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TOLERATING CONTRADICTION

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Yechezkel 45:20 (in the haftorah for Shabbat Hachodesh) seems to report a sacrifice that is not mentioned anywhere in the Torah. 45:18 reported the sacrifice of a bull as a *chatat* on the first day of Nissan. 45:20 reads:

וְכֵן תַּעֲשֶׂה
בַּשְּׁבִיעָה
בַּחֹדֶשׁ
מֵאִישׁ שֶׁגָּה וּמִפֶּתִי
וְכִפַּרְתֶּם אֶת-הַבַּיִת:

*And so you must do
on the seventh (b'shiv'ah
of the month (bachodesh)
from a man who is shogeh (accidental) or peti (seduced)
and you will cleanse/atone the Temple.*

Most pshat-commentators explain this as referring to a special inauguration sacrifice for the Third Temple. They vary only in details – for example Rashi understands the sacrifice as taking place on each of the first seven days of Nissan, whereas Abравanel has it only on the first and seventh days. However, they are also all aware that Talmud Menachot 45a records a radically different approach in which the relevant sacrifice is the *par be'elem davar shel tzibbur*, brought when a Great Sanhedrin makes a legal error that causes the nation to sin.

אמר ר' יוחנן:
אלו שבעה שבטים שחטאו ואף על פי שאין רובה של קהל.
חודש - אם חדשו ואמרו חלב מותר.
מאיש שוגה ומפתי מלמד
שאינן חייבין אלא על העלם דבר עם שגגת מעשה.

*Said Rabbi Yochanan:
(b'shiv'ah) refers to seven tribes that sinned, even though they
did not constitute a majority of the kahal
(ba)chodesh means if they creatively said that a forbidden type
of fat was permitted
From a man who is shogeh or peti
teaches that they are liable only for a forgetting of law that
leads to an accidental action.*

This reading is a wild stretch by any standard. It is immediately followed by the following report, also cited on Shabbat 13b and Chagigah 13a:

*Said Rav Yehudah said Rav:
Assuredly, that man is remembered for good – Chananiah son
of Chizkiyah by name,
as if not for him – the book of Yechezkel would be
sequestered/nignaz,
because its words contradicted words of Torah.
What did he do?*

*They brought up to him 300 bottles of oil, and he sat in the
attic, and interpreted them.*

Rashi to Shabbat 13b makes the connection explicit: 45:20 is one of the ways in which “its words contradicted words of Torah”, because “where is this sacrifice mentioned in the Torah?” It seemingly follows that the Talmud’s reading of that verse is one of the solutions developed by Chananiah son of Chizkiyah. However, Radak to Yechezkel denies this:

ומה שדרש חנניא על זה - לא נמצא היום אצלינו.

*What Chananiah interpreted regarding this – is not found with
us today.*

If Yechezkel was left in circulation only because of Chananiah’s interpretations, and his interpretations are lost, should we remove Yechezkel from our Tanakhs? We have to admit that the Talmud’s substitute interpretation on this question is far from convincing.

Rav Elyashiv took the opposite approach: why should apparent contradictions ever have been sufficient to cause the book to be sequestered?

*certainly Yechezkel was established and known to them as a
true prophet,
meaning that all his words came from the ‘mouth’ of The Holy
Blessed One,
and therefore there could not actually be any contradiction
between his words and words of Torah;
therefore, even though we don’t know how the words are
reconciled, why sequester them?*

*Furthermore,
the implication is that they came to sequester the entire book,
but most of the book’s words do not contradict the words of
Torah (even apparently),
so why would they want to sequester it (entirely)?
The explanation is,
that even though it’s obvious to us
that everything in the book is founded on and can be
understood in accordance with Truth,
nonetheless, since we don’t understand them in depth, and we
think that it contradicts words of Torah,
we will come to be tripped up, because we will behave against
the words of Torah,
and this is a reason to completely sequester it, and not to leave
over and sustain it in part,
because this is impossible,
since it is a unified book and people will come to trip up in the
matters that contradict.*

Since his concern is purely practical – we will do the wrong thing – perhaps Yechezkel survived because the contradictions that require

extraordinary solutions relate to sacrifices, and Chananiah's solutions were forgotten only after the Destruction of the Temple.

Iyyun Yaakov (by Rabbi Yaakov Reischer, 1670-1733, author of *Responsa Shevut Yaakov*) to Shabbat 13a matter-of-factly states that

From here we learn that a book in which is found improper things that contradict words of Torah – that it is appropriate to sequester the entire book even though there are also found in it matters that are correct and proper to wisdom-finders, and even though the author is an established prophet . . .

However, he continues,

we must be very patient in such matters before sequestering, as perhaps our limitations have prevented us from understanding the matter correctly.

*That's why great authors have the practice of writing about their predecessors' words
"I have not descended to the end of his mind"
and other phrases of humility . . .*

Rabbi Reischer apparently understands the Sages to have genuinely worried that Yechezkel contradicted Torah. Once a solution was found, the book is validated, and it is irrelevant whether we still have access to the solution.

How could the Sages have believed that Yechezkel contradicted Torah? The most radical answer is given by the (misattributed) *Chiddushei HaRan* to Shabbat 13a. Bava Batra 14b attributes the Book of Yechezkel to "King Chizkiyah and his followers", rather than to Yechezkel himself, so contradictions raised questions about the accuracy with which they had transcribed his words.

An opposite approach denies that sequestration was every genuinely considered. Rather, the Talmud's report is hyperbolic. For example, Rabbi Yisrael Ariel in *Sanbedrin HaGedolah* argues that the Talmud deliberately exaggerates the significance of Chananiah son of Chizkiyah:

*It is therefore clear that the language "were it not for him" is not precise and was said hyperbolically to add praise to the man
but the Sages would not have sequestered Yechezkel rather they would have found another sage to interpret it.*

Benayahu ben Yehoyada downplays Chananiah ben Chizkiyah's contribution in a different way. He argues that the Talmud gives several examples of resolutions to the conflicts between Yechezkel and Torah, and they seem intellectually pedestrian. Rather, Chananiah was uniquely motivated to address the issues because his soul was a spark of, or was otherwise connected to, Yechezkel. The rather shocking implication is that Yechezkel would have been sequestered because no one other than Chananiah thought it worth the effort to reconcile it with Torah, even though everyone knew it could be done. 300 bottles of oil suggests a lot of work, but still ...

Chagigah 13a records a second charge against the Book of Yechezkel, also successfully parried by Chananiah son of Chizkiyah:

*A beraita:
An actual event
in which a young child was reading the Book of Yechezkel in his teacher's house,
and he was understanding the chashmal,
and fire emerged from the chashmal and burnt him up,*

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and they sought to sequester the Book of Yechezkel.

Chananiah son of Chizkiyah said to them:

If this one is a chakham – are they all chakhamim?!

The second charge seems to make Yechezkel holy-but-dangerous rather than insufficiently holy.

It makes sense to restrict access to books that are dangerous to children. In fact, Chananiah ben Chizkiyah's response to this charge is difficult; why is leaving Yechezkel in Tanakh worth risking the lives of precocious children? (Divrei Yetziv CM 47 assures us that the burnt-up child was uniquely talented in his generation, which seems faint comfort.)

However, the language "they sought to sequester the Book of" is also used on Shabbat 30b regarding Kohelet and Mishlei. No one there suggests that the books were too holy; rather, the problem was that they seemed self-contradictory. In addition, Vayikra Rabba 28 charges that Kohelet makes statements that "had a tendency toward *minnut*/heresy?". So the challenge to Yechezkel was more likely also rooted in a rabbinic cancel culture. What do we learn from the attempts?

It's tempting to suggest that the key lesson is that they all failed. But that may be circular – maybe we only know about the efforts that failed, whereas the books that were successfully sequestered are lost.

Nonetheless, Shabbat 30b's discussion of Mishlei provides strong support for Rabbi Reischer's understanding of these episodes as cautionary. The rabbis responded to the charge against Kohelet by developing ways to reconcile the apparent contradictions. When it came to Mishlei, they merely said:

The Book of Kohelet, didn't we investigate and find a rationale?

Here too, let us investigate ...

The Rabbis learned from the experience of Kohelet that such efforts were wrongheaded from the beginning. Faced with serious Torah that also seems highly problematic, our first reaction should be to assume that the flaw is in our understanding.

But I want to tentatively go one step further. Radak teaches that we can live with contradictions so long as we know that someone we have confidence in resolved them. This was the argument Rav Aharon Lichtenstein made about Amalek: If Rav Chaim Brisker could commit to a halakhah that contained something so apparently harsh, there must be some way to reconcile it with the Torah's principles of mercy and peace. That sort of spiritual greatness is extraordinarily rare, and investing so heavily in any individual is dangerous. Nonetheless, some of us – I include myself - related to Rav Lichtenstein in much the same way. But maybe when ordinary Jews – especially lots of ordinary Jews - whom we regard as genuinely G-d-fearing and halakhically committed adopt positions that seem to us incoherent or incompatible with G-dfearingness or halakhic commitment, we ought to be very, very patient before reading them out of the community, and yet without ignoring the contradictions.

Shabbat shalom!