit* 1, man is initially created male and female (v. 27), whereas in Chapters 2-3, man is created first and the woman only subsequently, from man’s rib. In Chapter 1, vegetation is created on the third day (vv. 11-12) and Adam on the sixth day (vv. 27-28), whereas in Chapter 2, initially the world is without flora and only after the creation of Adam God plants a garden and trees (vv. 5-9). The documentary hypothesis explains this simply: Chapter 1 is the introduction of one original document, while Chapters 2-3 are the beginning another original document.

Similarly, when it comes to the Flood, there are clear contradictions: one verse states that of the clean animals, Noach is to take “seven, seven” (7:2), while another verse states that “Of the clean animals… two by two they came to Noach, to the Ark, male and female” (7:8-9). Here as well, the documentary hypothesis determines that these are two documents woven together: the document which begins in Chapter 1 continues with a story in which the animals come two by two, but the document which began with Chapters 2-3 continues with a story in which the clean animals number “seven, seven.”

The documentary hypothesis also maintains that different documents have different styles, reflecting the writing style of the author of each document. According to the documentary hypothesis, each document has its own vocabulary, and each addresses and explores different issues, while expressing different theological viewpoints. A famous characteristic is the terminology used to refer to God; according to the documentary hypothesis, the first four books of the Torah emerge from three basic documents. One of them almost always refers to God with the Tetragrammaton (this author is called J, for the initial letter of this name of God in Latin), while the others (E and P) prefer to use “*E-lohim*” or “*E-l Sha-dai*.” As the latter two documents recount, God reveals the Tetragrammaton first at the Exodus; from then on, E and P use it as well.

Naturally, the documentary hypothesis posed a significant challenge from a philosophical and interpretive perspective for believers in the Torah’s divine origin, creating a need to address the claims of the critics. The first attempts to address these issues proposed localized explanations for repetitions, contradictions and stylistic transitions. R. David Tzvi Hoffmann provided the most comprehensive version of this approach, trying to consistently address every argument raised by bible critics. Of course, such an assortment of local explanations, some more successful and some less so, is much less persuasive than a comprehensive, consistent approach.

***Shitat ha-bechinot***

In the 1050s, R. Breuer developed *shitat ha-bechinot*, aspect methodology.[[2]](#footnote-2) The basic insight of *shitat ha-bechinot* is that the documentary hypothesis has value in demonstrating the layered structure of the Torah’s text; however, instead of viewing these layers as different documents from different sources, they should be viewed as different *bechinot (*singular: *bechina)*, different aspects or facets of the Torah’s complex message, which the Torah conveys by means of layered narrative.

According to *shitat ha-bechinot*, God wrote the Torah with a layered structure, including parallel stories (or parallel legal sections) which represent different *bechinot*. Each stands on its own and may be read as such, which means that contradictions and duplications may exist between them. The aim of this layered structure is to express different meanings and messages. Every narrative has independent content which is significant in its own right, but the parallel narratives also relate to each other which sometimes leads to the weaving of multiple stories into one narrative.

In R. Breuer’s view, the fact that the documentary hypothesis produced *shitat ha-bechinot* is not coincidental. The documentary hypothesis, as we have seen, points to the stylistic differences between the documents; *shitat ha-bechinot* views these differences as an integral element of its mechanism. The stylistic differences between the *bechinot* reflect the fact that the Torah imitates the redaction of sources in an intentional manner. The Torah’s way to express complex ideas is writing in a way which appears to be different documents from different authors, edited together. The stylistic distinction contributes to presenting things in this way.

R. Breuer’s analysis of the *bechinot* accepts almost entirely the structures posited by the documentary hypothesis. R. Breuer sees his interpretive contribution almost exclusively as presenting the significance of the *bechinot*, and only very rarely does his division of Torah’s text into *bechinot* differ from the documentary hypothesis. Thus, R. Breuer identifies a long-ranging aspect, the *bechina* of the Tetragrammaton, which begins in *Bereishit* 2-3, continues in the story of the Flood in which the clean animals come in groups of seven, and as the name of God uses from the start the Tetragrammaton. Another long-ranging aspect, the *bechina* of the name *E-lohim* in Creation, opens in *Bereishit* 1, then goes on to tell a story of the Flood in which even the clean animals come two by two. This *bechina* uses the names *E-lohim* and *E-l Sha-dai*, and from the Exodus onward (*Shemot*, Chapter 6), it uses the Tetragrammaton as well.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Following the fundamental insight of *shitat ha-bechinot*, which recognizes the narrative contradictions between various *bechinot*, we must confront, naturally, the question of what actually happened: what is the historical value of a biblical story, and where is the value of truth in the Torah?

In order to deal with this question, *shitat ha-bechinot* states that narrative *bechinot* are always expressions of different aspects of divine providence: each *bechina* describes what should have happened according to one trait of divine providence (e.g. divine justice, divine compassion and the like). Every *bechina* describes what should have happened were the world conducted according to that singular trait of divine guidance, and since God directs the world through a combination of these various traits, what happened in practice was some middle groung between the descriptions of the two *bechinot*.

In other words, while the truth value in the *peshat* of the Torah is in fact defined by correspondence of description to referent, the referent is not actual historical reality. Only the middle ground resulting from the combination of aspectsmatches actual reality. Every description of each one of the *bechinot* on its own matches a certain theoretical reality which would have occurred had God not combined another trait in His direction of the world. These historiosophical underpinnings of the methodology have clear ramifications for the interpretation of the specific *bechinot*: the meanings of narrative *bechinot* must always be understood in the context of God’s ways of directing the world, as any other type of explanation cannot be integrated in the historiosophical foundation of R. Breuer’s *shitat ha-bechinot* in its entirety.

**C. *Shitat ha-bechinot* in the Torah’s Narrative**

The most common application of *shitat ha-bechinot* is in the narratives which fill the first books of the Torah. In R. Breuer’s view, using different *bechinot* of God’s different names, reflects the distinction between the different forms of divine guidance which are particular to each.

The divine name *E-lohim*, which is used in the creation story in *Bereishit* 1, reflects a natural form of directing and governing the world: God creates a natural world, a world which can be classified by the different categories of the creations of the first six days, and which operates by its own laws. God only intervenes from time to time, as this is a breach in the natural order, and so He does not reveal Himself often, but rather directs the world from a distance. On the other hand, the Tetragrammaton aspect is immanent and miraculous, so that we find God “walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (ibid. 3:8). In such a context, God need not breach the framework of nature in order to reveal Himself. In the *E‑lohim* narrative, the meaning of the revelation of the Tetragrammaton at the time of the Exodus (*Shemot*, Chapter 6; see fn. 3) is the transition from natural governance of the world to miraculous, immanent governance of Israel. *Shitat ha-bechinot* even strives to explain the entirety of the contradictions and repetitions among the *bechinot* in light of this fundamental distinction between them.

R. Breuer, in light of his method, explains *Chazal*’s approach in their Midrashic compositions. In his view, when *Chazal* offer an explanation for a contradiction between two verses, their aim is not to reconcile these verses, but to identify the middle path between the two *bechinot*. This middle path is what in fact happened, as a result of the confluence of these different forms of divine guidance.

Thus, for example, *Chazal* maintain that on the third day, the grass was created, but it remained below the surface of the earth, only sprouting and bursting forth after the creation of Adam (BT *Chullin* 60b). In R. Breuer’s view, this description does not match the *peshat* of either *bechina*: according to the natural governance of *E-lohim*, the grass deserved to be created before man, based on the natural progression from flora, through animals, to humans capable of speech; according to the miraculous guidance which the *bechina* of the Tetragrammaton implies, humans should have been created first, and only afterwards would it have been appropriate to make a garden spring forth for the needs of human beings. In practice, God combined these different traits: natural governance is expressed by the creation of grass, beneath the surface of the earth, before humans; while miraculous guidance is expressed by the fact that God makes this plant life break through and flourish only after the creation of Adam, for his sake.

**D. *Shitat ha-bechinot* in Halakhic Sections**

*Shitat ha-bechinot* is not limited to Torah narratives; it also addresses halakhic sections of the Torah. In these sections, the power of *shitat ha-bechinot* is in the fact that in addition to the fact that it explains the contradictions in the Torah itself, it also provides tools to deal with contradictions between Halakha and *peshat*.

A well-known example is the passage of the *Eved Ivri*, the Hebrew slave (or indentured servant). In *Parashat* *Mishpatim*, the Torah says that once an *Eved Ivri* has his ear pierced, “he will serve him forever” (*Shemot* 21:6). Similarly, in *Parashat* *Re’eh* (*Devarim* 15:17), the Torah says “and he shall be for you a servant forever.” On the other hand, *Parashat* *Behar* states that an *Eved Ivri* is freed in the jubilee year, even stressing “they shall not be sold in the way slaves are sold” (*Vayikra* 25:40-42). Rashi in *Parashat* *Mishpatim* quotes the *Mekhilta* (ad loc. 36), in which Rabbi states, “We see that 'forever' is no more than fifty years.” Ibn Ezra as well attempts to anchor this interpretation. Nevertheless, the *peshat* of the text clearly shows, as the Rashbam notes ad loc., that an *eved Ivri* who has his ear pierced serves his master for the rest of his life; this would indicate a contradiction between *Parashat* *Mishpatim* and *Parashat* *Re’eh*, on one hand, and *Parashat* *Behar*, on the other.

R. Breuer, following his method, does not attempt to resolve this contradiction; rather, he imbues it with meaning: in *Parashat* *Mishpatim* and *Parashat* *Re’eh*, the Torah establishes a mitzva for the master, commanding him to free the *Eved Ivri* in the seventh year of service, similar to the mitzva of Shabbat; in *Parashat* *Behar*, the Torah’s purpose is to fundamentally limit the service of an *eved Ivri* to his human master, “for they are My servants” (*Vayikra* 25:42, 55). Each passage focuses on the details that follow from its essential principle, in order to express it in its purest form, and each passage ignores other ideas which would blunt its message.

Due to this, in *Parashat* *Mishpatim* and *Parashat* *Re’eh*, the Torah establishes only that the master must free the *eved Ivri*; this emancipation is something which the *eved Ivri* may waive, choosing piercing. This viewpoint ignores the emancipation of the jubilee year, which follows only from the principle of *Parashat* *Behar*. Since, using the principle of *Parashat* *Mishpatim* and *Parashat* *Re’eh*, the *eved Ivri* need not be freed in the jubilee year, the Torah formulates the term of service in the most extreme way, “and he shall serve him forever.” The words of *Chazal* are not meant to explain the *peshat* of *Tanakh*, but rather to establish how Halakha integrates these two principles: the *Eved Ivri* deserves to be emancipated in the seventh year of service if there is no piercing; and the *eved Ivri* deserves to be emancipated in the jubilee year.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**From Mordechai to Mordechai**

The importance of R. Breuer’s *shitat ha-bechinot* is not limited to its being a fitting response to the challenge posed by biblical criticism. Its import lies, essentially, in providing a basic tool to reveal structure and significance in the biblical text.

R. Breuer was wont to say that he felt a kinship to another Mordechai – the biblical Mordechai from the Book of *Ester.* In *Ester*, Haman constructs the gallows for Mordechai, but Divine Providence causes that very gallows to be used for Haman himself. This, he said, was something like what biblical criticism seemed to do, by posing a severe challenge to belief in the Torah as being of divine origin; along came [R.] Mordechai [Breuer] and used the very arguments raised by biblical critics to bring his students to a deeper, more profound understanding of God’s Torah.

1. This final entry in Dr. Avigail Rock’s series is written by R. Yehuda Rock, a student of R. Mordechai Breuer’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. R. Breuer’s writings about his method are collected in *Shitat Ha-bechinot* *shel Ha-Rav Mordechai Breuer* (Alon Shevut: 2005). Applications of the method along with some of the writings appear in *Pirkei Mo’adot* (Jerusalem: 1986), Pirkei *Bereishit* (Alon Shevut: 1999), and *Pirkei Mikraot* (Alon Shevut: 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is what God tells Moshe at the beginning of *Parashat* *Vaera*:

   And God spoke to Moshe, and said to him, I am the Lord [the Tetragrammaton]; and I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Ya'akov, by the name of God Almighty (*E-l Sha-dai*), but by My name the Lord [the Tetragrammaton], I was not known to them. ([*Shemot* 6:2-3](https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.6.2-3?lang=he-en&utm_source=sef_linker))

   This stands in direct contradiction to places in *Bereishit* (15:7, 28:13), in which God identifies Himself: “I am the Lord [the Tetragrammaton].” According to *shitat ha-bechinot*, this reflects the *bechina* in which God does not reveal the Tetragrammaton until this point in history. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For another fine example, see “*Ama Ivriya Ve-shifcha Charufa”* in *Megadim* 16, available at: <http://www.herzog.ac.il/tvunot/fulltext/mega16_broyer.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)