

Parshat Vayishlach

Reuven. Cover-up or P'shat?

This week we shall turn our attention, once again, to Midrash and discuss several Midrashim that relate to the Parsha. If you have been reading these shiurim on a weekly basis, you will have already seen that Midrash is one of my favourite areas of study. But I think that the way I seek to study Midrash frequently departs from the populist "Midrash Says" method of understanding the words of our sages.

What I mean is that I do not perceive the Midrashim simply as fables, legends, or stories that give us extra historical or biographical information in connection to our Bible stories. Midrash, to my mind, is a sophisticated textual technique, a method of serious commentary that picks up on some of the deepest currents within the text, and allows us to focus upon the true depth of the verses at hand.

In this path, I follow the approach proposed by the Rambam in his Commentary to the Mishna. In speaking about the more difficult Midrashic statements of Chazal, he comments:

".. their words have both an outer and an inner meaning, and in all that they said which seems to be an impossibility, their comments were in the form of riddle and parable... The theme of the speech of men of learning consists entirely in matters of the highest import. But they are put in the form of puzzles and similes. And how can we criticise of their literary productions being in the manner of proverb and simile of a lowly and popular kind seeing that the wisest of men did the same in *Ruach Hakodesh*, "by holy inspiration," i.e. Solomon in the book of Proverbs, the Song of Songs and part of Koheleth."

When Midrash puzzles us, we would do well to remember this Rambam, that our wise sages sometimes expressed themselves in a manner that needs decoding. We must interpret Midrash and not always read it simply at face value. It is our task and our duty to seek the "inner meaning" behind the Midrashic words of Chazal. In my experience we will reveal a world of subtlety and sophistication, expressions of poetry and allusion, readings of innuendo and irony. The world of Midrash is complex and rich. Those who see only the surface miss its beauty and wisdom.

This week we shall present a famous Midrash about Reuven, and a "solution" to the Midrash in an attempt to reveal the p'shat behind the d'rash.

REUVEN'S SIN:

The Passuk tells us:

"When Israel dwelt in that land, Reuven went and slept with Bilhah, his father's concubine. Israel heard." (33:32)

The Midrash comments (via Rashi):

"Because he switched around his (father's) bed, the Torah treats him as if he slept with her. And why did he confuse and mix-up his bed? When Rachel died, Yaakov took his bed which was placed most frequently in Rachel's tent rather than the other tents. Yaakov put his bed in Bilhah's tent. Reuven came to protest his mother's insult. He said: If my mother's sister was a rival-wife to my mother, should the maidservant of my mother's sister now become a rival-wife to my mother? – Hence he switched the beds."

According to the Torah text, Reuven "slept" with Bilhah, in other words, there was a sexual act her. According to the Midrash, he simply adjusted his father's sleeping arrangements, obviously an unwelcome intrusion to his father's personal life, but not quite the same degree of sin! What is the truth here? Is the Midrash not making an attempt to whitewash Reuven's severe actions? Why does the Midrash feel a need to distort the truth?

And maybe to emphasise our question, the "headline" for this Midrash as it appears in Gemara Shabbat 55b is: "*If you think that Reuven sinned, you must be mistaken.*" How are we to understand this Rabbinic statement? Clearly Reuven sinned. It is written in the Torah text! How can Chazal absolutely disregard the p'shat?

P'SHAT: SONS, FATHERS AND CONCUBINES.

If Reuven actually did engage in a sexual liason with Bilhah, then what was his motive? Now, possibly we are talking about a love affair between Reuven and Bilhah. However, I believe that from a trans-Tanach perspective, a second possibility comes into focus.

There are many instances in Tanach in which a son attempts to engage in sexual relations with his father's concubine. The two cases that stand out are the story of Avshalom, and the story of Adoniah. In both these stories, there is a political rather than a sexual motive. In both episodes the son sleeping with his father's concubine represents an act of the son taking his father's status as king. By taking the King's wives and engaging in sexual relations with them, the son is assuming his father's position with all its political significance. The son is assuming the throne.

Avshalom staged a rebellion against his father, King David and temporarily deposed him from the throne, exiling him from Jerusalem. Avshalom, interested in making a firm statement about his new status as king, asks his advisors how he might publicise his new role as monarch. They reply:

"Lie with your father's concubines, whom he left to mind the palace; and when all Israel hears that you have dared the wrath of your father, all who support you will be encouraged." (II Samuel 16:21)

Similarly, with Adoniah. Adoniah has already made an attempt to snatch the throne from Shlomo Hamelech. Now Shlomo is appointed King. In a rather devious move, Adoniah asks BatSheva to approach the young king, Solomon, for permission to marry King David's concubine Avishag. Shlomo responds in horror:

"Why request Avishag the Sunnamite for Adoniah? Request the kingship for him!" ... Thereupon King Solomon swore by the Lord: 'So may God do to me and even more, if broaching this matter does not cost Adoniah

his life ... Adoniah shall be put to death this very day!"
(I Melachim 3:21-24)

These proofs are not the only ones. One might also talk about Avner (II Samuel 3:7) and even the case of David's wife Michal (II Samuel 3:13-16.) So where does this lead us? What might we conclude from these episodes? We can summarise it in a single sentence:

In Tanach, a son sleeping with his father's concubine is not an expression of romance; it is a quintessential act of politics. The son is usurping his father's position.

AND NOW TO REUVEN.

On the basis of that which we have gleaned from other references in Tanach, we do understand that what took place between Reuven and Bilhah was not some sordid love affair. The issue at stake is the family leadership and the succession of Yaakov as Patriarch of the family.

Rachel dies. Everyone was fully aware of Rachel's special status in Yaakov's eyes. They all knew that she was his first love, his true love.

But now Rachel is dead.

This is not the only important occurrence that takes place at this moment. Concurrent with Rachel's death is the birth of his twelfth and final son. Now we don't quite know whether Yaakov and his wives knew that they were aiming for a family of twelve boys, but we do know in retrospect that now the clan is complete¹.

So the family unit is complete, and now, naturally, the question is raised as to the leadership of the next generation. While Rachel was alive, the Leah children felt suppressed, marginalised. But now, with Rachel's death, it is time for the Leah clan to claim their rightful place in the family. Reuven – firstborn of Leah - by sleeping with Bilhah is expressing in the most explicit way that he intends to succeed his father as the family leader. He wanted to express the fact that the children of Leah were the natural continuation of Yaakov, and not Rachel.

BACK TO THE MIDRASH.

So our Midrash discusses the question of switching the beds. First, where does the text allude to this? I think that there is textual basis for this approach. See Bereshit 49:4 and Divrei Hayamim I 5:2. There, the phrase used is that Reuven desecrated his father's "yetzuei." Now, how is that phrase correctly translated? Rashi brings references that connect this phrase with the notion of a bed or bedding. Now if Reuven had committed a sexual crime, the Torah has very explicit terminology to describe such an act. The Torah is not shy about these things. Instead, Yehuda is described as "defiling his father's bed." Why the stress upon the bed itself if the sin were more serious?

¹ Rashi throughout ch.31 assumes that there was foreknowledge regarding the twelve sons of Yaakov. Interestingly, with Yishmael "twelve princes" are predicted (see 17:20) and Nahor also has 12 progeny (see end of ch.22.) Was Yaakov aware that he was destined to have a family of twelve sons?

MOTIVATION

But even without this particular hitch, let us look back at the Midrash. Reuven moves Yaakov's bed to Leah's tent removing it from Bilhah's tent. Why does he do it? What is his motivation in interfering with Yaakov's bed? The Midrash talks about the insult to his mother. But it isn't just his mother who suffers insult. After all Rachel and Leah are the sisters, the wives. The other two "wives" are of a lower stature. If Yaakov prefers Bilhah - Rachel's maid - to Leah, then Yaakov is saying absolutely and unequivocally that he allies himself exclusively with the Rachel side of the family. This impacts not only Leah. It impacts her sons. Are they going to stand back and be sidelined? Is Reuven, the firstborn, going to forego his leading role in the family and simply allow Rachel's children to lead the family?

If Reuven moves Jacob's bed into Leah's tent, then he is sending Yaakov a message that he wishes to be taken seriously, that Yaakov must take his mother seriously. The Leah children demand to be given their rightful share, that Reuven as firstborn is demanding his stake in the family leadership.

Moving the bed away from Rachel towards Leah is a political act.

And now, do the p'shat and d'rash stand so far apart? Are they so opposed to one another? I think not! They seem pretty close, don't you think?

Have a Shabbat Shalom

CHAVRUTA STUDY

I would not like to leave you without a few questions to investigate over Shabbat. Let me add that these questions should be good to discuss at the Shabbat table; they sound simple but the answers are somewhat elusive! You will need to work on these.

1. Yaakov approaches Esav

What did Yaakov seek to achieve with his approach to Esav?

"And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother unto the land of Seir, the field of Edom. 5 And he commanded them, saying: 'Thus shall ye say unto my lord Esau: Thus saith thy servant Jacob: I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now. 6 And I have oxen, and asses and flocks, and men-servants and maid-servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favour in thy sight.'" (32:4-6)

- Why did he stress his material wealth?
- Why bother informing Esav of his arrival? Just stay quiet! See the opening Ramban (reflecting several of the Midrashim in Bereshit Rabba) who suggests that Yaakov's approach to Esav was like "taunting a wild dog." Yaakov should never have made any approach to Esav. As the proverb goes: "let sleeping dogs lie."
- So what effect was Yaakov trying to achieve with this message to Esav?

2. Halving the Camp

We all know the story. Yaakov prepares for his encounter with Esav by means of "Prayer, war preparations, and gifts." (see Rashi 32:9)

And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying: 'We came to thy brother Esau, and moreover he cometh to

meet thee, and four hundred men with him.' 8 Then Jacob was greatly afraid and was distressed. **And he divided the people that was with him**, and the flocks, and the herds, and the camels, into **two camps**. 9 And he said: 'If Esau come to the one camp, and smite it, then the camp which is left shall escape.' (32:7-9)

- How does this "splitting" or "halving" the people help Yaakov? He says that if one camp is killed, then the other will escape. But, how does Yaakov know in which camp to place himself? How is he sure that he will be in the camp that will get away? And what is to say that Esav will not hunt down the second camp?
- Interestingly, the Rashbam suggests (see 32:23) that when Yaakov gets up in the middle of the night and crosses his family over the river, he is escaping to avoid a confrontation with Esav. Is this the "two camp" thing? Yaakov leaves everyone else in the camp, and runs off with his family!
- And then the mysterious angel fights with him all night. He emerges bruised and limping in the morning and is immediately confronted unawares by Esav:

"And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, Esau came, and with him four hundred men. **And he divided** the children unto Leah, and unto Rachel, and unto the two handmaids. (33:1)"

This seems like an attempt to follow the original plan of "splitting the camp." But what effect does it have here?

- One further point here regarding the splitting into "two camps." This, it would appear, is a bad thing... only because of the impending attack does Yaakov have to divide his camp into two. And yet, in his prayer (32:11) Yaakov expresses God's extensive kindness –chesed – in that "now I have become two camps," as if it were a good thing! Two camps – good or bad?