Book Review: Michelle J. Levine on Ramban

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By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Michelle J. Levine, *Navigating Wilderness: Ramban's Commentary on the Exodus and Numbers Narratives* (Kodesh Press, 2025)

In a book review essay I wrote over twenty years ago on a Memorial Volume for Professor Nehama Leibowitz (*Pirkei Nehama*), I outlined a fundamental difference that generally exists between those who study Tanakh as the primary text, and those who focus on the work of a particular commentator:

> In line with all traditional exegesis, Professor Nehama Leibowitz emphasized that we must scrutinize the meaning and significance of each word and passage in the Torah, and perceive its messages as communicated directly to us. We accomplish these daunting tasks by consulting the teachings of the Sages and later commentators. In effect, they serve as our eyes through which we understand the biblical text in its multifaceted and ever-applicable glory. Of course, their opinions must be painstakingly evaluated against the biblical text...

> To those studying *parshanut* as a discipline, whether for methodological approaches or in historical context, Midrashim and commentators are no longer secondary to the biblical text. They are three-dimensional people living in specific times and places. *Parshanut* scholarship investigates how a given exegete approached the text, and what influenced him, such as Midrashim and earlier commentaries, intellectual currents of his time, and other historical considerations beyond purely textual motivations. The student of Tanakh views commentary as secondary literature, while the student of *parshanut* or history treats exegetes as primary sources. These contrasting perspectives almost necessarily will yield different understandings of the comments of our commentators (*Tradition* 38:4, Winter 2004, pp. 112-113).

Professor Michelle J. Levine's recently published volume on Ramban's interpretation of the wilderness narratives in the books of Exodus and Numbers is a remarkable exception to the aforementioned dichotomy. She takes readers on a journey through the biblical narratives through the eyes of one exceptional commentator, Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman, Spain-Israel 1194-1270). Levine's expertise in Ramban's commentary and the secondary scholarly literature on Ramban's work shine forth on every page and in her learned footnotes. Strikingly, Levine provides a holistic approach on how Ramban learns the biblical texts.

Ramban composed a three-tiered commentary, exploring the layers of *peshat* (plain sense, contextual meaning), *derash* (deeper meaning, homiletical teachings), and mysticism. Ramban navigates his own path guided by Midrash, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rambam, Radak, and Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor. Transcending the works of his illustrious predecessors, Ramban also "often groups many biblical verses together to develop a wide-all-encompassing analysis that seeks to educe their integration as a literary unit and to extrapolate their fundamental motifs and concepts" (5). Ramban stresses that while God revealed the Torah and it is true,

it is vital to focus on how God, as Narrator, relates the story. The literary form of the narratives contribute substantially to the meaning of the Torah (8). These overarching premises of Ramban's commentary remain relevant and illuminating to this very day.

For example, Ramban observes that after Pharaoh decrees that Egyptians must drown baby Israelite boys, two Levites get married and have a son:

> Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, "Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live." A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months (Exodus 1:22-2:2).

These Levites, whom we later learn are Amram and Jochebed, just gave birth to Moses. We also learn later that Moses already has an older brother, Aaron, and Moses' sister (generally, but not universally, understood to be Miriam) watched over him in the ensuing narrative. From the impression given by the narrative, however, it would appear that Moses was born right after his parents' marriage, as there is no notification of the births of Miriam and Aaron.

One midrashic reading (Sotah 12a-13a) assumes that after Pharaoh's evil decree to drown all baby Israelite boys, Amram and Jochebed separated since there was a 50% chance of having a boy who would be drowned. They were filled with despair and helplessness. It was their precocious daughter Miriam who persuaded them to resume having children so there would be a chance to have girls and thereby perpetuate the nation of Israel. The Torah presents Moses' birth after his parents' marriage since Moses was born after the *remarriage* of his parents.

Ramban disagrees with this reading. The juxtaposition of Pharaoh's decree and Moses' parents' marriage serves to highlight the moral courage and heroism

of Amram and Jochebed who challenged Pharaoh's decree. The Torah does not mention the births of Miriam and Aaron at this juncture, since Pharaoh issued his decree after they already were born. The Torah wants to focus the reader's attention on the heroism of Moses' parents and on the birth of Moses.

Ramban notes further that Jochebed also acts courageously by attempting to save Moses. Ramban then connects this narrative to the exceptional virtue of Pharaoh's daughter, who rescued and adopted Moses, defying her own father's evil decree. Ramban even surmises that Pharaoh's daughter subsequently persuaded her father to repeal his wicked decree. Levine concludes,

> Thus, Ramban's commentary spotlights how Moses is surrounded by central personages who act with intent, purpose, and focus in order to be vehicles for salvation from a situation of oppression. With this in mind, readers can better appreciate when Moses himself initiates his own parallel actions to save others from injustices (37).

Through this and countless other examples, Professor Levine's volume is a truly welcome contribution, enabling readers to have a sustained focus on Ramban's singular contributions to Tanakh learning and its religious meaning.