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HOW SHOULD ONE RELATE TO MODES OF TORAH INTERPRETATION THAT ONE DOES NOT BELIEVE IN?

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

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 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".

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 Akedah, 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 (although for Talmud Berakhot 28 it seems to refer to a separate act of prayer) – 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 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 – B'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.

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.

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