Book Review of Rabbi Dr. Moshe Sokolow's "Pursuing Peshat"

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Dr. Moshe Sokolow, *Pursuing Peshat: Tanakh, Parshanut, and Talmud Torah* (Kodesh Press, 2024)

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

> Just as a bride is festooned with 24 trinkets and if she lacks even one, she is nothing, so must a scholar be familiar with all 24 books [of the Bible], and if he lacks even one, he is nothing (*Song of Songs Rabbah* 4:11).

Rabbi Dr. Moshe Sokolow has taught Tanakh and Pedagogy for over 50 years, during which time he has made the case for the centrality of Tanakh in Jewish education. He introduces his latest book with the assertion that he is "a modern Orthodox Bible scholar and educator who firmly believes that no branch of knowledge in the domain of Jewish studies is as vital to Jewish religious development as Tanakh" (ix).

In this volume, Dr. Sokolow takes a close-up look at some of the areas addressed in his earlier book, *Tanakh: An Owner's Manual* (2015). There, he explores central issues in Jewish Bible interpretation, the use of modern

scholarship, and pedagogy. In *Pursuing Peshat*, Dr. Sokolow builds more comprehensively upon that foundation with many more specific examples.

The first section of this volume investigates the theoretical underpinnings of Tanakh learning, the *peshat-derash* relationship, and the debates over the role of Tanakh in a Jewish curriculum. Dr. Sokolow provides extensive surveys from the period of the Talmud, through the leading figures of the medieval period, down to the modern period. These lucid reviews provide the required background knowledge to appreciate what occurs on every page of a *Mikraot Gedolot* Tanakh, where commentaries throughout the ages surround the biblical text and provide their own interpretations.

While expressing his preference for the centrality of Tanakh in the Jewish curriculum (one strongly shared by this writer), Dr. Sokolow also presents the debates over the millennia between those rabbinic thinkers who similarly stressed the need for deep learning of Tanakh, and others who downplayed Tanakh study in favor of Talmud and halakhah. Those who reduced emphasis on Tanakh generally emphasized Talmud and halakhah which lead to religious practice; some found Talmud study more rigorous; Talmud is uniquely Jewish, whereas Christians share our Bible; and improper study of Tanakh could lead to heresy. Of course, these concerns sadly led to the proverbial throwing the baby out with the bathwater. As Dr. Sokolow observes in his introduction, all branches of Jewish knowledge and study derive their authority from the divinely revealed texts of Tanakh.

After examining the theoretical underpinnings of Tanakh study, Dr. Sokolow moves into text learning. His section on pedagogy focuses on specific skills one should develop as a learner. Central to that pursuit is the appreciation of the polyphonous nature of the biblical text (i.e., it contains multiple meanings), the *peshat–derash* relationship, and the fact that many verses contain ambiguities that need to be interpreted.

Perhaps the most illuminating discussion pertains to ambiguities that present a conflict between the syntax of a verse and the broader context of that verse. For example, Judah implores Joseph to take him prisoner instead of his younger brother Benjamin, who has been caught with Joseph’s cup. As a central part of his plea, Judah states: “We said to my lord: The young man cannot leave his father; were he to leave his father, he would die” (Genesis 44:22).

Who would die? From a syntactical perspective, Benjamin is the subject of the verse. Therefore, Judah’s concern that “he would die” should likewise refer to

Benjamin dying if he is taken prisoner. Contextually, however, it appears more likely that Judah is appealing to the potential death of their old, frail father Jacob, who would die of grief were Benjamin not to return (cf. 44:31). In this instance, the classical commentators are divided between those who favor the syntax (e.g., Rashi, Ramban, Ibn Kaspi) and those who interpret based on the context (e.g., Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Bekhor Shor).

In the book's final section, Dr. Sokolow provides several text studies that apply the methodologies and tools discussed in the earlier chapters. For example, in his study of the Tower of Babel, Dr. Sokolow examines classical interpretations, mines historical considerations such as Babylonian ziqqurats and mythology, and also applies modern literary scholarship to the biblical passage. Demonstrating how each area contributes to our understanding, Dr. Sokolow arrives at a more comprehensive interpretation of the enigmatic narrative. It is an artistically presented condemnation of self-centeredness, as well as a polemic against the Mesopotamian tradition regarding the origins of Babylon.

In a different study, Dr. Sokolow evaluates the opinions of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban regarding the Torah's laconic characterization of Nimrod: "He was a valiant hunter before the Lord (*lifnei Hashem*)." What does this cryptic phrase mean regarding this ancient king?

Building off of midrashic traditions which vilify Nimrod as a tyrannical idolater who cast our Patriarch Abraham into a fiery furnace, Rashi interprets the verse to mean that Nimrod brought people into rebellion against God. Rejecting this midrashic approach, Ibn Ezra understands the expression in a positive light. Nimrod built altars and brought sacrifices to God. Ramban in turn rejects Ibn Ezra's reading on the grounds that "he is vindicating a villain because our rabbis knew of his villainy through tradition."

In this instance, one must decide whether to base one's interpretation on a nexus of rabbinic Midrashim (as do Rashi and Ramban), or solely on the text (as does Ibn Ezra). Dr. Sokolow leads readers through a process of evaluating these opinions to reach resolution. He supports Rashi and Ramban's position on the grounds that the talmudic Sages would not attack Nimrod unless they had a received tradition that he was wicked. Moreover, the Sages view the name Nimrod as deriving from *mered*, rebellion. Finally, Nimrod is mentioned as the king of Babylonia in Genesis chapter 10, and this narrative is immediately followed by the Tower of Babel in chapter 11. Perhaps Nimrod was the Tower's instigator and builder. Despite his preference of the rabbinic interpretation, Dr. Sokolow continues to ask, "What if Ibn Ezra is right?" By giving each side a fair

hearing, Dr. Sokolow carefully leads us through the learning process.

Early in the volume, Dr. Sokolow quotes the eminent 20th century scholar Professor Yehuda Elitzur:

> A contemporary exegete is required, of course, to examine things in the light of contemporary knowledge…If he does so, then he is following in the footsteps of the ancients even if he disagrees with them in a thousand details. However, one who only copies the ancients, shutting his eyes to newly discovered facts and knowledge, is abandoning the ways of the ancients and is rebelling against them (25).

With his extensive knowledge of classical commentary and their methodology, as well as a command of contemporary scholarship and its tools, Dr. Sokolow develops a comprehensive approach to learning to promote religious engagement and growth through Tanakh study. He thus epitomizes walking in the footsteps of our classical commentaries. More importantly, he shows readers how they, too, can and should walk in those venerable footsteps.

Rabbis, educators, and advanced students stand to gain the most from Dr. Sokolow's new volume. Because it is written in an accessible manner, those who study Tanakh who want a broader perspective from within a traditional framework also will benefit from reading this book.