

Death by Midrash: The Case of the Disappearing Father¹

A fun midrashic technique, especially for those who enjoy genre novels, is the construction of elaborate deaths for named Biblical characters who disappear without notice. Thus, for example, Aharon's nephew Chur is stoned by the Jewish mob when he seeks to prevent the Golden Calf, and Kayin is killed by his descendant's stray arrow. In this week's parashah, if we follow Rashi, the victim is Rivkah's father Betuel, who is killed when an angel switches his plate with the poisoned portion he intended for Avraham's servant.

Why is Betuel's death necessary? One midrashic suggestion, also cited by Rashi, is that he intended to prevent Rivkah from leaving with the servant. Another, much more graphic, 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.

This second 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. 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.

But the first suggestion seems to fit more organically 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?

I suggest that another midrashic trope is at work here, what is in Hebrew called "*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 would have believed that his silence would be his own choice.

Now Betuel's death is literarily demanded, as we noted above, 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 otherwise. After all, his only speech is about the futility of speech! Why would he speak again?

None of these interpretations 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. *Laniyut daati*, Radak's suggestion has all the interpretational baggage of the midrash but none of its virtues, while Rashi's suggestion

¹ I encourage reading Genesis 24:20 through the end of Chapter 25 in advance; I have not attached a translation, however, as any will do for this purpose. I have attached a page with translation of medieval commentaries as relevant background.

embroils us in the question of whether we are supposed to realize this early, before Yaakov comes to him in Parashat VaYetze, that Lavan is a trickster.

Bekhor Shor explains that Betuel's later silence is because he really wants the match: realizing this, Eliezer give gifts and speaks only with Rivkah's brother and mother, who might still oppose it. Again 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 happily prefer the former.

At the risk of boring regular readers, I wish to point out that the substantive difference between "midrash" and "peshat" here is whether one kills or rather disables Betuel, and whether one constructs a positive or negative motivation. A midrashist might detail Betuel's disability, or find a specific textual hook on which to hang Betuel's enthusiasm, but these are differences of expression, not of interpretation. I also 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.

Psychoanalytic readers will doubtless note also that Rivkah is brought up in a family where the wife and son dominate the father, which may shape her relationship with Yitzchak. Rivkah's family ask her whether she wishes to go – no one asks Yitzchak whether he wishes her, 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.

Shabbat shalom

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רש"י בראשית פרק כד

(כח) לבית אמה - דרך הנשים היתה להיות להן בית לישב בו למלאכתן, ואין הבת מגדת אלא לאמה:
(ג) ויען לבן ובתואל - רשע היה וקפץ להשיב לפני אביו:
(נה) ויאמר אחיה ואמה - ובתואל היכן היה? הוא היה רוצה לעכב ובא מלאך והמיתו:

בכור שור

לאחיה ולאמה - שהם צריכים פיוס. אבל בתואל היה בן דודו, לא היה צריך פיוס, ששמח היה שתנתן בתו לקרובו.

ויאמר אחיה ואמה תשב הנערה וגו' - אבל בתואל לא היה צריך באיחור, לפיכך לא דבר, לפי שהיה יצחק קרובו, וחפץ ביוג, כאדם ששואל לו קרובו ואומר: ממני אין עיכוב, טוב תתי אותה לך ובלבד שתרצה אמה, ולפיכך כל הדברים היו על האם, ובנה מדבר בשבילה בשביל צניעות. ואף למעלה ויען לבן ובתואל ששם לבן קודם בתואל, מפני שהיה לבו גס בו שהוא הלך לקראתו והביאו לביתם, וגם אין דרך שידבר האיש בתמרוקי הנשים.

רד"ק

ואמר "לבית אמה" - ולא אמר לבית אביה כי הבת אם האם ספוריה ולרבה אה - לפי שלא כתב אותו בספור תולדות נחור ויען לבן ובתואל - הקדים לבן לבתואל כי בתואל היה זקן ודברי הבית מוטלים על לבן לאחיה ולאמה - כי הם היו עיקר הבית כי בתואל זקן היה. ובמדרש: כי היה בלבו לעכב ובא המלאך והמיתו וישלחו - לבן וקרוביו, זהו שאמר "אחותם"

חזקוני

ולפי הפשט בשביל המתנות שקבלו הקדימן לדבר, או שמא לבן גדול מאביו בחכמה היה. ונמצא באגדה: בתואל בקש להאכיל אליעזר סם המות כדי שיירש הממון ובא גבריאל והחליף הקערה והניחה לפני בתואל, לכך לא הזכירו כאן הכתוב ד"א

בני דורו קראו שמו בתואל על שם שהבתולות כולן נבעלות לו תחלה והיה מולך על ארם, ורצו בני עירו שיבעול אף רבקה בתו קודם שתלך לנשואיה ואם לאו יהרגוהו ונתרצה בדבר ובא גבריאל והרגו

בראשית פרק כח:ה

וישלח יצחק את יעקב וילך פדנה ארם אל לבן בן בתואל הארמי אחי רבקה אם יעקב ועשו:

רש"י לבראשית פרק כח:ה

אם יעקב ועשו - איני יודע מה מלמדנו:

RASHI 24:50-55

“Lavan and Betuel answered” – Lavan was a wicked man, jumping in to respond before his father.

“Her brother and mother said” – Where was Betuel? He wanted to prevent (Rivkah from leaving with the servant), so an angel came and killed him.

BEKHOR SHOR 24:53,55

“To her brother and her mother” – who needed to be conciliated, but Betuel was his cousin, so he did not require conciliation, as he was happy that his daughter would be given to his relative.

“Her brother and mother said etc” – But Betuel had no need for delay, and therefore did not speak, because Yitzchak was his relative, and he desired the pairing. He was like a man whose relative asks him (for his daughter’s hand in marriage) and he says: “I am no obstacle, it is better for me to give her to you, so long as her mother agrees”. Therefore all the conversation was toward the mother, and her son spoke on her behalf out of tzniut.

So too above: “Lavan and Betuel answered” –

with Lavan placed before Betuel, it is because Lavan treated Eliezer as familiar because he had gone to greet him and brought him to their house, and also because it is not proper for the man (of the house) to speak about women’s adornment.

RADAK 24:29, 50, 53

“Rivkah had a brother” – (It says this) because he was not written in the genealogy of Nachor

“Lavan and Betuel answered” – Scripture put Lavan before Betuel because Betuel was elderly and household matters devolved on him

“To her brother and to her mother” – Because they were the root of the house, because Betuel was elderly.

But in the midrash:

because he intended to prevent (Rivkah from leaving to marry Yitzchak), so the angel came and killed him.

“They sent” – Lavan and those close to him; therefore it says “their sister”.

Chizkuni

According to the peshat: Because of the gifts they received, they spoke first.

Or perhaps Lavan was greater than his father in wisdom.

But we find in the Aggadah: “Betuel sought to feed Eliezer poison so as to inherit the money, but Gavriel came and switched dishes and left the poisoned one before Betuel. Therefore Scripture does not mention him here.

Another explanation:

The people of his generation called him Betuel because all the *betulot* (virgins) would be required to have sex with him first. He was ruler over Aram, and the people of his city wished him to have sex with his daughter Rivkah before she went to be married, saying they would kill him otherwise, and he agreed, so Gabriel came and killed him.

RASHI 25:5

“Mother of Yaakov and Esav” –

I do not know what this teaches us.