The Human Complexity of Biblical Heroes

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In several areas of Jewish thought, more conservative positions only achieved dominance in modernity. For example, most *rishonim* (medieval authorities) believed in the natural order before Ramhal (R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto), R. Eliyahu Dessler, and others declared that nature was an illusion and that our human efforts produce no direct causal result. The same applies to attitude towards our biblical heroes. R. Dessler and R. Aaron Kotler avoid attributing basic human emotions to our patriarchs and matriarchs, forbid criticizing them, and depict their sins as the minutest of transgressions. However, Radak and Ramban did not interpret in this fashion nor did R. Samson Raphael Hirsch and Neziv. Arguably, R. Dessler type thinking on this topic only became widespread in the twentieth century.

Before addressing twentieth century rabbinic luminaries, I shall use a lesser-known recent volume as a foil to help convey the issues at hand. R. Beinish Ginsburg, teacher for many years at Netiv Aryeh and Michlala, published a volume on Genesis entitled *Ohr le-Netivati* which includes several concluding chapters about the correct approach to the *avot* (patriarchs). After extended analysis of this work, we shall briefly confront the work of R. Avigdor Nebenzahl as well as other famous rabbinic predecessors. Analysis of *Ohr le-Netivati* reveals a one-sided presentation of traditional sources and shows how this ideology hinders our biblical study. Ginsburg very much belongs in the R. Dessler camp and let us explore the results.

The significant question here is not only whether we can fault our luminaries, but also whether we can attribute basic human emotion to them. In one example, avoiding this makes a patriarch look worse. According to Ginsburg:

> But at the same time, the fact that he woke up early reflects that he slept the night before. Avraham Avinu was so secure in his *avodas Hashem* (service of God), so confident that he was doing the right thing, that he managed to fall asleep despite the *nisayon* (test) that awaited him the next morning (the *akedah*).[1]

I would think more highly of Abraham had he experienced trouble sleeping the night before embarking on a journey to slaughter his son, divine command notwithstanding. R. Aharon Lichtenstein criticizes

those who think Abraham went to the *akedah* as if he was attending a wedding.[2]

Ginsburg states that the faithful never worry once they know the correct course of action.[3] This does not match the storyline in Genesis where Abraham is afraid (15:1), Isaac is frightened (26:24) and Jacob appears nervous on multiple occasions (32:8, 48:3). The traditional commentaries on those verses often work against Ginsburg's thesis. If Abraham was afraid that the four kings would vengefully attack or that he has used up his heavenly reward, these are fears about practical results and not about the correct course of action.[4] It seems quite normal and human to be nervous about either an upcoming war or the aftermath of a military conflict.

The same applies to the very natural fear of death. Ginsburg quotes R. Avigdor Miller on Rachel's attitude to mortality. "She did not fear death because of death itself. Death was a grief because she would no longer bear any sons to build the house of Israel."[5] I would not think less of Rachel if she was upset on a personal level and not only because of an inability to further contribute to Jewish destiny. If Rachel feared not surviving long enough to spend more time with her two sons, including one who was just born, I would actually think more of her. R. Joseph Soloveitchik, for one, was not embarrassed to write about his illustrious grandfather's fear of death.[6]

One midrash emphasizes that Jacob and Moses were frightened despite their receiving divine promises and holds them up as a model for emulation. *Hazal* (our Talmudic sages) apparently did not view apprehension as religiously derelict.

> “Jacob was very frightened and distressed” – R. Pin?as in the name of R. Reuben: The Holy One blessed be He made a promise to two people, but they were afraid; the chosen of the patriarchs, and the chosen of the prophets. The chosen of the patriarchs – this is Jacob, as it is stated: “For the Lord has chosen Jacob for Himself” (Psalms 135:4). The Holy One blessed be He said to him: “Behold, emphasizes I am with you” (Genesis 28:15), but ultimately he was afraid, as it is stated: “Jacob was…frightened.” The chosen of the prophets – this is Moses, as it is stated; “Were it not for Moses, His chosen” (Psalms 106:23). The Holy One blessed be He said to him: “For I will be with you” (Exodus 3:12), but ultimately, he was afraid: “The Lord said to Moses: Do not fear him” (Numbers 21:34). He says: ‘Do not fear’ only to one who is afraid.

> R. Berekhya and R. ?elbo in the name of R. Shmuel bar Na?man in the name of R. Natan: Israel would have been worthy of elimination in the days of Haman, had they not based their mindset on the mindset of their ancestor. They said: ‘If our patriarch Jacob, to whom the Holy One blessed be He promised and said: “Behold, I am with you,” (Genesis 28:15) was afraid, we, all the more so.’ (*Bereishit Rabba* 76:1).

In another portrayal of a biblical character as transcending basic humanity, Ginsburg cites R. Meir Twersky who denies that Rachel was jealous of her sister's children; she only envied Leah's good deeds which enabled the older sibling to merit offspring.[7] *Hazal* do indeed suggest this (*Bereishit Rabba* 71:6) but Radak has no problem saying Rachel was jealous of Leah for having children.[8] Imagine the situation. If not for a deceit in which Leah participated, Rachel would be the sole wife of Jacob but now she has to share her husband with her sister. To add to her frustration, Rachel remains barren as her sister quickly produces four children. Surely, it would be understandable and not a moral failure to experience some resentment and jealousy.

None of the above examples involve transgression; they merely reflect simple humanity. If we deny these feelings to the *avot* and *imahot* (matriarchs), we render them irrelevant to us, who experience the full range of human emotions, as models. As noted, in some instances, we may actually be lowering their stature.

Hazal alreadypresent a multitude of perspectives on biblical heroes. The same Talmudic passage stating it is mistaken to say that King David sinned in the Bat Sheva episode also includes Rav saying that R. Yehuda Hanasi went out of his way to exonerate this monarch only because he descended from the Davidic line (*Shabbat* 56a). Furthermore, another gemara suggests that David was guilty of both adultery and rape (*Ketuvot* 9a). One midrash faults Jacob for not responding with enough sympathy to his frustrated wife (*Bereishit Rabba* 71:7). On occasion, the sages even introduce problematic behavior not explicitly in the biblical narrative. A gemara says that Joseph stayed behind that fateful day fully intending to sleep with Potiphar's wife but was able to restrain himself at the last minute (*Sotah* 10b). Our sages were not singularly dedicated to whitewashing our heroes.

Many classic commentaries assume a normal psychological makeup for our forefathers in Genesis. Why is Joseph the favored *ben zekunim* (child of his advanced years) if Benjamin was actually younger? Hizkuni explains that Jacob was never able to love Benjamin as he loved Joseph because he always associated Benjamin with the death of Rachel.[9] This reaction does not reflect negatively on Jacob but it does show the complexities and difficulties of human experience. Hizkuni also suggests that the brothers sold Joseph into slavery in an attempt to save themselves from the prophecy of *brit bein habetarim* (the covenant between the pieces); they hoped to restrict the foreseen servitude to Joseph and his family.[10] This is quite different from asserting that the brothers convened a *beit din* (court) and ruled that Joseph was a *rodef* (a dangerous pursuer). Denying normal human apprehensions and frustrations to our biblical heroes robs biblical narrative of sensitivity and insight.

R. David Kimhi (Radak) consistently relates to the *avot* and *imahot* as great but flawed humans. He faults Sarai for her treatment of Hagar, calling it "not the way of ethics or of the pious". In fact, the Torah includes the Hagar story to instruct us regarding this very ethical message.[11] For Radak, a reader who defends Sarai misses the entire point. Radak also says Jacob was punished for his method of acquiring the *bekhora* (privileges of the first born) from Esau. His penalty was that he ultimately had to honor his brother (precisely what he tried to avoid by purchasing the *bekhora*) when they met after a twenty year hiatus.[12] Where one opinion in *Hazal* states that Reuben merely moved his father's bed (*Shabbat* 55b), Radak follows the simple meaning of the verse that Reuven slept with Bilhah.[13] Radak even goes so far as to explain that Joseph told his brothers his dreams in order to pain them in response to their hatred.[14] Nor do our biblical greats' errors only relate to the sinful variety. Radak suggests that Rivkah misunderstood her husband's plan to bless Esau. The *birkat Abraham* (blessing of Abraham) was going to pass on to Jacob with or without a blessing from his father; therefore, there was no need to fool Isaac in order to receive the blessing.[15]

Ramban walks along the same path. Ginsburg alludes to Ramban attributing sin to Abraham but does not quote the relevant passages which contradict his position.[16]

> Know that Abraham our father unintentionally committed a great sin by bringing his wife to a stumbling block of sin on account of his fear for his life. He should have trusted that God would save him and his wife and all his belongings for God surely has the power to help and to save. His leaving the Land, concerning which he had been commanded from the beginning, on account of the famine, was also a sin he committed, for in famine God would redeem him from death. It was because of this deed that the exile in the land of Egypt at the hands of Pharaoh was decreed for his children.[17] (Charles Chavel translation)

Ramban faults Abraham for endangering his wife, lack of faith, and leaving the Land of Israel. While he does mitigate blame by saying that the transgression was not intentional, he also refers to it as a "great sin." He does not emphasize that this was only a sin for someone on Abraham's level.[18] Parenthetically, I note that Radak defends Abraham in this episode; willingness to criticize does not entail always doing so.[19]

The driving out of Hagar inspires a parallel reaction.

> Our mother did transgress by this affliction and Abraham also by permitting her to do so. And so, God heard her [Hagar's] affliction and gave her a son who would be a wild-ass of a man, to afflict the seed of Abraham and Sarah with all kinds of affliction.[20]

Note that Ramban thinks both transgressions were serious enough to cause long-term punishment. Regarding the category of making mistakes not necessarily sinful, Ramban explains that Abraham misjudged the character of Abimelech and Gerar and, unlike in Egypt, Sarah was not truly in

danger.[21]

Ginsburg argues that Ramban frequently refers to the *avot* as *zaddikim* (righteous) so he cannot be attributing serious transgressions to them.[22] This line of reasoning highlights the problem with the entire approach. Righteous people are not infallible and they can stumble religiously and ethically. Given the pressures of a famine and a dangerous foreign country, even an Abraham can fall into a "great sin."

His presentation of Rambam also leaves what to be desired. Ginsburg cites a passage in *Guide to the Perplexed* where Rambam says that Moses and the three patriarchs were all able to cling to God even as they engaged in mundane activities.[23] For Ginsburg, this shows how different they were from normal humans. However, the seventh chapter of *Shmoneh Perakim* (Rambam's introduction to *Avot*) strikes a very different note. Rambam says that a prophet must excel in the intellectual and moral spheres but that he need not be perfect regarding every character trait. Thus, the following group all prophesied even though Solomon had an excessive libido, David had a streak of cruelty, Elijah was too angry, and Samuel was overly fearful. In the fourth chapter of that same work, Rambam says that Moses became inappropriately angry in the episode of the waters of Meribah. Apparently, heroic figures can still struggle with serious character flaws

Abravanel works with analogous assumptions. He notes how Esau asks Jacob about his wife and children but Jacob only answers about the children (33:5) and he explains that Jacob was embarrassed to tell his brother that he had four wives.[24] There is no claim that the righteous are above such embarrassment. Abravanel also thinks that the Egyptian exile was punishment for the sale of Joseph. They sold him into Egyptian slavery and they ended up in Egyptian servitude. The brothers "sinned a great sin in their groundless hatred for their brother Joseph and in their plotting to murder him." Reuben was not part of the plot but he did participate in the hatred. Joseph sinned inadvertently in his prideful reaction to his dreams, and Jacob sinned to some degree in favoring one child and giving Joseph the *ketonet passim* (ornamented tunic).[25] Abravanel does not try to minimize the brothers' transgression.

He also relates to Noah as an individual with standard fears and concerns. After the deluge, Noah was saddened and scared because of the loss of friends and acquaintances, the lack of food, the possibility that the animal kingdom will overwhelm a small number of humans, and the potential repeat of the first fratricide. According to Abravanel, in the first verses of the ninth chapter, God reassures Noah regarding all four fears. For example, the allowance of meat consumption helps compensate for the reduced amount of vegetation available for eating.[26] Despite being a *zaddik*, Noah struggled with the trauma of a world destroyed.

Relying on R. Yehuda Copperman's critique of R. Shlomo Riskin, Ginsburg says that the latter takes a quote from R. Hirsch about Moses' humanity out of context.[27] Yet he fails to consider some far more telling Hirschian passages.

> The Torah never hides from us the faults, errors and weaknesses of our great men. Just by that it gives the stamp of veracity to what it relates. But in truth, by the knowledge which is given us of their faults and weaknesses, our great men are in no wise made lesser but actually greater and more instructive. If they stood before us as the purest models of perfection we should attribute them as having a different nature, which has been denied to us. Were they without passion without internal struggles, their outcome would seem to us the outcome of some higher nature, hardly a merit and surely no model we could hope to emulate (Isaac Levy translation).[28]

R. Hirsch offers three arguments for a more human portrayal of our great men. One, it gives our stories the stamp of truth since it reflects the reality of humanity. Second, it actually enhances their greatness because it means that their achievements depended upon overcoming various character shortcomings and were not innate from birth. Finally, it makes them relevant role models for all of us who struggle with difficult personality traits.

His famous commentary on the education of Jacob and Esau echoes this theme: “Our sages, who never objected to draw attention to the small and great weaknesses in the history of our great forefathers and thereby make them just the more instructive for us.”[29] He goes on to say that Isaac and Rebecca erred in giving Jacob and Esau the identical education when their needs were so

diverse. The active and energetic Esau needed a different approach than the more contemplative, reserved Jacob. Additionally, Isaac and Rebecca mistakenly failed to exhibit equal love to each of their children. It seems that Copperman and Ginsburg are truly the ones distorting the views of R. Hirsch.

R. Hirsch's approach to Simeon and Levi in Shechem also proves instructive. While, Ginsburg tries to downplay any wrongdoing, R. Hirsch is quite adamant about their transgressions.

> Now the blameworthy part begins, which we need in no way excuse. Had they killed Shechem and Hamor there would scarcely be anything to say against it. But they did not spare the unarmed men who were at their mercy, yea, and went further, and looted, altogether made the inhabitants pay for the crime of the landowner. For that, there was no justification.[30]

The juxtaposition of the chapter in which Jacob confronts Esau with the Shechem episode inspires a profound comment from R. Hirsch. In chapter 33, Esau overcomes his violent nature and embraces his brother. This contrasts sharply with the following story in which Simeon and Levi pick up the sword of Esau and engage in unjustified violence.[31]

Strikingly, Ginsburg enlists Neziv (R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin) as a champion of his conservative approach even though Neziv very much humanized the patriarchs and matriarchs. R. Berlin explains that Rebecca was intimidated at her first sight of her husband, that this influenced their life-long relationship, and that she was unable to confront him directly as Rachel and Sarah did with their husbands. Therefore, she employed a deceptive strategy to get Jacob the blessing rather than just challenging Isaac's decision in an open conversation.[32]

Furthermore, Neziv explicitly contradicts Ginsburg's reading of a midrash which states that the great and bitter cry of Mordecai in Shushan was payment for the great and bitter cry that Jacob caused in Esau (*Bereishit Rabba* 67:4). Ginsburg asserts that this midrash does not deem Jacob's actions blameworthy.[33] In contrast, Neziv explains that one need not have pure motivations for *mizva* acts but one does need such purity for performing an *avera lishmah* (sin with a noble impetus); using a bad trait for a good cause must come without any personal pleasure. According to Neziv, this explains why Jacob was punished for his brother's cry but not for his father's tremble. He was pained by his father's reaction but took some problematic joy in his brother's distress. R. Berlin explicitly writes that such joy is forbidden and a sin.[34]

In one story, R. Berlin prefers a more human explanation over the alternative. How could Judah not have recognized the look or voice of Tamar, his daughter-in- law? Our sages suggest that this reflects Tamar's great modesty (*Megilla* 10b). The idea that Judah and Tamar lived as part of the same family for years without his knowing what she looks like certainly portrays their lives as radically distinct from ours. R. Berlin offers an explanation more rooted in basic human psychology. Judah first saw Tamar from afar and judged her a prostitute and, when he got closer, could not imagine that the decent Tamar was acting as a prostitute.[35] Indeed, we often get stuck in our preliminary judgment and cannot identify a person in an unexpected context.

Another midrash has Leah retort sharply to Jacob when he accuses her of deceit; she notes his own trickery in taking Esau's blessing (*Bereishit Rabba* 70:19). Ginsburg suggests a creative interpretation.

> This sounds like a rather strong criticism of Yaakov. But the *meforshim* on the midrash explain that the intention is entirely different. Leah was saying, "Everyone knows that Lavan's two daughters were destined to marry Rivka's two sons, and the oldest should go to the oldest. I'm supposed to marry the *bechor* – and you made yourself the *bechor* when you got the *brachos*. [36]

Leah was arguing that even though she was originally destined for Esau since the older daughter should wed the eldest son, Jacob's usurping the *bekhora* now meant that Leah should marry Jacob, the newly established first-born. However, this is certainly not the simple reading of the midrash in which Leah asks Jacob: "is there a master without disciples;" in other words, I learned subterfuge from you. This line relates to the morality of deceit and not to a question of correctly lined up marriage arrangements.

Ginsburg misreads several other relevant sources as well. He quotes *Ohr ha-Hayyim* as explaining that Joseph knew his brothers acted with good intentions in selling him but *Ohr ha-Hayyim* does not say this. He does say that even at the time of the sale, Joseph continued to feel brotherhood with his siblings but this could be explained in many ways. A person can continue to love relatives even when they have intensely wronged him or her (45:4).[37]

I reiterate that the point is not only about wrongdoing; it is about having the aspirations and frustration of human beings. God states that He will not destroy Sodom without relating this news to Abraham first (18:17). R. Meir Simha ha-Cohen from Dvinsk offers a profound explanation as to why our first patriarch needed to know. A compassionate person wants the effects of his compassion to last. Indeed, we all want to leave a legacy and this is especially a concern for the childless. Abraham had heroically saved Sodom in the battle with the four kings, and thus would understandably not be happy about its impending destruction.[38] R. Meir Simha assumes that Abraham shared the same kind of hopes and dreams as other human beings.

One of Ginsburg's important influences is the writings of R. Avigdor Nebenzahl, Rosh Yeshiva at Netiv Aryeh and former chief rabbi of Jerusalem's Old City. In the two concluding chapters to his volume on Genesis, R. Nebenzahl defends both Reuben and David as being nobly motivated and not driven by physical desire. Reuben only slept with Bilhah to break her connection with Jacob and restore his father's proper place with Leah. David's mistake was relying on the Holy Spirit informing him that Bat Sheva and he were destined for each other.[39] Let us leave aside the fact that these interpretations have no basis in the biblical narrative. In fact, the prophet informs us that Bat Sheva (*Samuel II* 11:2) was good-looking, presumably explaining David's interest. One gemara cites the following line in the context of the David and Bat Sheva episode. "There is a small limb in man. If he starves it, it is satisfied. If he satiates it, it is starving" (*Sanhedrin* 107a), clearly relating the monarch's sin to sexual temptation. Furthermore, do the motivations suggested by R. Nebenzahl truly mitigate the sins? What would we think of someone who slept with his step-mother in order to restore his own mother's place?

R. Nebenzahl brings support for the minimization of David's sin from the fact that David does not lose the kingship, unlike Saul who forfeits the monarchy for what seems like a relatively, lesser transgression.[40] Earlier authorities give different answers to that question. R. Yosef Albo mentions several explanations, none of which reduce David's sin. Perhaps David sinned in a personal matter whereas Saul erred in a matter of kingship. Alternatively, David repented immediately when Natan confronted him while Saul initially denied any wrongdoing to Samuel. R. Albo outlines a series of areas in which David had superior character to Saul but he never denies the adultery with Bat Sheva or the murder of Uriah.[41]

Minimizing David's wrongdoing neutralizes some of the story's power. The opening verse relates that David resides in his Jerusalem palace while his men fight on the battlefield (Samuel II 11:1). This morally dubious practice starts the moral deterioration leading to the affair with Bat Sheva. David tries to send Uriah home to cover up his having impregnated Bat Sheva but Uriah refuses (Samuel II 11:8-13). Instead of viewing this as Uriah' rebelling against David's authority, we could see it as Uriah showing sensitivity to his comrades at the front in a way that the monarch does not. Alternatively, Uriah refuses because he suspects what David has done.[42]

Admittedly, Ginsburg's methodology has roots in recent rabbinic authorities. However, these rabbinic personalities differ from the many rabbinic voices we have surveyed and we have sufficient motivation to prefer the more human view of biblical heroes. A comparison of the two schools reading the sale of Joseph reveals good reason for our preference. *Beit ha-Levi* asserts that Yaakov's extensive sadness was due to the loss of a tribe for Am Yisrael, and not so much because of grief over a deceased son.[43] I am unsure why extensive grief over a son's death is a problematic emotion, especially given the added guilt and responsibility Jacob felt for sending his son off on a mission from which he never returned (as Radak explains).[44] This approach neutralizes the very powerful human emotion of sadness for the loss of a beloved son.

R. Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the Alter from Slobodka, insists that no one did anything seriously wrong in the entire story. Jacob had good intentions in favoring Joseph, Joseph had good intentions in tale-bearing, and the brothers sincerely judged Joseph as a *rodef*. The brothers were punished for the minor flaw of having some jealousy in their hearts, even though that jealousy did not warp their judgment. Based on a *midrash* (*Bereishit Rabba* 84:17), he even finds a positive element in their sitting down to a meal.[45] Similarly, R. Hayyim Yaakov Goldvicht, former Rosh Yeshiva of *Yeshivat Kerem be-Yavneh,* understands their meal within the approach that justifies the brothers by saying they formed a rabbinic court, trying Joseph and finding him guilty. During legal deliberation, he says, they were forbidden to eat, so they naturally sat down for a meal following the verdict.[46] His interpretation misses out on the narrative's subtle use of the meal to indicate indifference to pain.

These readings do not cohere with the simplest reading of *Humash*, and thwart appreciation of the psychological and moral insights conveyed in the brothers' sitting down to eat, as well as the potential motivation of the brothers according to Hizkuni. As noted, Hizkuni explains that the brothers wanted the prophesied servitude to take effect on their brother Joseph. Moreover, the overall approach deviates from the standard language of the major *Rishonim*. Note, for instance, Abravanel's comfort in attributing significant blame all around.

R. Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler follows the path of the Alter. Jacob had a metaphysical right to grant Joseph more honor, but he sinned slightly in allowing personal affection into the picture as well.[47] As with *Beit Ha-Levi*, his approach seems to not value the most authentic human emotions. R. Dessler also attempts to justify Joseph's relating his irritating dreams to his brothers. The truly righteous are so involved in otherworldly thoughts that they only get by in this world due to divine assistance. Since God wanted the Egyptian exile to begin, He removed His protection from Joseph, who then innocently told his brothers about the dreams.[48] In contrast, I suggest that a *zaddik* very much needs to understand human interaction even without God's help.[49]

In a footnote, Ginsburg says that attaching oneself to a *gadol* promotes the correct attitude to biblical interpretation. "If one sees and appreciates the greatness of the *gedolim* and witnesses how they have such complete self-control, by extrapolation one will assume that the *Avos* certainly had such perfect control."[50] In contrast, I posit that time around *gedolim* may actually lead in another direction. I have known several prominent rabbis in my time, some truly great and some not so great, but all of them knew of apprehension, frustration, and anger. Ironically enough, some of the contemporary *gedolim* Ginsburg cites are deeply flawed individuals, especially R. Avigdor Miller, by far the most cited rabbinic figure in the book.[51] Perusal of R. Miller's explanations for the Holocaust may be enough to show that well-known rabbis can have serious limitations.

What is at stake here may be more serious than we initially think. The more conservative approach significantly infringes on our study of *Tanakh* since it prevents us from noticing many of the insights of our sacred scripture. Furthermore, it hinders our identifying with biblical heroes and their human tribulations, robbing us of potential role models. Finally, introducing encounter with contemporary *gedolim* into the conversation is quite telling. In response to secularization and the weakening of religion in the modern era, religious communities responded with increased emphasis on clergy authority and clergy greatness. Both papal infallibility and *daas Torah* are modern innovations.[52] One contemporary manifestation of this is a strong reluctance to ever criticize prominent rabbis even if they utter insulting statements or defend abusers. Large parts of the Orthodox world (certainly not all) need a more critical attitude towards the rabbinate. There may be serious overlap between how we read *Tanakh* and how we relate to the shortcomings of today's rabbis.

Of course, this does not entail going to the opposite extreme and claiming that the biblical luminaries were bad people.[53] Recall that we are discussing the gamut of human emotions and not just sinful behavior. Remember as well Radak's defense of Abraham's behavior in Egypt. Concluding that the *avot* do sin does not mean they always or invariably do so. Due to the complexity of human nature, great individuals also struggle with character weaknesses. Denial of that basic fact strays from the example of Radak, Ramban and R. Hirsch, robs *Tanakh* of some of its most powerful messages and leaves readers without authentic role models.[54]

Notes

[1] Beinish Ginsburg, *Ohr le-Nitavati*, (henceforth *OL*), (2024), 131.

[2] R. Aharon Lichtenstein and R. Hayyim Sabato, *Mevakshei Panekha* (Tel Aviv, 2011), 200.

[3] OL, 343. On the patriarchs expressing fear despite divine promises, see my "No Guarantees in Life," *Tradition* (Summer 2022), 145–153.

[4] See Rashi and Seforno Genesis 15:1.

[5] *OL*, 291.

[6] R. Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia, 1983), 73.

[7] *OL*, 433.

[8] R. David Kimhi, *Commentary on the Torah* Genesis 30:1.

[9] Hizkuni, *Commentary on the Torah* Genesis 37:3.

[10]*Ibid*., 37:27.

[11] R. Davd Kimhi, *Commentary on the Torah* Genesis 16:6.

[12]*Ibid*., 25:31.

[13]*Ibid*., 35:22. See also R. Yosef Bekhor Shor's commentary on that verse.

[14]*Ibid*., 37:5.

[15]*Ibid*., 27:5.

[16]*OL*, 424.

[17]R. Moshe ben Nahman, *Commentary on the Torah* Genesis12:10.

[18]*Ibid*. 16:6.

[19]R. David KImhi, *Commentary on the Torah* Genesis 12:12.

[20]R. Moshe ben Nahman, *Commentary on the Torah*, Genesis 16:6.

[21]Ibid., 20:2.

[22]*OL*, 422.

[23]Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed* Book 3, Chapter 51.

[24]Don Isaac Abravanel, *Commentary on the Torah* Genesis p. 346 (in the Jerusalem 5784 edition).

[25]*Ibid*., p. 212.

[26]*Ibid*., 162–163.

[27]OL, 439.

[28]R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah*, *Genesis* 12:10.

[29]*Ibid*., 25:37.

[30]*Ibid*., 34:25–31.

[31]*Ibid*.

[32]R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, *Ha'amek Davar*, Genesis 24:65.

[33]*OL*, 446.

[34]R. Berlin, *Harhev Davar*, Genesis 27:1

[35]*Ha'amek Davar*, Genesis 38:15.

[36]*OL*, 445–446.

[37]R. Hayyim ibn Attar, *Ohr ha-Hayyim*, Genesis 45:4.

[38]R. Meir Simha ha-Kohen, *Meshekh Hokhma*, Genesis 18:17.

[39]R. Avigdor Nebenzahl, *Sihot le-Sefer Bereishit*, (Jerusalem 5750), 369–396.

[40]*Ibid*., 387.

[41]R. Yosef Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* 4:26.

[42]For analysis of this story and a list of traditional authorities who understand David's sin literally, see Amnon Bazak, *II Samuel : David the King* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 2013), 135–169.

[43]R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *Beit ha-Levi va-Yeshev*, s.v. *va-yasem sak be-matnav*.

[44]R. David Kimhi Commentary on the Torah Genesis 37:34.

[45]R. Nosson Zvi Finkel, *Ohr ha-Tzafun* (Jerusalem, 5738), Part 1, 207–209.

[46]R. Hayyim Yaakov Goldvicht, *Assufat Ma'arakhot Bereishit 2*, 164.

[47]R. Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu* (Jerusalem, 2002), Part 2, 175.

[48]Ibid., 228–229.

[49]Much of the three previous paragraphs is taken from my VBM shiur. https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/studies-tanakh/literary-readings-tanakh/academic-tanakh-frum-tanakh-and-their-limitations

[50]*OL*, 435.

[51]Ginsburg refers to R. Miller as "one of the *gedolim*" on page 34. For a series of problematic statements from R. Miller, see my "The Hareidi Option," *Conversations* (Spring 2024), 75–90.

[52]On the history of *Daas Torah*, see Benjamin Brown, *Democratization in the Haredi Leadership? The Doctrine of Da'at Torah at the Turn of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 2011).

[53]See my VBM shiur analyses of Burton Visotsky. https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/studies-tanakh/literary-readings-tanakh/cynicism-and-bible

[54]There are several helpful articles on this topic in *Hi Sihati: al Derekh Limmud ha-Tankah* ed. Yehoshua Reiss (Jerusalem, 2013).