WOMEN’S VOICES IN CONTEMPORARY ORTHODOX TANAKH SCHOLARSHIP

View PDF



Rabbi Hayyim Angel is National Scholar of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. He teaches advanced Tanakh classes at Yeshiva University, and has published and lectured widely.

WOMEN’S VOICES IN CONTEMPORARY ORTHODOX TANAKH SCHOLARSHIP

Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Author's note:

Since I published this article originally in 2014, there have been a few updates:

Dr Avivah Zornberg’s Numbers book came out in 2015. Dr. Yael Ziegler's Ruth commentary was published in 2015 and her new commentary on Lamentations is about to be published in the Maggid Tanakh Series. Dr Erica Brown has since published a commentary on Jonah (Maggid, 2017) and her commentary on Esther is about to be published by Maggid. Tragically, Dr. Avigail Rock passed away in 2019. Her online course on exegesis will appear as a book published by Maggid, and is soon coming out in Hebrew and later in English.

INTRODUCTION

The past generation was blessed with the sui generis Professor Nehama Leibowitz (1905-1997), who revolutionized Tanakh education through her systematic

treatment of classical commentary and interpretation of the biblical text. Her work continues to play a prominent role in religious Tanakh learning today. [1]

Our generation has witnessed a flowering of Orthodox women publishing on diverse facets of religious Tanakh learning, ranging from associative, insight-based derashot, to rigorous analytical peshat scholarship, to parshanut scholarship that emphasizes the contributions of individual commentators. In this essay, I will briefly survey the work of several outstanding scholars.

***

Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg's essays are derashot on biblical narratives. She draws on a wealth of midrashic and Hasidic teachings, classical scholarship, and contemporary literature and psychology in exploring the personalities of biblical figures.

Although "modern midrash" often becomes a vehicle of saying whatever one wants in the context of postmodern literary criticism, Dr. Zornberg uses classical commentary as a point of reference so that she can engage in her own work while having an anchor in traditional thought. She does not present a transparent analytical peshat methodology that can be replicated, but rather offers an associative and introspective presentation of her insights that elucidate aspects of spiritual and human experience. [2]

Dr. Zornberg has published books on Genesis and Exodus, and has a forthcoming book on Numbers.[3] She also has published a more eclectic collection of derashot in The Murmuring Deep.[4] Below are two examples from the latter work.

In her essay on the Book of Jonah (pp. 77–105), Dr. Zornberg asks the obvious question: What was Jonah thinking when he fled from before God? She quotes from Psalm 139, where the Psalmist seeks to hide from God but knows that it is impossible to do so:

O Lord, You have examined me and know me. When I sit down or stand up You know it; You discern my thoughts from afar…You hedge me before and behind; You lay Your hand upon me…Where can I escape from Your spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence? (Psalm 139:1–7)

The Talmud plays on the expression, "You hedge me before and behind," stating that God created man with two faces (Berakhot 61a; Eruvin 18a). The Jewish French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) interpreted this passage to suggest that if you have one face, there is a place in the back of your head where

you can keep hidden thoughts. If you have a second face in the back of your head, however, then all is exposed to God. Levinas argues that this double-exposure brings joy to the psalmist through exultation in divine proximity and intimate knowledge. Everyone desires to be known and understood.

Dr. Zornberg maintains that Levinas is only partially correct. “Where shall I flee from Your face?” does not sound like an expression of pure bliss. Rather, it voices the human longing for a deep connection while simultaneously trying to protect the private self within.

Refusal to stand before God means to evade uncertainty, since confrontation with God generates feelings of fallibility and humility. After fleeing from God’s presence, Jonah becomes compulsively certain, insisting that he knows why everything happens. The sailors and Ninevites panic, say “maybe” and “who knows,” and they pray and repent. In contrast, Jonah calmly says yadati—I know why there is a storm, and I know how to stop it. I knew from the beginning that God would pardon the Ninevites. Jonah’s exaggerated knowingness is a camouflage for his anxieties. Jonah fears exposure to God, which would reveal that he really does not know. Jonah flees God initially, and would sooner die than concede uncertainty at the end of the narrative.

In a different essay, Dr. Zornberg discusses Judah’s dramatic speech to Joseph before Joseph broke down and revealed himself to his brothers. Judah “drew close to him, va-yiggash elav” (Genesis 44:18). The nineteenth-century Hasidic master Sefat Emet explains that Judah drew close to Joseph, but also to himself and to God. Dr. Zornberg expands on this insight: When Judah pleads on behalf of Benjamin by stating that Jacob would die of grief if Benjamin were not to return (44:34), Judah accesses a deep part of his own personality. Invoking Jacob’s potential grief over losing a son, Judah recalls the pain of losing his two sons Er and Onan, and suddenly feels a new empathy and identification with his father Jacob. Once Judah has discovered his true self, he also draws closer to God (pp. xii-xiv).

***

In her book, Waiting for Rain,[5] Dr. Bryna Jocheved Levy presents associative derashot for the Tishri holiday season. She brings a mastery of the biblical text, classical commentary and Midrash, and weaves together a wide array of writings to develop her own insights.

Dr. Levy offers a multidimensional analysis of Noah’s character (pp. 3-24). In the Zikhronot blessing of the Musaf for Rosh HaShanah, we remember Noah. At one

level, this association reminds us of God's sovereignty over all humanity. The Noah story also teaches that we always can begin again, a central message of Rosh HaShanah.

However, several interpreters insist that Noah also failed in his responsibility to humanity, and we must learn from that dimension of the story as well. For example, Rabbi Abraham Saba (1440-1508) asserts that Noah should have pleaded for mercy for humanity as soon as God proclaimed the decree. Instead, Noah silently built the Ark and saved only himself and his family.[6] Dr. Levy explains that Rabbi Saba derived his critical stance in part from the fact that after the Flood, Noah planted a vineyard and got drunk (Genesis 9:20-21). Noah also never had other children, despite God's blessing to be fruitful and multiply. Perhaps Noah recognized, too late, how devastating the Flood had been, and regretted not having tried to ward it off.

Dr. Levy then proposes alternative dimensions that also may have motivated Noah to become drunk and strip naked in the lone post-Flood narrative about him, including: (1) Noah longed to return to the innocence of pre-Flood life, and produced wine to remind himself of celebration. (2) Noah was inspired by the process of winemaking: To ferment, grapes decompose and then something wonderful emerges from something rotten. Similarly, Noah wanted the cadavers rotting beneath the earth's surface to produce new life. (3) Noah wanted to escape the dreadful memories of the Flood. (4) Noah wanted to return to an Eden-like state. Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge, and thereby became conscious of their nakedness. The Talmud suggests that the Tree of Knowledge may have been a vine (Sanhedrin 70a). Noah now became drunk and stripped naked, returning to the primeval Eden-like state (cf. Hatam Sofer). Thus, Dr. Levy's exposition considers several possible motivations for Noah's post-Flood behavior, taking a larger-than-life situation and humanizing it with insightful complexity.

Elsewhere, Dr. Levy discusses Jeremiah's stirring prophecy of redemption, which is read as the Haftarah on the second day of Rosh HaShanah (pp. 47-70). A highlight of this prophecy is the haunting image of the Matriarch Rachel's crying inconsolably over the loss of her exiled children (Jeremiah 31:14-16). Dr. Levy suggests that Jeremiah selected the image of Rachel—the only time she appears in Tanakh outside of Genesis—in part because God had previously commanded Jeremiah not to marry or have children in Israel as a prophetic sign that there was no short-term future in the land (Jeremiah 16:1-4). Following the destruction, when Jeremiah stood at Ramah and watched Jewish captives being dragged into

exile (Jeremiah 40:1), Jeremiah identified deeply with Rachel. In addition to weeping over the national tragedy, the prophet felt a personal sense of loss over the children he never had. His tears were Rachel's tears. Jeremiah also looked beyond the immediate sense of loss to the hope for restoration, prophesying that there is reward for Rachel's labor and her children will return.

Dr. Levy makes related attempts to connect the personalities of other prophets with their prophecies. For example, Moses was able to reveal God's attributes of mercy to humanity because Moses possessed those traits himself (pp. 148-149). When Joshua encountered the angelic captain of God's hosts prior to the battle against Jericho (Joshua 5:13-15), the angel was a manifestation of Joshua, the general of Israel's army. "It is as if God held up a celestial mirror and asked Joshua to gaze within and respond to what he saw" (p. 243).

Another feature of Dr. Levy's work is her sensitivity to the connection between art and religious experience. Invited to contribute to a recent issue of Conversations, she chose to include her analysis of Rembrandt's paintings of biblical scenes. [7]

Also noteworthy in the genre of modern midrash by scholars with a strong grounding in peshat is Dr. Erica Brown's book, Leadership in the Wilderness.[8] As the title suggests, she uses the text as a springboard to explore the concept of leadership through the Book of Numbers.

For example, in her analysis of the plague of fiery serpents and Moses' brass serpent that helped bring about their cure (Numbers chapter 21), Dr. Brown derives meaning from the symbol of a serpent as a source of healing. Goodness sometimes come from places often perceived as sources of pain. The Israelites learned not to make judgments regarding what might bring salvation.

Additionally, the people needed only to look up at the serpent in order to be saved (Numbers 21:8-9). Evidently, if they did not look up but instead concentrated on themselves and their pain, they would remain unhealed. This detail teaches that sometimes the solutions to our most pressing problems are right in front of us; but we need to open our eyes to see them. Moses succeeded as a leader by empowering the people, teaching them how they could find their own salvation (pp. 159-160).

***

We turn now to two leading scholars who champion the realm of peshat. Yeshivat Har Etzion and its affiliated Herzog College are at the forefront of contemporary Orthodox Tanakh study. This school exemplifies the bridging of the best of

traditional and contemporary scholarship in a religious context.[9] Many of their courses are archived online at their Virtual Beit Midrash (http://www.vbm-torah.org).

Dr. Yael Ziegler taught a course on the Book of Ruth, archived at http://www.vbm-torah.org/ruth.html, and forthcoming as part of the new Maggid Press Tanakh series. Dr. Tova Ganzel taught a course on the Book of Ezekiel that has been published by Tevunot Press of Herzog College (in Hebrew). [10] Both scholars present material in a transparent, analytical manner that can be applied by others in developing their own learning methodology.

Weaving together biblical text, Midrash, classical commentary and contemporary scholarship, Dr. Ziegler illustrates how the analytical tools of literary analysis, including allusions, attention to individual words and syntax, rhetorical devices, key words, character development, and many other features, contribute substantially to our understanding of the Book of Ruth. She also demonstrates the immense value of the insights of Midrash in the realm of peshat. Midrashim are especially sensitive to the finest literary nuances, making them valuable for ascertaining meaning.

For example, Dr. Ziegler explores the meanings of the characters' names in peshat and in derash.[11] The plain sense of Elimelech's name—my God is King—righteously suggests that the people should not be interested in a human monarchy; rather, they should accept God as their King. However, one Midrash deviates from the plain sense and suggests that the name Elimelech should be read as though it said elai melekh, to me shall come the kingship (Ruth Rabbah 2:5). This Midrash fits into a constellation of other Midrashim that accuse Elimelech of selfishly shirking his responsibilities toward his community during the famine. The Midrash intimates that Elimelech felt entitled to be a king, and therefore did not deserve to produce a king. Dr. Ziegler bridges the peshat and derash etymologies by explaining:

The Midrash suggests that while Elimelech could perhaps have promulgated the notion that God is the ultimate King, thereby setting in place a viable model of human kingship, he does not do so. He corrupts the destiny that attends his name and, in a commensurate fashion, our Sages corrupt his name.

Dr. Ziegler also explores various midrashic etymologies proposed for the name Ruth:

Rabbi Yohanan said: Because she was worthy and from her emerged David, who saturated (rivahu) the Holy one, blessed be He, with songs and praises. (Berakhot 7b)

This etymology focuses on Ruth's significance as the progenitor of David, who is mentioned at the end of the Book of Ruth (4:22).

"And the name of the second was Ruth," because she saw (ra'atah) the words of her mother-in-law. (Ruth Rabbah 9:4; Tanhuma Behar 3)

This etymology highlights Ruth's sensitivity toward her mother-in-law Naomi. Dr. Ziegler suggests further that these Midrashim may relate to others that derive the name Ruth from re'ut, meaning friend. Ruth's loyalty shines throughout the book.

Still other Midrashim expound on Ruth's name as deriving from her relationship with God:

"And the name of the second was Ruth," because she would boil herself (meratahat atzmah) [to stay away] from sins, in order to do the will of her Father in heaven. (Ruth Zuta 1:4)

This approach points to Ruth's piety before God, as she becomes the paradigmatic convert. Dr. Ziegler concludes that each of these midrashic wordplays relates to central dimensions of Ruth's character. Ruth was the progenitor of David, a loyal daughter-in-law, and a God-fearing individual.

Of particular value is her essay on methodology at the conclusion of the series.[12] Dr. Ziegler surveys the emergence of literary scholarship within the secular academy and its impact on contemporary Orthodox Tanakh study. She distinguishes between where the yeshivah and the academy can engage in productive dialogue, and where they differ. Most importantly, secular literary analysis focuses on Tanakh as literature, without necessarily seeking the theological dimensions of the text. In contrast, religious study uses the same literary tools to enhance Tanakh learning to grow in one's relationship with God.

Dr. Tova Ganzel has distinguished herself as a scholar in the esoteric Book of Ezekiel. In her book published by Herzog College, Dr. Ganzel offers a commentary on the Book of Ezekiel accessible to scholars, educators, and interested laypeople. She combines a deep understanding of the historical period, literary analysis, and a mastery of classical and contemporary scholarship. One reading her book will gain a sense of the current state of scholarship on the Book of Ezekiel, and will be able to fathom many aspects of this difficult prophetic work.

***

Ideal Tanakh scholarship keeps the biblical text at the center of inquiry and draws from the best of classical and contemporary interpretation. Parshanut scholarship, in contrast, focuses on individual biblical commentators and their modes of thought and contributions. A scholar of Ramban, Dr. Michelle J. Levine concentrates on his exceptional literary and human insight. She illustrates how Ramban offers a holistic view of biblical narrative. Through his integrative readings, Ramban develops more comprehensive character portrayals than most other classical commentators. Ramban also is sensitive to gaps and ambiguities, and exploits them in his penetrating analyses. Dr. Levine argues that these features make Ramban's commentary particularly relevant and appealing to modern readers.[13]

To cite one example, Ramban maintains that Noah was absolutely righteous. Differing from those Midrashim and later commentators who relativize Noah's greatness in contrast to that of Abraham, Ramban maintains that the Torah's introduction of Noah as a righteous man in his generation teaches that he stood above everyone else and walked with God (Genesis 6:9). What of Noah's drunkenness after the Flood? Ramban (on Genesis 9:26) explains that this passage warns of the potency of wine and its ability to bring down even the greatest of men: "For the wholly innocent individual (tzaddik tamim), whose merit saved the entire world, even he was brought to sin by wine." Dr. Levine explains that Ramban's positive characterization of Noah answers a central question of the story: Why did Noah merit to become the "second Adam" who would become the ancestor of all humanity? [14]

Also noteworthy in the realm of parshanut scholarship is Dr. Avigayil Rock's course on "Great Biblical Exegetes," archived at the Virtual Beit Midrash of Yeshivat Har Etzion (http://vbm-torah.org/parshanut.html). Dr. Rock surveys the history of traditional biblical peshat interpretation from Targum Onkelos and Rabbi Saadiah Gaon, through the nineteenth-century commentators. Her course elucidates the methodology and major contributions of each commentator.

***

We have considered a small sampling of the contributions of several exceptional contemporary women engaged in religious Tanakh scholarship. Even more promising, however, is what likely is yet to come, as growing numbers of Orthodox women engage in high-level learning and teaching.

NOTES

[1] For a recent discussion of Professor Leibowitz's continued relevance in developing a learning methodology, see R. Shalom Carmy, "Always Connect," in Where the Yeshiva Meets the University: Traditional and Academic Approaches to Tanakh Study, ed. Hayyim Angel, Conversations 15 (Winter 2013), pp. 1-12.

[2] See especially the reviews of her book on Genesis by R. Shalom Carmy, Jewish Action 58:3 (1998), pp. 82-87; and Dr. Tamar Ross, Bekhol Derakhekha Da'ehu (BDD) 3 (1996), pp. 49-57.

[3] Genesis: The Beginning of Desire (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995); The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus (New York: Doubleday, 2001); Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers (New York: Schocken, forthcoming).

[4] The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious (New York: Schocken, 2009).

[5] Waiting for Rain: Reflections at the Turning of the Year (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998).

[6] See further discussion and sources that criticize Noah in Prof. Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Bereshit (Genesis), trans. Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem: Eliner Library), pp. 59-66.

[7] Dr. Bryna Jocheved Levy, "Scripture Envisioned: The Bible through the Eyes of Rembrandt," in Where the Yeshiva Meets the University: Conversations 15, pp. 189-199.

[8] Leadership in the Wilderness: Authority and Anarchy in the Book of Numbers (New Milford, CT: Maggid, 2013).

[9] See further discussion in Hayyim Angel, "The Literary-Theological Study of Tanakh," afterword to R. Moshe Sokolow, Tanakh: An Owner's Manual (Brooklyn, NY: Ktav, 2014), pp. 192-207; reprinted in Angel, Peshat Isn't So Simple: Essays on Developing a Religious Methodology to Bible Study (New York: Kodesh Press, 2014), pp. 118-136.

[10] Nevu'at ha-Tzofeh: Ben Hurban le-Tekumah, Iyyunim be-Sefer Yehezkel (Hebrew) (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2012). This material also is archived in the Hebrew section of the Virtual Beit Midrash at Yeshivat Har Etzion, at http://www.etzion.org.il/vbm/search_results.php?subject=%F2%E9%E5%F0%E9%ED+%E1
.

[11] At http://vbm-torah.org/archive/ruth/07ruth.htm.

[12] At http://vbm-torah.org/archive/ruth/38ruth.htm.

[13] For an essay accessible to nonspecialists, see “Ramban’s Integrative Approach to the Reading of Biblical Narrative,” in Where the Yeshiva Meets the University: Conversations 15, pp. 154-167. See also her scholarly book, Nahmanides on Genesis: The Art of Biblical Portraiture (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 2009).

[14] “Ramban’s Integrative Approach to the Reading of Biblical Narrative,” in Where the Yeshiva Meets the University: Conversations 15, pp. 160-161.