

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

**Shiur #11d: The Sins of Biblical Figures
Part 4 of 4**

e. Our approach to understanding sins of biblical characters

We have seen that, since the earliest times, there have been two main approaches to understanding the sins and errors of biblical heroes: one takes the straightforward meaning of the text as its starting point, while the other proceeds from the fundamental assumption that such negative actions cannot be attributed to such great figures. Both views can be found in the commentaries, such that neither may be presented as the decisively and unequivocally accepted approach. Nevertheless, I shall conclude this series with a final observation concerning the *peshat* approach and its significance for our generation.

Reasonably enough, those who study *Tanakh* in accordance with the plain meaning of the text will not suddenly adopt other approaches upon encountering narratives that record transgressions committed even by central, on the whole positive, figures. Someone who believes that God's word must be understood first and foremost in accordance with its plain meaning, as elaborated in the previous chapters, will try to implement this approach in every chapter that he or she encounters, with no preconceived notions. One who seeks to understand the message arising from the text must approach it with great humility, without assuming in advance what should appear there, and without forcing the text to say things that sit more comfortably with his or her personal world-view. Rather, the reader must honor the integrity of the text and mold his or her world-view in light of it. Only in this way is one able to internalize the messages that the text is seeking to convey through its presentation of the story as it appears.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that this approach in no way diminishes the tremendous stature of these biblical figures, since the *peshat* approach views the plain understanding of the text as God's word. The greatness of Avraham, Moshe or David arises not only from Jewish tradition and teachings over the generations, but – first and foremost – from many chapters of the *Tanakh* that explicitly describe God as choosing them or relating to them owing to their unique qualities. For this reason, even where we understand from the text that they erred or transgressed, such incidents cannot be severed from the broader context of their character and stature.

Thus, the *Tanakh* teaches us that even great people make mistakes, succumb to temptation, or commit transgressions; and that the way to deal with sin is through genuine repentance, which may always be accepted. However, we do not start out with this important educational message and then seek support for it in the text; rather, we learn the text and deduce this message from it. *Chazal's* teaching that "If someone is greater than his fellow, then his evil inclination is likewise greater" (*Sukka* 52a) is no empty statement. This message is a central one both in the *midrashim* and in the approach of the commentators over the generations. Biblical characters are complex, and it is difficult to find a single one of them who is described and depicted in a purely positive manner throughout. It is no coincidence that *Chazal* name only four individuals who died without sin¹ – all four of them playing only a very minor role in the narratives of the *Tanakh*.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, one of the greatest commentators in recent generations, expressed this view most eloquently:

"The Torah never presents our great men as being perfect... The Torah never hides from us the faults, errors and weaknesses of our great men. Just by that it gives the stamp of veracity to what it relates. But in truth, by the knowledge which is given us of their faults and weaknesses, our great men are in no wise made lesser but actually greater and more instructive. If they stood before us as the purest models of perfection we should attribute them as having a different nature, which has been denied to us... It may never be our task to whitewash the spiritual and moral heroes of our past, to appear as apologists for them. Truth is the seal of our Torah, and truthfulness is the principle of all its true and great commentators and teachers." (Commentary on *Bereishit* 12:10-13)²

¹ The *beraita* states, "Four died on account of the snake" – in other words, they died on account of the sin of Adam and Chava which introduced death into the world, but they had not sinned and they personally were worthy of eternal life: "And these are they: Binyamin, son of Yaakov; Amram, the father of Moshe; Yishai, the father of David; and Kil'av, son of David" (*Shabbat* 55b). Further on, the Gemara notes that this list is based on a tradition handed down, rather than on biblical evidence (except for the case of Yishai; see the discussion there).

² Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch expresses the same idea in other places in his commentary, such as: "Our Sages, who never objected to drawing attention to the small and great mistakes and weaknesses in the history of our great forefathers, and thereby reflected the greatness of the Torah and upheld its lessons for all generations..." (*Bereishit* 25:27); "We follow the opinion of our sages, and do not consider it our task to be apologists for our great men and women, just as the Word of God, the Torah itself, never refrains from informing us of their errors and weaknesses" (ibid. 27:1). For more about Rav Hirsch's philosophy in this regard, see A. Frisch, "Shitato shel RSh"R Hirsch be-Sugyat Chat'ei ha-Avot," in M. Ahrend and S. Feuerstein (eds.), *Derakhim ba-Mikra u-ve-Hora'ato*, Jerusalem 5757, pp. 181-197.

Similar points have been made by academic scholars of Biblical literature. Eric Auerbach, in his classic essay, "Odysseus' Scar," contrasts the presentation Biblical heroes with those of Greek myth in the following terms:

And how much wider is the pendulum swing of their lives than that of the Homeric heroes! For they are bearers of the divine will, and yet they are fallible, subject to misfortune and humiliation – and in the midst of misfortune and in their humiliation their

Paradoxically, it is precisely the tendency to diminish the significance of the *peshat* in these episodes that plays into the hands of those who do not accept the Divine origin of the *Tanakh*. As we have seen in previous chapters, it is specifically the complexity of the great biblical characters and the awareness that they, too, were not perfect, that conveys a very solid sense of the reliability of the text. This itself is a strong argument against those who question the authenticity of the *Tanakh*. As the midrash teaches:

"Moshe said to the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the universe, any transgression that I have committed – attribute it to me, so that people will not say, 'Moshe appears to have falsified matters in the Torah,' or 'He wrote something that he was not commanded to.'" (*Sifri Devarim, piska 26*, Finkelstein edition p. 36)³

The *Tanakh* is a text that is altogether unusual against the backdrop of ancient literature, insofar as it presents its characters in all their complexity, describing their greatness as well as their shortcomings.

When confronted with stories such as Yehuda and Tamar, the sale of Yosef, Mei Meriva (where Moshe struck the rock), David and Bat-Sheva, Shlomo and his foreign wives, and others, the response of many Biblical critics has been to deny that these episodes can be from the same original source as the narratives which describe the positive attributes of the aforementioned characters. What the religious opponents of the *peshat* approach and the secular Bible critics share in common is an inability to accept that the *Tanakh* could depict its heroes as complex individuals whose greatness exists alongside their fallibility. By contrast with both of these schools, we maintain that acceptance of

acts and words reveal the transcendent majesty of God. There is hardly one of them who does not, like Adam, undergo the deepest humiliation – and hardly one who is not deemed worthy of God's personal intervention and personal inspiration. Humiliation and elevation go far deeper and far higher than in Homer, and they belong basically together. The poor beggar Odysseus is only masquerading, but Adam is really cast down, Jacob really a refugee, Joseph really in the pit and then a slave to be bought and sold. The reader clearly feels how the extent of the pendulum's swing is connected with the intensity of the personal history – precisely the most extreme circumstances, in which we are immeasurably forsaken and in despair, or immeasurably joyous and exalted, give us, if we survive them, a personal stamp which is recognized as the product of a rich existence, a rich development. (Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Princeton, 1973)

³ A similar idea appears in a different midrash:

"A Roman matron asked R. Yossi: Is it possible that Yosef, at the age of 17, at the height of physical maturity, would have acted in this way?
R. Yossi brought out the Book of *Bereishit* and began to read the stories of Reuven and Yehuda. He said to her, If with regard to these two, who were older than him and were in their father's house, the text makes no effort to cover up their deeds, then concerning Yosef, who was younger than they and was all alone – how much more credence is thereby bestowed on this account." (*Bereishit Rabba parasha 87,10*, Theodor-Albeck edition pp. 1070-1071)

the mistakes of Biblical characters is a more intellectually honest and less reductive approach to the text. But it is also far more than that. It is a more religiously enriching message, for it accepts human complexity in the lives of Biblical heroes, and maintains the integrity and unity of the Biblical text.

Translated by Kaeren Fish