

How should one relate to modes of Torah interpretation that one does not believe in?

I intend this question in two ways.

First, how does one relate to hermeneutical systems that one sees as imposed on texts rather than as organic to the text, as producing eisegesis rather than exegesis?

Second, how does one relate to interpretations developed in the service of broad philosophic positions that one does not share?

The first question arises often for me when reading Chassidic commentaries. An underlying presumption of such commentaries is that the exoteric historical narrative of chumash (but not only the narrative, and not only Chumash, or even only Tanakh) is properly interwoven with, supplemented, and sometimes supplanted by an esoteric psychospiritual narrative.

The esoteric narrative often emerges by employing some of the more radical techniques of classical midrash. Here is an example, drawn from Toldot Yaakov Yosef<sup>1</sup> to Genesis 27:22. "הקול קול יעקב והידיים ידי עשו" is generally translated as "The voice is the voice of Yaakov, but the hands are the hands of Esav"; Toldot Yaakov Yosef, however, translates "The voice is the voice of Yaakov, as are the hands, the (very) hands (previously) of Esav". Exoterically, the verse describes Yitzchak's confusion as to which son was standing before him to receive his blessing; esoterically, it tells us that involving one's entire body in the ecstasy of prayer sanctifies the physical, specifically by clapping, so that the hands previously identified with the material become servants of the spiritual.

On a purely syntactic level, this reading requires us to read across the parallelism of the verse in a kind of slant rhyme. The identical tactic is given on Sanhedrin 57b as the basis for Rabbi Yishmael's position that abortion is included within the Noachide prohibition against bloodshedding. Genesis 9:6 "שופך דם האדם באדם דמו ישפך" is usually translated as "The shedder of human blood, by a human must his blood be shed", but here is translated "The shedder of the blood of a human within a human, his blood must be shed".

No claim is made in either case that this reading is the *exclusive* or even *primary* meaning of the verse, and I think that playing with punctuation to produce multiple meanings is a standard poetic technique. So for me the fundamental question is not whether the literary tactic is compelling, but rather whether I think that the resulting interpretation is a plausible intent of this section of Chumash.

My answer to this depends to some extent on another question: To what extent is this interpretation interwoven with the exoteric narrative? For example: Does Toldot Yaakov Yosef claim that on some level Yitzchak intended this when exclaiming it, or would he be content to say that Yitzchak simply channeled the Divine intent unconsciously, he "prophesied without knowing what he had prophesied", in the rabbinic phrase? I would be happier if the former were true, if this interpretation owed at least some fealty to the narrative context.

On that assumption, Toldot Yaakov Yosef must claim that Yitzchak was on some level aware of Yaakov's deception. Even more strongly, he was celebrating Yaakov's capacity to engage in the deception, to utilize the "hands" without losing his "voice".

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<sup>1</sup> Attached and translated. I have also attached and translated the parallel comments of Kedushat Levi to show that Chassidic interpretation is not textually arbitrary; rather, it is reproducible, in the sense that multiple interpreters using the Chassidic hermeneutic will produce roughly cognate interpretations in the same ratio as multiple pashtanim, darshanim, or Structuralists.

And I do think that a close reading of the exoteric narrative lends much support to the thesis that Yitzchak was a willing party to his own deception. Which means, in the end, that Toldot Yaakov Yosef's reading is *useful* to me. And yet, I still find it hard to allow any validity to the claim that this verse is in any sense about the importance of being a clapper during davening.

Toldot Yaakov Yosef offers the above reading as a prefatory aside to a discussion of the opening of this week's parshah. "Yaakov left B'er Sheva, and went toward Charan. Vayifga bamakom..." Any reader will notice immediately that "*bamakom*", "(untranslatable preposition) the place", is problematic, as the place has not previously been identified. Classical midrash identifies it either as Mount Moriah (on his way to the Akeidah, Avraham saw the place from afar – Genesis 22:4) or as G-d (the place of all existence). The former reading raises geographic difficulties, which are resolved in various ways. The latter fits well in context – a prophetic dream ensues immediately<sup>2</sup> – but Ibn Ezra argues that it is anachronistic, in that G-d is not referred to as "the place" in Tanakh, only in rabbinic literature. Radak and Seforno<sup>3</sup> accordingly postulate a well-known wayfarer's station in that location, and indeed an entire institution of such stations on major roads.

Toldot Yaakov Yosef adopts the position that "*bamakom*" refers to G-d. He does not stop there, however – Be'er sheva refers to a kabbalistic Service known as the Seven, Charan refers to Divine Anger, and "*vayifga bamakom*" means that Yaakov became subject to the Divine Aspect of Justice as the result of leaving the highest level of service (in which he acquired the "hands").

I cannot follow him down that path. This raises for me the question of whether I can legitimately use the product of his initial steps. But I want to explore that question in a broader context.

Over the years, I have had a number of friends who raved about the beauty and depth of kabbalistic thought without, so far as I could tell, in any way believing that the metaphysical structures described by kabbalah had any "real" existence. For them, the ten sefirot, the worlds of thought and deed, and the like were useful metaphors for aspects of the human psyche, and no more; they did not require any notion of transcendence or Divinity. I often wondered (aloud, and, no doubt irritatingly, to them) if this was fair to the texts and authors they studied and taught. More strongly, I wondered whether the key question was not belief but experience, whether it was possible to meaningfully read these texts without having had experiences that corresponded to their notion of reality – were they colorblind critics teaching about art? For myself, I remain unaware of having had any such experiences, and therefore I always resisted citing such texts.

So it is much caution that I end this devar Torah by citing a metaphor from the Zohar.

**Zohar 1:148b**

The other, younger (son of Rabbi Yitzchak) said:

"Vayifga bamakom; he lay over there because the sun had set; (he took of the rocks of the makom and put underneath his head" –

What is the meaning of "vayifga bamakom"?

This can be compared to a king who visits a lady – he needs to entreat her and to perfume her with words, so that she will not seem utterly available to him.

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<sup>2</sup> Although for Talmud Berakhot 28 it seems to refer to a separate act of prayer

<sup>3</sup> Did Seforno read Radak? If you know, please email me

Not only that – even if he has a bed of gold and woven tapestries in his castle to sleep on, whereas she makes do with a stone bed on the ground in a fortress of straw, he should leave his and sleep on hers so as to give her satisfaction, so that their companionship will be unified without constraint.

This is as we learn here, for once he came to her, what is written? “He took from the rocks of the place and put under his head, and he lay down in that place” – so as to give her satisfaction, as even the rocks of her house are beloved to him to sleep on”.

The Zohar is plainly talking about the unification of various aspects of the Divine, about which I have nothing to say. But the courting/marital advice is beautiful, and there is one literary/psychological element that is tempting, namely the parallelism between Yaakov’s relationship with G-d and his relationship with Rachel, where he also saw hardship as joy in the service of love. Is it fair to extract those and leave the kabbalah behind? I welcome your comments.

Shabbat shalom

Aryeh Klapper

## בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשה סח

"ויפגע במקום" -

ר"ה בשם ר' אמי אמר

מפני מה מכנין שמו של הקב"ה וקוראין אותו מקום?

שהוא מקומו של עולם ואין עולמו מקומו,

מן מה דכתיב (שמות לג) הנה מקום אתי,

הוי הקב"ה מקומו של עולם ואין עולמו מקומו,

### זהר א:קמח:ב

פתח אחרא זעירא ואמר:

"ויפגע במקום וילן שם כי בא השמש וגו'" - מאי "ויפגע במקום"?

למלכא דאזיל לבי מטרוניתא - בעי למפגע לה ולבסמא לה במלין, בגין דלא תשתכח גביה כהפקירא;

ולא עוד אלא דאפילו אית ליה ערסא דדהבא וכסותותי מרקמאן באפליטיא למיבת בהו, ואיהי מתקנא ערסיה

באבנין בארעא ובקיסטרא דתיבנא, ישבוק דידיה ויבית בהו למיהב לה נייחא, ובגין דיהא רעותא דלהון כחדא

בדלא אניסו,

כמה דאוליפנא הכא, דכיון דאזל לגבה מה כתיב (וילן שם כי בא השמש, לאחזאה דאסיר ליה לבר נש לשמשא

ערסיה ביומא), "ויקח מאבני המקום וישם מראשותיו וישכב במקום ההוא" - בגין למיהב לה נייחא, דאפילו

אבני ביתא רחימין קמיה למיבת בהו,

(ס"א דכתיב וישכב במקום ההוא). בכה רבי יצחק (ד"א ל"ג וחיידך) וחדו, אמר מרגלאן אלין תחות ידיכו ולא

אזיל בתרייכו,

אמרו ליה את תזיל לאורחך, ואנן נייעול למתא להלולא דהאי ברי.

אמר רבי יצחק השתא אית לי למהך לארחי:

### קדושת לוי

ועל זה ויצא יעקב מבאר שבע, רצה לומר שיצא מאותו הסתכלות של היחוד עליון אשר משם נובע שפע לכל

העולמות לכל שבע המדות המכונה בשם באר שבע. וילך חרנה, והסתכל באותו החרון אשר יעברו על כנסת

ישראל והיה לו צער גדול מאוד בהרגישו צער גדול הצרות אשר יסבלו זרעו בגלות ויהיה להם ירידה חס

ושלום. וזהו שכתוב ויפגע במקום, רצה לומר לבד מזה הצער של זרעו הרגיש ופגע בצערו של מקום כביכול

מקומו של עולם אשר בכל צרתם לו צר וחשש יעקב מאוד על צער שכינה כביכול . . .

### תולדות יעקב יוסף

. . . וכמ"ש הרמב"ם באדם פרטי, כך הוא בכללות העולם, שאם אנשי הצורה עוסקים בתורה ועבודה על ידי

סמכין ומחזיקין מאנשי החומר, יש קיום לשניהם, להחומר והצורה. מה שאין כן כשאין סומך ומחזיק ללומדי

תורה, אזי שניהם מוכנים לפגעי הזמן, וכמ"ש בזוהר על פסוק ויגע בכף יריכו וגו' (וישלח קעא ע"א), לכך

ראוי להכניע חומר תחת הצורה בכלל ובפרט כנ"ל:

בזה יובן ויצא יעקב מבאר שבע וילך חרנה. ר"ל מיד כאשר יצא ופירש יעקב שהוא הת"ח, ע"ד הקול קול

יעקב והידיים וגו', כי כתבנו במ"א (בהר סימן ד ועוד) ביאור פירוש המשנה שכ' הרמב"ם איך במצוה א'

כשעושה בשמחה גדולה וכו' (פיה"מ שלהי מכות). והנה החוש וראות אשר ראינו לעשות מעשה התפלה

בשמחה גדולה, בקול גדול, וידיים המשמיעים קול שמחה, ובזה ניטל גם הידים מעשו וניתן ליעקב, וז"ש הקול

קול יעקב והידיים, ר"ל גם הידים וגו' והבן. וכאשר פירש מעבודת ודביקות הש"י הנקרא באר שבע, אז וילך

חרנה. שגם אנשי המוני עם הנקרא חומר אל הצורה הולך לחרון אף של מקום, וזה להליכה יכונה, שהולך

ונתרחק מאת פני הש"י. וכמ"ש הנה אנכי הולך למות (בראשית כה, לב). וז"ש ויפגע במקום, ר"ל שכל פגעי

מדת הדין במקו"ם ההוא . . .

### **Bereshit Rabbah (Vilna) 68:9**

“Vayifga BaMakom” –

R. Huna said in the name of R. Ami:

Why do they elide the name of The Holy Blessed One and call him “Makom=place”?

Because he is the place of the universe, but the universe is not His place.

From Exodus 33:21 “Behold a place with Me” –

See that the Holy Blessed One is the place of the universe, but the universe is not His place”<sup>4</sup>

### **Zohar 1:148b**

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### **Kedushat Levi**

Regarding this it writes “And Yaakov went out from Be’er Sheva”, meaning that he left from that place of gazing on the Highest Unification, from which springs the overflow to all the worlds via all the Seven Attributes known as Be’er Sheva, “and he went toward Charan” – and looked at that Anger that would pass over the Assemblage of Israel, and he experienced great suffering when he felt the great suffering which his descendants would experience in Exile, and that they would have a Descent, Heaven forbid. This is the meaning of “vayifga bamakom”, meaning that in addition to the suffering of his descendants, he felt and was touched by the suffering of the Makom (as if He could suffer), the Place of the Universe, for whom all their suffering causes Suffering, and Yaakov was greatly concerned for the Suffering of the Shekhinah (as if She could suffer)

### **Toldot Yaakov Yosef**

...as Rambam writes regarding individuals, so it is with the world as a whole, that if the people of Form engage intensely in Torah and Service, via the support and assistance of the people of Matter, both of them endure, the matter and the form, but if there is no support and assistance for the learners of Torah, then both of them are given over to the damage-encounters of the time, as the Zohar writes regarding “and he touched the hollow of his thigh” – therefore it is proper to subordinate the matter to form both in general and individually as per above.

Through this the verse ““And Yaakov went out from Be’er Sheva and went (*vayelekh*) toward Charan” can be understood. For we wrote elsewhere the explanation of Rambam’s Mishneh Commentary that via one mitzvah, when done with great joy etc. Now via our intuition to perform the act of prayer with great joy, in a loud voice, with hands conveying the sound of joy, via this the hands too are taken from Esav and given to Yaakov. This is what is meant by “the voice is the voice of Yaakov, and the hands”, meaning also the hands etc. Understand this. So when Yaakov separated from the service and cleaving-to Hashem the Blessed that is called Be’er Sheva, “*vayelekh charanah* = he went toward Anger” - – this separation is called “*halikhah*”, as he was going and distancing himself from the Face of Hashem the Blessed, as in Genesis 25:32 “behold I am going toward death”. This is the meaning of “*vayifga bamakom*”, for all the damage-encounters of the Attribute of Justice are in that *makom*...

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<sup>4</sup> The derivation is not clear to me – suggestions, especially for alternate translations of the preposition, are welcome