

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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**Fundamental Issues in the Study of *Tanakh***  
**By Rav Amnon Bazak**

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This week's shiurim are dedicated in memory of  
Moshe Eliezer Maeir Stillman z"l  
by Isaac Ely Stillman  
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**Shiur #11a: The Sins of Biblical Figures**  
**Part 1 of 4**

**a. Introduction**

The return to the study of the *peshat* – the plain meaning – of the biblical text has raised numerous religious questions, some of which we have addressed in previous shiurim. We now turn our attention to the question of our attitude towards central characters in *Tanakh*.

A plain reading of the text shows that it is difficult to find any flawless figures: the forefathers, Moshe, the kings and the prophets all display human complexity. In many instances they make mistakes and even sin; in some instances they are described as committing major transgressions. We must ask, first, whether the plain text accords with *Chazal's* teachings concerning the greatness of our biblical ancestors, and second, how we are to understand the complex picture of the biblical heroes that emerges from a *peshat*-oriented reading of the text.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the essential question confronting us concerns the conflict between what the plain text tells us and our basic assumptions. Two legitimate, yet conflicting, approaches present themselves in this regard. On the one hand, a reading of the plain text leads to conclusions that are not always in accordance with traditional views that have occupied a central position in Jewish thought over the course of our history, and these conclusions demand certain amendments to

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<sup>1</sup> The contemporary polemic surrounding this question is known in Israel by the misnomer, "*Tanakh be-gova ha-enayim*" (Bible at Eye-Level). This was in fact the title of an article published by Rabbi Shlomo Aviner in the weekly publication *Be-Ahava u-ve-Emuna*, no. 338, 5762, pp. 5-6. Rabbi Yoel bin-Nun responded in an article entitled, "Yes, Tanakh at Eye-Level," published in *Ha-Tzofeh*, 12 Shevat 5762, p. 12. Thus the debate gained a title that does not represent the positive position of either side. Many opinions have been voiced in this debate, some profound and others superficial. My aim in this chapter will be to examine some of the fundamental questions raised by the plain text, without engaging in polemics.

these positions – as has been the case with the other issues we have addressed in previous chapters. On the other hand, when there are preconceived basic assumptions that are regarded as unassailable, the only option is to try to adapt the text to fit these assumptions. This is an inherent source of tension that arises between the text and the reader.<sup>2</sup>

This dilemma is given clear expression in a midrash that explores the meaning of the verse, "Sara saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Avraham, making sport (*metzachek*)" (*Bereishit* 21:9).

What was the nature of the act that she witnessed Yishmael performing? From the context, it seems reasonable to posit that his act was a morally objectionable one, and indeed the midrash starts off by citing the opinions of three different Tannaim, who propose three different interpretations of the root "tz-ch-k" in the sense of sinning, on the basis of appearances of this word in other contexts:

"Rabbi Akiva taught: Sara saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Avraham, '*metzachek*': the '*tzechok*' referred to here is idolatry, as it is written, 'And the people sat down to eat, and they drank and they got up to make sport (*le-tzachek*)' (*Shemot* 32:6)..."

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<sup>2</sup> To illustrate, let us consider two areas in which this sort of phenomenon occurs:

a. In the case of the medium consulted by Shaul (*Shmuel* I 28), there is no question that the plain text indicates that the medium did indeed succeed in raising up Shmuel, and Shmuel prophesies what will happen in battle. However, some of the Geonim refused to accept this, and their views are cited in Radak's summary of this chapter: "There is some debate among the Geonim on this matter: they all agree that the act of raising up spirits is vanity, emptiness, and misleading falsehood, but some say that Shmuel did not speak to Shaul; that Shmuel did not, heaven forefend, ascend from his grave, nor did he speak; rather, the woman performed the entire procedure deceitfully, for she recognized Shaul immediately, and in order to give him the impression that she recognized this through her supernatural wisdom, she said, 'Why have you deceived me? For you are Shaul...'" (The continuation of the commentary on that chapter continues the same line of interpretation.) The basic assumption that Shmuel could not have risen from the grave led the Geonim to interpret the chapter in a way that does not accord with the plain reading, maintaining that their rather forced interpretation is ideologically inescapable.

b. There are numerous instances where the text records that a prophet is required to perform a symbolic act – sometimes quite extreme and morally questionable – in order to illustrate and reinforce his message. The Rambam maintains that these symbolic acts were perceived as being carried out as part of the prophetic vision, but were not performed in reality. Thus, for example, he explains the command to Yechezkel that he shave all the hair of his head and his beard (*Yechezkel* 5:1): "And likewise the command, 'and cause it to pass over your head and upon your beard': it was in a prophetic vision that he saw himself performing all these actions which he was commanded to do. The great God would not cause His prophets to become the object of ridicule and sport in the eyes of the ignorant, by commanding them to perform foolish acts. In addition, this command would entail transgression, for Yechezkel was a Kohen, and would thus have transgressed two prohibitions concerning the corners of his beard or the corners of his head. Rather, all of this took place only in his prophetic vision." (*Guide of the Perplexed* II:46).

Rabbi Eliezer, son of R. Yossi ha-Gelili taught: The 'tzechok' referred to here is sexual immorality, as it is written, [Potifar's wife complains about Yosef:] 'The Hebrew slave [whom you brought to us] came to me [to make sport – *le-tzachek* – with me]' (*Bereishit* 39:17).

Rabbi Yishmael taught: 'Tzechok' refers to bloodshed, as it is written, "Avner said to Yoav: Let the young men arise and make sport (*ve-yitzachaku*)<sup>3</sup> before us... Each man caught each his fellow by the head, and thrust his sword in his fellow's side, so they fell down together' (*Shmuel* II 2:14-16)..." (Tosefta *Sota* 6:6, Lieberman edition pp. 185-186)

However, these opinions are followed in the midrash by the opinion of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai:

"But I say, **heaven forefend that such actions would be carried out in the household of that righteous man.** Is it possible that the man concerning whom we read, 'For I know him, that he will command [his children and his household after him to do righteousness and justice]' (*Bereishit* 18:19), would have idolatry, sexual immorality, or bloodshed committed within his household? [Surely not.] Rather, the 'tzechok' referred to here concerns the matter of inheritance: When Yitzchak was born to Avraham, everyone was joyful and said, 'A son has been born to Avraham' – a son has been born to Avraham who will inherit the world and take both portions. Yishamel scorned this (*metzachek*) in his thoughts, saying, 'Do not be fools, do not be fools! I am the firstborn, and I shall take both portions!' For it is from this response that we understand [the continuation of the description concerning Sara] – 'For the son of this handmaid shall not inherit [with my son, with Yitzchak]' (*Bereishit* 21:10)."

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai does not proceed from an etymological analysis of the word *metzachek*. Rather, his point of departure is the basic assumption that a person of the stature of Avraham, concerning whom God Himself testifies that "He will instruct his children and his household after him, that they will keep the way of God, to perform justice and judgment," could not have raised a child who would engage in the most serious of transgressions. For this reason, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai offers an interpretation of the verse that does not accord with the plain meaning; he suggests that Yishmael merely contested the status of the firstborn and the inheritance. While he provides a textual proof from the preceding verse, it seems that the verse in question would not necessarily lead to the conclusion that he adopts, were it not for his starting assumption.

The other opinions in the midrash adopt the opposite path: rather than proceeding from an ideological assumption, they seek instead to understand the meaning of the word *metzachek* from its appearance in various other contexts, and this leads them to conclude that Yishmael was indeed guilty of a major

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<sup>3</sup> The text as we have it reads "*vi-yisachaku*."

transgression. While their interpretations of the nature of the sin may be midrashic in nature, they proceed from the impression gleaned from the plain meaning of the text, that Yishmael's actions were morally wrong. These *Tannaim* do not address Rabbi Shimon b. Yochai's argument directly, but it appears that they do not perceive any contradiction between the fact that Avraham will instruct his progeny in the way of God, and the fact that one of his sons turns out to have deviated from the path in which he was educated.<sup>4</sup>

The debate continues in the midrash concerning Moshe's plea to God:

"The people in whose midst I am are six hundred thousand footmen, and You have said, 'I will give them meat, that they may eat a whole month.' Shall flocks and herds be slain for them, would it suffice for them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, would it suffice for them?" (*Bamidbar* 11:21-22)

According to the plain meaning of the text, Moshe is casting doubt on God's ability to provide meat for such a large population for an entire month. Hence, God's response to him is, "Is God's hand too short? Now you shall see whether My word will come to pass, or not" (verse 23). Rabbi Akiva understood the text in this way, too, but this immediately raises the question of why Moshe was not punished for his words, which seem to be far more problematic than his actions at Mei Meriva, in which he struck the rock and rebuked the people and was in turn barred from entering the land. The midrash answers:

"Rabbi Akiva taught: 'Shall flocks and herds be slain for them, to suffice them'... Which is more serious – this argument, or 'Hear now, you rebels' (*Bamidbar* 20:10)? We must conclude that although this questioning is more severe than [the outburst of anger in] 'Hear now, you rebels,' nevertheless one who causes a desecration of God's Name in private may be treated leniently, but one who does so in public is punished. The instance that occurred in private was overlooked by God."

However, here too Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai disagrees with Rabbi Akiva, and once again his disagreement proceeds from his basic assumption concerning Moshe's character:

"But I say, heaven forefend that this righteous man would even think of saying that God 'cannot provide for all of us and for our livestock.' Could someone concerning whom the text testifies with the words, 'Not so My

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<sup>4</sup> Rashi, in his usual fashion (as we shall see), cites all the different opinions of the *Tannaim*. However, the commentators who adhere to the *peshat* suggest exegetical directions different than those of the *Tannaim*. Ibn Ezra maintains that the text implies no improper action on Yishmael's part: "'*Metzachek*' – for such is the way of all youth. And she [Sara] was zealous [to protect Yitzchak] because he [Yishmael] was older than her son." Others suggest that Yishmael derided Yitzchak in different ways. Ramban suggests that he "scorned Yitzchak, or the great banquet," while Radak proposes that "he scorned Yitzchak for being born of this elderly couple."

servant Moshe...' (*Bamidbar* 12:7) even think of saying that God could not provide for all the people and their livestock? After all, when *Bnei Yisrael* were in Egypt, the Nile River provided sufficient fish for them and for the Egyptians, and the livestock in Egypt were likewise sufficient for them and for the Egyptians. Rather, [Moshe's words] concerned that which is written, 'Not one day shall you eat it...' (*Bamidbar* 11:19), 'but a whole month.' Moshe said to the Holy One, blessed be He: "Master of the universe, is it fair that You give this to them only to then kill them? Does one say to a person, 'Take already, and go down to Sheol?' Does one say to a donkey, 'Take this measure of barley' – and then cut off its head?" ...To which God responded, "Is it then proper that they say, 'God cannot provide enough for us and for our livestock?' Rather, they and thousands like them should die rather than My hand be considered too short even for a short time." As it is written, 'And God said to Moshe, Is God's hand too short?'..."

His assumption is that we cannot suggest that Moshe would voice any doubt as to God's ability to provide food for *Bnei Yisrael* (in both contexts, of Avraham and Moshe, he uses the phrase "heaven forefend"). Hence, he is forced to interpret Moshe's words as a moral argument: "Is it proper to feed them such prodigious quantities and then kill them?" – to which God responds that this is preferable to having it seem to *Bnei Yisrael*, even for the shortest time, that God lacks the ability to provide what they are asking for. This is a rather forced interpretation of the verses, but R. Shimon's basic assumption makes it inescapable if we are to avoid what he considers the unthinkable.<sup>5</sup>

It seems, then, that Rabbi Akiva disagreed with Rabbi Shimon b. Yochai and believed that even a person on the level of Moshe is not immune to questioning and doubt, and the Torah does not hide this. Here, too, the debate among the *Tannaim* concerns not only the relationship between basic assumptions and exegetical possibilities, but also the fundamental question of the extent to which we may attribute to the great characters of the *Tanakh* the sort of human qualities that indicate imperfection.

The two disagreements we have cited here are representative of our dilemma and the different approaches to dealing with it. In general, these two fundamental approaches may be found in almost every such instance in *Tanakh*, along with some intermediate approaches, in keeping with the particular circumstances of each case. In many cases, there are *midrashim* that seek view favorably actions that seem, on the level of *peshat*, to be greater or lesser sins.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Here, too, Rashi cites both sides of the Tannaitic debate without stating his own preference. The other *peshat* commentators (Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Radak) tend to accept R. Akiva's view in terms of understanding the verse, but they do not accept with equanimity the conclusion that Moshe is questioning God's abilities; rather, they explain why in this particular instance there was indeed room for Moshe to wonder. Thus, they mitigate the seriousness of his questioning.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed list of such instances, see A. Margalio, *Ha-Chayavim ba-Mikra ve-Zaka'im ba-Talmud u-va-Midrashim*, London 5709.

At the same time, in many other instances we find the opposite phenomenon: a harsh view of the actions of Biblical characters – even the patriarchs – where the literal text does not seem to imply any wrongdoing.<sup>7</sup>

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed list, see A.Y. Chwat, "*Ha-Zaka'im ba-Mikra ve-Chayavim be-Chazal*," *Talelei Orot* 12, 5766, pp. 13-99. Various explanations are offered for this phenomenon, with a discussion of the educational messages of the *midrashim* that may sometimes come at the price of textual accuracy or even the esteem shown to the forefathers.