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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

WHO TOLD AVRAHAM THAT LOT HAD BEEN TAKEN?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Reading a text well requires balancing (at least) two fundamentally incompatible sensibilities. The first is the ability to notice and find meaning in subtle semantic and syntactic choices and differences. The second is the ability to ignore even unsubtle semantic and syntactic choices and differences as meaningless.

There is no formula for determining which sensibility to apply to which choices and differences.

Here are two illustrations from this week's parshah.

I

Genesis 12:11-12 read(s):

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר הִקְרִיב לְבֹאֵי מִצְרָיִם
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו שְׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ

הַגֵּרָגָא וְלִדְעֵי כִּי אִשְׁתּוֹ יִפְתֹּחַ מִרְאָה אֵת: וְהָיָה כִּי-יִרְאוּ אֹתוֹ הַמִּצְרִיִּים וְאָמְרוּ
אִשְׁתּוֹ גֵּאָת וְהָרְגוּ אֹתָי וְאֵתְךָ יִשְׁתָּו:

When he neared Mitzrayim, he said to Sarai his wife:

Hinei na yadati that you are a beautiful woman / so when the Mitzrim see you and say "This is his wife", they will kill me and preserve you alive.

The above translation deliberately reads the two verses as a continuous sentence.

That way, the whole section can be read as Avram saying that he **has always been aware** that Sarai is beautiful, but her beauty has a new consequence, namely that the Mitzrim will kill him in order to possess her. If one considers the verse-break meaningful, however, one is pushed to say that Avram has **just become aware** that Sarai is beautiful. The issue of whether to treat the verse-break as meaningful thus radically affects our whole understanding of our foreparents' relationship.

Moreover, our general attitude toward verse-breaks is just one of many literary details that might lead us to adopt one of these readings over the other. We might for example debate whether the word *hinei* necessarily implies a new discovery, or conversely, whether *yadati* implies prior knowledge; or what the word *na* adds here or anywhere.

I must also acknowledge that local semantic and syntactic details are often only one factor in our choice of interpretations. In this case, we might also debate whether the foreparents' relationship should be read as a primary source for contemporary Jewish marital ideals – "be like Avram and Sarai" - or rather whether we ought to read that relationship through the lens of what we understand via halakhah or via the weight of tradition to

be obligatory Jewish marital ideals – "Sarai and Avram must have been like this". Our position in that debate might depend on our personal aesthetic or axiological reaction to midrashim that show Avram as previously unaware of Sarai's beauty, and Sarai as enabling and encouraging his unawareness via her hyper-modesty.

But I must further acknowledge that none of these positions are necessarily associated with each other. For example, I might argue that the narrative arc is intended to show the development of the relationship. The marital ideal is not the relationship of Avram and Sarai but rather that of Avraham and Sarah, and this episode is critical for the development of the first into the second. That way I could be critical of aspects of the relationship between Avram and Sarai and still argue that their relationship is overall an independent source of moral instruction.

II

Genesis 14:13 reads:

וַיָּבֵא הַפְּלִיט וַיַּגֵּד לְאַבְרָם הָעִבְרִי
וְהוּא שֹׁכֵן בְּאֵלֹנֵי מַמְרֵי הָאֱמֹרִי אֶתִי אֲשַׁכֵּל וְאֶתִי עֲנָר
וְהֵם בְּעֻלֵי בְרִית־אַבְרָם:

The refugee came; he told Avram the Ivri;
he was staying in the Elonim of Mamrei the Amorite, brother of
Eshkol and brother of Aner;
they were covenanted with Avram.

If the verse had read *vayavo palit* = a refugee came, we'd have no difficulty leaving that refugee anonymous. RADAK, Bekhor Shor, and Ibn Ezra (and many others) are comfortable ignoring the definite article. But others contend that THE refugee is a different matter entirely from A refugee.

Rashi cites two traditions that identify the *palit* as Og, later King of Bashan, but for different reasons: the first has him as a refugee from the losing side of the immediately preceding War of the Four Kings against the Five Kings, whereas the second has him as having escaped the Flood by clinging to the Ark.

The contextual advantage of the first approach is obvious. Less obviously, the second approach argues that the definite article must mean that the *palit* was known as such before the immediate context, since there is no evidence that he was the only refugee from the war. But the second approach also has to explain how Og, survivor of the Flood, knew that Lot had been captured! So

most likely Rashi's two approaches should be combined: A refugee came who was already known as THE REFUGEE.

Whether one likes the combinatory approach is probably also very much a question of literary sensibility. Without it, though, how do we identify THE REFUGEE?

Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer (Chapter 27) responds as follows:

בא מיכאל והגיד לאברהם, שנאמר: ויבא הפליט ויגד לאברהם העברי.
מיכאל שרו של עולם הוא מגיד, שנאמר [קהלת י:כ] ובעל כנפים יגיד דבר.
ולמה נקרא שמו פליט?
לפי שבשעה שהפיל הקדוש ברוך הוא את סמאל נכתו שלו ממקום קדושתו, אז
בכנפו של מיכאל להורידו ולתפילו, ופלטו הקדוש ברוך הוא מידו; לפיכך נקרא
שמו פליט.
ועליו אמר יחזקאל: בא אלי הפליט מירושלים לאמר הקתה העיר [יחזקאל
ג:כא].

Michael came and told Avraham, as Scripture says: *The refugee came; he told Avram the Ivri.*

Michael, the officer of the world, was the teller, as Kohelet 10:20 says: “*The master of wings will tell the matter*”.

Why was he called “The Palit”?

Because at the time that G-d brought Samael and his group down from his holy place,

he (Samael) grabbed the wing of Michael to bring him down, but G-d rescued him from him: therefore he was called Palit.

About him Yechezkel said: *The palit came to me from Yerushalayim saying “the city has been struck down”.*

The identification of the angel Michael as THE Palit rests on a story that has very little anchorage in Torah, namely the rebellion and exile of a group of angels. I suspect that the story is mostly familiar to Jews now via Milton's Paradise Lost rather than directly from Jewish sources, but it long predates Christianity. I don't however know the source for the specific narrative of an angel being rescued, or whether that angel was originally Michael.

However, even if we accept the angelic rebellion as a literary fact that a Torah narrative can assume, that does not require the insertion of an angel into our story. The insertion instead seems to be motivated by the appearance of another THE Palit in Yechezkel 33:21 informing the prophet of the destruction of Jerusalem. If we take both THEs seriously, then we have to say that the same Palit appears in these stories centuries apart, which leads us to angels (or giants such as Og).

I suspect that an additional motivation is that the arrival of THE Palit is predicted in Yechezkel 24:26-27, and that 24:27 can easily be read as giving the Palit a role in enabling Yechezkel to prophesy. But I have not yet found anyone arguing this explicitly.

I've tried to show via the above examples that reading Torah well requires noticing everything about the text but not necessarily taking everything one notices as meaningful. I've tried to show as well that there is no fixed method for deciding which things to take as meaningful and which to ignore. In each case, the issue may depend on how one understands other verses,

methodological assumptions about which facts or stories Torah can be read as assuming, theological positions, and more.

That conclusion can be very frustrating, or even disturbing. Alternatively, it can be read simply as a statement that interpretation is an art and not a science (although that statement itself probably makes the unjustified assumptions that we have a shared definition of science and that we agree about the classification of other disciplines.)

Perhaps the most common ambiguity in Torah that must be noticed, and yet perhaps most frequently needs to be disregarded, is the pronoun with multiple antecedents. Let's take

The refugee came; he told Avram the Ivri;
he was staying in the Elonim of Mamrei the Amorite, brother of Eshkol and brother of Aner;
they were covenanted with Avram.

The “he” who told Avram has only one available antecedent, namely the *palit*. However, Biblical Hebrew allows pronouns to have understood, “ghost” antecedents, so that we could translate: “The *palit* came; the teller told Avram the Ivri” and even understand this to mean “The teller told Avram the Ivri that the *palit* had come”.

But leaving that aside, who is “staying in the Elonim of Mamrei the Amorite”? Before today, I had assumed that this referred to Avram. So it was a joy to discover on Al haTorah that a manuscript “Collected from the Sages of France” thought otherwise:

וי"ל והוא שוכן – לא קיא אאברם אלי אפליט. פי הפליט שוכן באלוני ממרא,
וכן נראה, דמה לנו להזכיר אחי אשכל ואחי ענר?
אלא כלומר: אל תתמי על הטובה שעשה הפליט לאברם להגיד כי נשבה אחיו,
שלפי שהיה דר במקום בעלי ברית אברם עשה. (כ"י אוקספורד 271/8)

One can say that “*he was staying*” refers not to Avram but rather to the *palit*, i.e. that the *palit* was staying in the Elonim of Mamrei.

This seems correct, because (otherwise), why is it necessary to say *brother of Eshkol and brother of Aner*?

Rather, it must be saying that we should not be astounded by the good that the *palit* did for Avram by telling him that his relative had been captured; he did it because he was staying in a place whose owners had covenanted with Avram.

To be honest, I don't understand why this reading explains the mention of the brothers. My current sense accordingly is that this is an ambiguity to notice and then discard. But I don't think this means that I would have been better off not noticing it – quite the contrary. And I would more than welcome strong arguments for why my sensibility is wrong in this case.

Shabbat shalom!