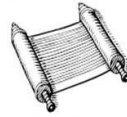


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MURDER BY MIDRASH: THE CASE OF THE DISAPPEARING FATHER

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A fun midrashic technique, especially for those who enjoy genre novels, is the construction of elaborate deaths for Biblical characters who disappear without notice. For example, Aharon's nephew Chur is present when Moshe ascends Sinai but not mentioned when Mosheh returns; the midrash records that he was stoned by a Jewish mob when he sought to prevent the Golden Calf. Kayin's death is foretold but never reported; the midrash has him die by means of a blind descendant's stray arrow.

In this week's parashah, the victim is Rivkah's father Betuel. In 24:50, Betuel speaks, together with Lavan, but in 24:55 it is Rivkah's sister and mother who apparently speak for the family. On the assumption that Aramean society was patriarchal, it seems reasonable to attribute his silence to his death.

Whodunnit? Rashi tells us that Betuel was struck by an angel. This may seem like an unsatisfying "mysterious stranger" solution, but actually kills two interpretational birds with one stone. In 24:5, Eliezer asks Avraham what to do if the woman he selects for Yitzchak refuses to come with him to Canaan. Avraham responds in 24:7 that the G-d of Heaven "will send His angel before you." The angel is not mentioned explicitly again, but we now understand why its presence was necessary.

Furthermore, we know why Betuel had to die; he intended to prevent Rivkah from leaving with Eliezer. How did he intend to accomplish this, when in 24:50 he acknowledged that "the matter had emerged from Hashem"? Chizkuni cites a midrash which notes that Eliezer eats in Betuels house that night (24:54), and suggests that Betuel had poisoned Eliezer's food. The angel, with poetic justice, switched the two plates.

A much more graphic suggestion, also cited by Chizkuni, is that Betuel was a despot who exercised *droit du seigneur* over all brides in Aram. His populace demanded that he do the same with

his own daughter, Rivkah, and he agreed, and so an angel came and killed him to protect Rivkah.

This suggestion is worthy of study on its own, regardless of its merit as interpretation, for its wonderful capsule portrait of the limitations of power and of how evil can corrupt its victims. Betuel never planned on incestuous rape, and perhaps would never have begun this particular abuse of power had he known where it would lead. Those who achieve evil voluntarily often have great evil thrust upon them.

As interpretation, it highlights an erotic tinge to this episode that might otherwise be overlooked, even though it is clearly a romance. Rivkah is introduced to us as "very beautiful in appearance, virgin, and no man had known her." The redundancy of "betulah (virgin) and no man had known her" drives Ibn Ezra to euphemism, and once pointed out, the resonance *betulah*/Betuel is hard to ignore. Perhaps there is a reason that the servant must swear an oath on a circumcision before being sent on this mission. (Note that in some *midrashim* Avraham explicitly suspects Eliezer, and in others his suspicions are all too justified.)

But our original suggestion seems the most organic fit with the story. Here Aviva Zornberg's psychoanalytic sensitivity to suppressed narrative tensions may be at work. Why does the Torah spend so many words on Rivkah's parting from her family, if not to hint that its smoothness is only apparent?

Perhaps another midrashic trope is at work here: "*niba velo yada mah shniba*," the idea that characters often unknowingly prophesy, especially their own fates. Betuel's only words (24:50) are "The matter has come out from G-d: we cannot speak to you about whether it is evil or good" (cf. 31:29). For the midrash, this must be taken as a statement of fact, and yet Betuel surely believed that his silence would be his own choice.

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Betuel's death is literarily demanded by his sudden disappearance: after 24:50 Lavan and Rivkah's anonymous mother are the only family speakers, even in contexts, such as a leavetaking blessing, in which a father seems very much called for. But it is possible to explain his silence in other ways. After all, his only speech is about the futility of speech; why would he speak again? And nothing we have suggested thus far explains why even Betuel's first speech is joint with Lavan, with Lavan mentioned first.

Here the *pashtanim* try their hand: Rashi suggests that Lavan was wicked and sought to speak before his father, while Radak suggests that Betuel was too old to handle such affairs. Radak's suggestion seems to possess all the interpretational baggage of the midrash but none of its virtues: Betuel's unmentioned sudden death is more plausible than his unmentioned ongoing disability. Rashi's suggestion, meanwhile, embroils us in the question of whether we are supposed to realize now, before Yaakov comes to him in Parashat VaYetze, that Lavan is a trickster.

Bekhor Shor explains that Betuel is silent in 24:55 because he genuinely supports the match; realizing this, Eliezer give gifts and speaks only with Rivkah's brother and mother, who might still oppose it. *Laaniyut daati*, it seems hard to believe that this interpretation is generated by more than reaction to Rashi; given the choice between hypothesizing Betuel's opposition, or rather his enthusiasm, I prefer the former.

(I suspect that many other examples can be found of "*peshat*" interpretations that make sense only as reactions to midrash, rather than as resulting from unmediated encounters with Torah. Note also that Bekhor Shor argues that Betuel favors the match because

Yitzchak is his family, but not his wife's; Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine z"l maintained in a completely different context that Eliezer's major challenge was to overcome the family bitterness caused by Avraham's physical departure and ideological estrangement.)

If Betuel is allowed to survive this encounter, psychoanalytically inclined readers will note that Rivkah seems to have been brought up in a family where the wife and son dominate the father, which may shape her relationship with Yitzchak. Rivkah's mother and brother ask her (but not her father) whether she wishes to go – no one asks Yitzchak whether he wishes Rivkah, or any other women for that matter, to be brought. The disappearance, death, or disability of Betuel may therefore parallel the manipulability of the elderly Yitzchak. Perhaps there is some midrash in Radak's understanding of Betuel's silence after all.

At the same time, Yitzchak does not merely accept Rivkah passively. He brings her into his late mother's tent, and he finds comfort in her presence. This may simply be the result of her innate and overwhelming *chesed*, as evidenced by her behavior to Eliezer at the well. But I would prefer an explanation that makes her specifically compatible with Yitzchak, rather than generally amiable.

More specifically – Rashi makes the eminently plausible claim, developed in numerous midrashic permutations, that Sarah's death results from her inability to deal with the fact of the Akeidah. That same fact presumably dominates Yitzchak's psychology and worldview. We should therefore look for something that makes Rivkah especially capable of dealing with it.

I invite your suggestions; additional murder and mayhem are of course welcome. *Shabbat shalom!*

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