

IMITATE THE RAMBAN, NOT THE PROFESSORS

Interview with Rabbi Shalom Carmy

by Asher Friedman
Hamevaser 2000

Asher Friedman:

Our growing sensitivity to psychological and moral complexities gives us great tools for analyzing narratives in Tanakh. Yet often those who attempt such analysis end up turning our Avot and Immahot into pop-psychology case studies. How should we provide psychological depth to our understanding of Tanakh without falling prey to these dangers?

Shalom Carmy:

Are we modern people, or modern Orthodox Jews, really more sensitive to psychological and moral complexities? We definitely talk about them a lot. Yet explosion of verbiage, like monetary inflation, does not inevitably make one spiritually richer; it may simply cheapen the currency. One reason that people shrink the larger than life personalities of Tanakh to pop-psychology size is that they are accustomed to treat themselves the same way. What characterizes pop-psychology? Casual deterministic assumptions, clichéd depictions of emotion, a philosophy that cannot grasp the dramatic, absolute, momentous solemnity of the moral-religious life. This is not the way I think of myself; it is not the way I think of you. It is not the way one should think about any human being created uniquely in the image of God. Once people see nothing wrong in entertaining secular conceptions of

themselves, once they take for moral and psychological insight the tired idiom of the therapeutic, it's no wonder that they are tone-deaf to the grandeur of the Avot and Immahot.

How can we retrieve an appropriate reverence for the Avot and, in the process, enhance our own stature as spiritual beings? One crucial step is to take responsibility for our language. Rather than accept our language and habits of thought off the rack, so to speak, we must struggle to create the authentic words adequate to the depths and sublimity and uniqueness of our experience. The outbursts against modern culture indulged in so many *mussar schmuzen*, and then laid aside until the next occasion, will not suffice. It requires a perpetual effort "to get the better of words," to say what we really feel and get a grip on what we want to feel. As you know, I value the study of literature and philosophy to a large degree because they help to emancipate us from the tyranny of shallow, received ideas.

Of course, the struggle to achieve honest religious self-expression and self-understanding must permeate our Torah study as well. We must internalize the modes of thought and expression of our role models, not merely learn to parrot their opinions. The pop-psychologists have culled a

handful of inert positions from the Rishonim and Aharonim which they exhibit as precedents. Again we hear about Ramban imputing *het* (sin) to Abraham and Sarah. But to be a talmid of Ramban, to walk in his footsteps, means placing these rare statements in the context of Ramban's awe when he discusses the patriarchs. It means studying the Ramban, his straightforward assertions and hints, his broad strokes and nuances, until we have made them our own. Is this how the pop-psychologists read Hazal and Rashi and Ramban? If they did they would gag on their own jargon, not only in interpreting the Avot, but in addressing their own lives as well.

Let me illustrate. Hazal maintain that Adam and Eve lived together as man and wife before the sin. This is stated with exemplary *tsniut* (modesty): “They went up [to bed] two, and came down four [with Cain and Abel].” Milton tried to depict such a scene. He was faced with an obvious problem. Describe the sex act as it is perceived by fallen man, and he is being false to the prelapsarian innocence; remove the elements of modesty about nakedness appropriate to sexual knowledge as we experience it, and their behavior strikes the reader as shameless. If Milton's bold attempt to imagine a mentality radically different from ours was a failure, it was a noble and solemn failure. A contemporary treatment of the question may emulate the taciturnity of the Gemara or the ambition of Milton, but at the very least it must be grounded in the seriousness about the human condition and language that is common to both.

AF:

You have criticized the approach to parshanut that centers on apologetic explanation of halakhically questionable acts on the part of heroes

and heroines of Tanakh. Yet this clearly is a concern of Hazal, from Esther to David to Yiftach. Were Hazal accomplishing something different from what contemporary halakhic parshanim are attempting? How should we deal with episodes in which figures we think of as upstanding do not seem to be primarily concerned with Halakha?

SC:

Let's take one case and clarify what is at stake. The Gemara suggests that David didn't commit adultery because Uriah had given Batsheva a conditional get, and that Uriah's inferred disloyalty made his life forfeit and therefore exculpated David from the guilt of his death. Abarbanel questions this, and the text of Tanakh seems to support him. After all, David was punished for taking Batsheva and for killing Uriah. According to Abarbanel, then, and according to the simple phrasing of Tanakh, David was an adulterer; according to Hazal he was not.

Which view is historically correct? If the Gemara is conveying the authentic tradition of Torah she-b'al Peh, then it is literally true, and you have to explain why the pasuk gives a different impression. If Abarbanel is right, then the Gemara, regarding David as a righteous person, is offering the most respectful, least damaging version of the story. It is not my primary interest to decide between these options. My business is to explore the implications of the sources. Why indeed does the Navi imply that David was an adulterer and a murderer, why is he so severely punished for his behavior, if, as Hazal teach, he was halakhically impregnable? The answer is very simple. Legal invulnerability does not exclude moral guilt. In the face of God's condemnation, David's ability to justify himself on narrow halakhic

grounds counts for very little. We, who have so much experience with legalistic politicians and other amoral personages, should understand why Hazal's defense of David does not override *peshuto shel mikra*.

In a word, a proper appreciation of Hazal should not lead us to substitute Aggadic constructions for the Biblical text. To the contrary, we must learn to read midrash and peshat as complementary sources, interrelating in a variety of ways, as is suitable in each case, both contributing to the complex truth of Torah.

AF:

Is it legitimate to approach the text of Tanakh unfettered by the layers of parshanut that have accrued over the past two thousand years, or must our reading always be a response to what has been said before?

SC:

It is neither possible nor desirable to approach Tanakh in a vacuum. As Professor Kugel argues, there is no such thing as "the Bible as it was." More precisely, the text of Tanakh was always incomplete in itself. Forever it confronts us, trailing clouds of tradition and exegesis. Of course, we immerse ourselves in parshanut not only because we can't escape it. We see the encounter with the teaching of previous generations as something valuable in itself. We glory in the opportunity to sit around the same table where our masters and role models are arrayed, inviting us into their world, awaiting our questions.

At the same time it is neither possible nor desirable to substitute the analysis of parshanut for the study of Tanakh, as is often done in our circles. To begin with, there are countless gaps in the exegetical literature. How many

significant passages are only sparsely commented on by our predecessors, most conspicuously in Nakh, but even in Humash? How far can we get, if we limit ourselves to mechanical dissection, however sophisticated, of their work?

Furthermore, even where the exegesis is thick on the ground, each generation has its own questions. Sometimes we benefit from new data about the historical and linguistic background of Tanakh. What truth-seeking person would close his, or her, eyes to a newly discovered inscription clarifying the geography or vocabulary of a pasuk that baffled the Rishonim? The Ramban's delight when, upon his arrival in Eretz Israel, he was able to revise some of his perushim in the light of the realia, should put to shame the kind of piety that disdains such knowledge. Interest in realia should never overshadow the study of devar Hashem; yet I would rather model myself on the Ramban than on the professors of Ramban.

More important, however, are the characteristic questions we bring to our study. We tend to think more topically, which is why our best work is essayistic, rather than verse-by-verse commentary. We are (at least those of us for whom Tanakh is more than the occasion for research on dikduk) not satisfied to treat individual pesukim and passages in isolation from their larger literary and theological context. We are more consistently sensitive to questions of literary structure and imagery. We are, as a rule, more aware of the characteristic tones and emphases of the Biblical books and the manner in which later Jewish thought is both continuous with, and distinct from Tanakh.

The more we attain self-understanding,

the better we are able to derive guidance in these areas, as well, from Hazal and Rishonim and Aharonim. The reason that we are all, to some degree, disciples of Dr. Nechama Leibovitz, is that she demonstrated the relevance of traditional exegesis to our generation's concerns. Indeed, the popularity of certain writers, for instance Ramban, Seforno, Netziv, elements in the thought of R. Hoffmann, R. Kook and maran haRav (R. Soloveitchik) zt"l, derives in part from the regularity with which they respond to our problems. Our dialogue with the meforshim draws crucially on the liveliness of our own set of problems and concerns.

If I may be blunt, substituting the study of parshanut for the study of Tanakh in general will not make us creative disciples of our exemplary predecessors, but only manufacturers of term papers on their work. An exclusive focus on parshanut is often the refuge of the intellectually timid, who would prefer to engage in a limmud Torah that is "safer" and less adventurous. Sometimes it's successful, and promotes a painless enhancement of piety. Sometimes one just ends up

with another academic specialty.

AF:

One of your most endearing qualities is your ability to gain insight into complex theological issues via popular culture, particularly the TV shows of your childhood. Describe your favorite episode of "Police Philosopher."

SC:

First, for the uninitiated: "Police Philosopher" was born the day I spied an ad in a professional journal, seeking a professor of philosophy prepared to teach at a local precinct so that the cops could get college credit without having to be on campus. Wouldn't it be interesting if the professor got involved in police cases? Over the years, the Police Philosopher, his academic pals who hang out at Footnote Charlie's, and his Great Dane (what else?), Begriff the Philosophy Dog, have become as familiar to some of our students as that purple dinosaur what's-his-name.

Which is my favorite episode? The one that can help dramatize and clarify whatever I'm teaching now.