

Fundamental Issues in the Study of *Tanakh*
By Rav Amnon Bazak

Dedicated in memory of
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Shiur #4g: Duplication and Contradiction (continued)

G. The roots of the "aspects approach"

While Rav Breuer pioneered the systematic application of the "aspects approach," this approach has much earlier – perhaps even ancient – roots. The most obvious foundation for such an approach would seem to be found in the well-known teaching of *Chazal*, that appears in a number of variations, concerning contradictory verses that were said "as a single utterance" (*be-dibbur echad*):

"*Shav'* and '*shaker*'^[1] emerged as a single utterance, which is impossible for the human mouth to say, or for the ear to perceive; '*Zakhor*' and '*shamor*'^[2] emerged as a single utterance, which is impossible for the human mouth to say, or for the ear to perceive; 'Those who desecrate it shall be put to death' ([Shemot 31:14](#)) and 'Two lambs of the first year, without blemish' ([Bamidbar 28:9](#)) emerged as a single utterance, which is impossible for the human mouth to say, or for the ear to perceive;^[3] 'You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife' ([Vayikra 18:16](#)) and 'Her husband's brother shall go to her' ([Devarim 25:5](#)) emerged as a single utterance ...^[4] And so it is written, 'One thing was said by God' – in speech, 'yet two things have I heard' ([Tehillim 62:12](#)), and it is written, 'Is My word not like a fire, says the Lord; like a hammer that shatters rock' ([Yirmiyahu 23:29](#))." (*Yerushalmi, Nedarim* chapter 3; col. 37d)

This passage draws a clear distinction between God and man: where God is able to utter multiple ideas in a single utterance, to the human mind these statements appear to contradict one another. For our purposes it is important to note that while the Talmud and classical commentators have supplied answers to the contradictions and tensions cited here, the emphasis of our gemara is that the disparities between the verses are to be appreciated in and of themselves without reference to any potential resolution.

A well-known Talmudic text of a similar nature occurs concerning the disputes between the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai, where the *gemara* (*Eirubin* 13b) concludes that "both these and those are the words of the living God." Rabbeinu Peretz bar Eliyahu of Corbeil, one of the most prominent Tosafists of the 13th century, raises a question on this statement that is pertinent to our

own discussion:^[5] how can we conclude that "both these and those are the words of the living God" in questions of material fact? For example, there are differing opinions, based on Biblical sources, concerning the size of the altar in the Temple (see [Zevachim 62a](#)). One opinion states that its size was sixty cubits while the other maintains that it was twenty. Surely the actual size of the altar could accord with only one of the opinions?

Rabbeinu Peretz explains that even in this sort of question, pertaining to material fact, the text offers no decisive ruling. The verses may be interpreted in two different ways, and so long as the method of exegesis is rooted in the text itself, then "both these and those are the words of the living God" – even though it is clear that only one opinion can accord with what was historically the case. Thus, the text does not necessarily describe the physical reality as such but rather offers the possibility of multiple interpretations, which, for the purposes of the *Tanakh's* message, are able to coexist.

If this is so where the question at stake is of a technical nature, such as the size of the altar, then it surely applies to a matter of different perspectives on reality, or different elements of a world-view. The text need not adopt a one-sided position; it may express two truths which, to the human mind, appear contradictory, but nevertheless are both to be considered as "the words of the living God."

Rav Breuer himself^[6] found a basis for his approach in the works of Rabbi Aryeh Leib Ginzburg, author of *Sha'agat Aryeh*, one of the greatest Lithuanian scholars of the 18th century. The Gemara ([Yoma 54a](#)) states that the expression "to this day," which appears many times in *Tanakh*, means up until the time of the writing (and not until the reader's time). In *Sefer Divrei Ha-yamim* we find,

"Some of them, of the children of Shimon, went to Mount Se'ir... and they smote the remnant of Amalek, who had escaped, and they dwelled there to this day."
(*Divrei Ha-yamim* I 4:42-43)

Clearly, this description is not relevant to our own times, for "Sanheriv, king of Assyria, arose and confounded all the nationalities." However, this verse still poses a problem, for according to *Chazal* it was Ezra who composed *Divrei ha-Yamim* ([Bava Batra 15a](#)), long after the time of Sanheriv – so how could even Ezra himself have written about Shimon dwelling in Mount Se'ir "to this day"? Rabbi Aryeh Leib Ginzburg suggests an answer in his *Gevurat Ari* on *Massekhet Yoma*:

"We must conclude that Ezra copied the Chronicles from some books which he found, as I have written. Because in any case the lineage of the generations is not properly ordered; it includes several internal contradictions, and also some between *Divrei Ha-yamim* and the Book of Ezra, for in one book he found such-and-such, and in another book something else, and he copied what he found. It seems most likely to suggest that he found written, in an ancient book that had been written before Sanheriv's upheaval, 'And some of the children of Shimon went...' up until 'And they dwelled there to this day,' and he copied it word for

word, not wishing to introduce any changes [although this was no longer the reality]."

The assertion that *Divrei Ha-yamim* and the Book of Ezra were composed with input from other sources, which Ezra copied verbatim into his books despite the resulting contradictions, is indeed an original and audacious idea. While it seems that even the *Sha'agat Aryeh* himself never contemplated for a moment the possibility of applying this approach concerning the latter Books of *Tanakh*, to the Five Books of the Torah, we do encounter the foundations for such an approach in the writings of two of the greatest Jewish philosophers of the 20th century: Rav Avraham Yitzchak ha-Kohen Kook, and Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik. As we have mentioned in previous *shiurim*, the "aspects approach" in fact rests upon Rav Kook's fundamental approach of seeking out the positive elements even in those views that contradict the Torah and Jewish faith. For him, it is specifically the grappling with such approaches that creates the possibility of deepening our understanding of the Torah:

And in general, this is an important rule in the struggle of ideas: we should not immediately refute any idea which comes to contradict anything in the Torah, but rather we should build the palace of Torah above it; in doing so we are exalted by the Torah, and through this exaltation the ideas are revealed, and thereafter, when we are not pressured by anything, we can confidently also struggle against it.^[7]

More specifically, the conceptual basis of the "aspects approach," too, conforms to Rav Kook's harmonious approach, which views contrasts and contradictions as part of an overarching, all-encompassing unity. This idea appears in many different places in Rav Kook's writings. For example, in *Orot ha-Kodesh*,^[8] he compares different world-views to saplings which must be planted at some distance from one another in order for each to be able to grow and develop fully, expressing all of its unique, individual characteristics. Were the distances between them to be eliminated, the identity and features of each would be less distinct; they would blur into one another. Only out of this distance and sharp contrast are we able to appreciate the connections between the separate parts, so that eventually true unity can arise.

Thus, Rav Kook also laid the foundations for the approach which views contradictions in the biblical text, too, not as problems that require solutions, but as part of an overall harmony and a more complete truth. At the end of a discussion on the nature of prophecy and its relationship to science he concludes:

".... Reality is not afraid of contradictions as science is, for it is inestimably greater than science."^[9]

Rav Soloveitchik took this a step further, and explained some of the contradictions between Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 of *Bereishit*^[10] in a manner similar to the "aspects approach":

"We all know that the Bible offers two accounts of the creation of man. We are also aware of the theory suggested by Bible critics attributing these two accounts to two different traditions and sources. Of course, since we do unreservedly accept the unity and integrity of the Scriptures and their divine character, we reject this hypothesis which is based, like much Biblical criticism, on literary categories invented by modern man, ignoring completely the eidetic-noetic content of the Biblical story. It is, of course, true that the two accounts of the creation of man differ considerably. This incongruity was not discovered by the Bible critics. Our sages of old were aware of it. However, the answer lies not in an alleged dual tradition but in dual man, not in an imaginary contradiction between two versions but in a real contradiction in the nature of man. The two accounts deal with two Adams, two men, two fathers of mankind, two types, two representatives of humanity, and it is no wonder that they are not identical."^[1]

Thus, although Rav Breuer was the first to apply his method in a consistent and specific manner, the roots of his approach are firmly rooted in generations of Jewish philosophy.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

^[1] This refers to the discrepancy in the 9th of the Ten Commandments, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor": in [Shemot 20:12](#) the expression for "false witness" is "*ed shaker*"; in [Devarim 5:16](#) we find "*ed shav*."

^[2] The 4th of the Ten Commandments in *Shemot* is introduced by the words "*Zakhor et yom ha-shabbat*" – Remember the Shabbat day; in *Devarim* we find, "*Shamor et yom ha-shabbat*" – Observe the Shabbat day.

^[3] Likewise in reference to Shabbat. Strictly speaking, this is not a contradiction, since it is possible for God to prohibit labor on Shabbat while at the same time commanding the offering of sacrifices on Shabbat.

^[4] Here again, this is not a clear contradiction, since the Torah does not state explicitly that one may not marry the wife of a brother who has died. The other examples which *Chazal* go on to cite, omitted here, are of a similar nature.

^[5] For further discussion, see my article in *Shitat ha-Bechinot*, pp. 295-298, and Rav Breuer's response, pp. 299-300.

^[6] See *Shitat ha-Bechinot*, p. 92 onwards.

^[7] *Iggerot ha-RAY" H 1* (Jerusalem 5722), *iggeret* 134 (translation from Tzvi Feldman in *Selected Letters* [Ma'aleh Adumim, 1986], p.14). Rav Breuer himself cites this passage as the heading of his second article on the subject of his exegetical approach; see *Shitat ha-Bechinot*, p. 28. Rav Kook writes a similar idea in other places, such as in *Orot ha-Kodesh* 2, Jerusalem 5724, p. 547: "The very same declarations and paths that lead to the ways of heresy, also lead in their essence – if we seek their source – to the depths of a faith that is more exalted, more illuminating and life-giving,

out of the same simple understanding that shone prior to the appearance of this rift." Concerning the relationship between the story of the Creation and the theory of evolution, Rav Kook wrote: "A comparison between the story of the Creation and recent studies is a noble endeavor. There is no problem with interpreting the biblical account, 'These are the generations of the heavens and the earth' as containing within itself worlds of millions of years, until man arrived at some awareness that he was differentiated from all animals, and that through some sort of vision it appeared to him that he had to establish a family that would be stable and of noble spirit, by choosing a wife, who would be more connected to him than his father and his mother – his natural family members. The deep sleep could be interpreted as visions, and this could also last for some time, until the consolidation of the idea of 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh'..." (*Shemonah Kevatzim*, Jerusalem 5764, *kovetz 1 siman* 594, p. 163).

^[8] *Orot ha-Kodesh* 1, Jerusalem 5723, p. 15. This, too, is cited by Rav Breuer, at the end of a different article: see *Shitat ha-Bechinot*, p. 70. The idea that Rav Kook sets forth here is part of a more comprehensive discussion which he develops over the course of *Orot ha-Kodesh*, especially in part I, chapters 8-13.

^[9] *Iggerot ha-RAY"H* 2, Jerusalem 5722; *iggeret* 478, p. 120. At the same time, Rav Kook was vehemently opposed to the study of biblical criticism: see, for example, *Iggerot ha-RAY"H* 1, *iggeret* 279, p. 317; *Iggerot ha-RAY"H* 2, *iggeret* 363, p. 27.

^[10] On more than one occasion I heard Rav Breuer express his regret that Rav Soloveitchik did not expand his approach beyond the specific aspect noted here. See *Shitat ha-Bechinot*, pp. 188-189.

^[11] *The Lonely Man of Faith* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2012), p. 7. Rav Soloveitchik goes on to develop these two aspects of man, Adam I and Adam II (corresponding to the Torah's description of his creation, in chapter 1 and chapter 2 of *Bereishit*).