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HOW TO READ LIKE CHAZAL: THE FIVE PILLARS OF PEIRUSH AND THE MISHKAN

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Did Chazal have a reading methodology?

In a LookJed exchange with Dr. Avie Walfish some time ago, I argued that “we would be well-served by developing a mode of teaching for the next generation that focuses on reclaiming the methodologies of Chazal”, rather than teaching them to read like a particular understanding of a particular subset of rishonim. If the answer to my question above is “no”, my argument is stillborn. This is the objection that several great contemporary Tanakh teachers/scholars have raised in response to my contention. There is a sense in which that response strengthens my argument, in that it reflects our failure to teach even our best and brightest that Chazal did more than brilliantly but randomly impose their feelings, beliefs, and admonitions on the text.

Now there is a sense in which their response is likely true. The term “Chazal” encompasses at least hundreds of sages, who lived over a period of at least 500 years and in a diverse array of geographic and cultural contexts, and who were educated by schools and teachers who often saw each other as ideological opponents. Rabbinic literature itself records fundamental methodological disagreements, such as whether or not the Divine Torah’s linguistic efficiency is subject to the constraints of idiom (דברה תורה בלשון בני אדם) as well as those of grammar. So to claim that Chazal had a single method of interpretation would certainly be overbroad.

On the other hand – schools of interpretation are often recognizable in retrospect, and the recording of occasional methodological disagreements itself suggests a common core. For example, the dispute about idiom seems to arise out of the common belief that Torah is written with maximal efficiency. It is not unusual for a culture to record primarily disputes, and leave little formal record of consensus or common knowledge. The problem then is how to recover that culture when the consensus has dissipated and the knowledge evaporated. There is grave danger that the incidental will be mistaken for the central in any such project of intellectual archaeology. This has likely happened with regard to “No Scripture leaves the boundary of its peshat” (אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו), leaving aside the question of whether that statement has been properly understood (I discuss the statement at

<http://www.torahleadership.org/categories/rashbamvayeshev20.pdf>).

Here are what I preliminarily propose as the “Five Pillars of Peirush”, principles that may reasonably characterize the exercise of reading like Chazal did:

- A. Bias toward meaningfulness
- B. Risk-taking
- C. Literary context
- D. Cultural context
- E. Mythological sensibility

I will briefly explain what I mean by each, and then try to provide an illustration via Parashat VaYakhel.

A) Bias toward meaningfulness

If there are two ways of understanding an element of a text, whether a single word, a structure, or an entire narrative, one should choose, or at least fully explore, the interpretation that gives the element greater significance.

B) Risk-taking

Interpretation is an abstraction, a web of meaning that can comport with but never be demonstrated by data. As in science – that a theory fits with the known facts may reflect its truth, or else the theorists’ failure of imagination (perhaps another theory fits even better); and in any case the theory may be proven wrong, or less compelling, as previously unknown facts emerge. Recognizing that proof is generally a chimera, it is worth making suggestions that explain one thing well even if, looking at the evidence overall, they are highly speculative.

C) Literary context

a. Every word of Tanakh refers to every other use of the same word in Tanakh. This is parallel to, but not the same as, the deconstructionist insight that the meaning of a word in conventional language is constructed for each reader out of every previous meaning the word has had for that reader.
b. Every incident in Tanakh is presumed to happen within the same universe. Characters who live at the same time can therefore interact even if they are not explicitly mentioned in each other’s stories, and anonymous characters in one story can be identified with named characters from another.

D) Cultural context

Tanakh does not construct a self-sufficient universe de novo; instead, it records a perspective on a universe known to readers from elsewhere. Think of a history of the Vietnam War written for veterans of that war. It is therefore legitimate to see a verse as referring to an incident known to us only via oral tradition.

E) Mythic sensibility

I use the term “mythic” with trepidation, as it can be misunderstood in two ways. To be as clear as I can – “mythic” in no way implies fiction. Furthermore, I do not mean to reject the argument that much of Tanakh is intended to demythify the natural world. What I mean by “mythic sensibility” is that one sees history as either a recurring pattern or else as the playing out of a cosmic plan, or both, and understands specific events in light of that sensibility. Ramban’s concept of *מעשה אבות סימן לבנים* is a fine example.

Now on to Vayakhel:

VaYakhel opens by reporting that Mosheh congregated (transitive) that entire *edab* of the Children of Israel. He begins by announcing

אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְקֹוֹק לַעֲשׂוֹת אִתְּכֶם
שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲשֶׂה מְלָאכָה
וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי יִהְיֶה לָכֶם קֹדֶשׁ שַׁבַּת שַׁבְּתוֹן לַיְקֹוֹק
כָּל הָעֹשֶׂה בּוֹ מְלָאכָה יוּמָת
לֹא תַבְעֵרוּ אִשׁ בְּכָל מַשְׁבְּתֵיכֶם בַּיּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת

There are the things which Hashem has commanded, to do them.

Six days melakhah will be done

But on the seventh day, it will be for you holy, a Shabbat Shabbaton to Hashem,

Everyone who does melakhah in it must die.

You must not kindle a fire in all your dwellings on the day of Shabbat.

We are then told again that Mosheh spoke to “the entire *edab*” of Bnei Yisroel. This time he commands them to bring *terumah* for the construction of the Mishkan, and to construct the Mishkan and its accessories.

The *entire edab* of Bnei Yisroel then leave Mosheh’s presence.

Any sensitive reader must ask why Mosheh feels compelled at this point to assemble the entire community. A Rabbinic reader might ask in addition whether Mosheh did so on his own authority, or rather on Divine instruction, and would explore (but not commit to) the position that Mosheh did so on his own even if there was no evidence for preferring that option.

Any sensitive reader must further ask *inter alia*

- why Mosheh begins with instructions about Shabbat, when the topic du jour is clearly the mishkan
- why there is a paragraph break between the Shabbat and Mishkan instructions
- at what point in the overall Exodus narrative the assembly takes place.

The answer to the first two questions, *laaniyut da’ati*, is that instructions about Shabbat are also the topic of the last paragraph Hashem tells Mosheh to say to bnei Yisroel before He gives him the first Tablets (31:12-18); in other words, Mosheh now does what he was supposed to do then, *as if the Golden Calf had never happened*.

At the same time, the very word *vayakhel* recalls the Golden Calf episode, which began as follows:

וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי בָשַׁשׁ מֹשֶׁה לְרִדֹּת מִן הָהָר וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל אֶהָרָן
The people saw that Mosheh as delaying to descend from the mountain, vayikahel the people on Aharon.

(Note that the Golden Calf episode is framed by the people’s sightings: it ends with them seeing that Mosheh’s face is illuminated).

Perhaps Mosheh is *mak’bil* the people to demonstrate that the Golden Calf episode was not the fault of the people, but rather of weak leaders, who allowed them to assemble as a mob with no positive purpose.

Be that as it may, we must now ask perhaps more difficult questions: Why was Shabbat the last topic Hashem covered with Mosheh before giving him the *luchot*? And why are Shabbat and mishkan connected?

We can answer both questions with one presumption – Mosheh was originally intended to build the Mishkan as soon as he came down from Sinai (among other reasons, so that the *luchot* would have a storage place.) This was derailed by the Golden Calf.

From a Halakchic perspective, the question is: Is the juxtaposition of Shabbat and Mishkan intended to teach us that Shabbat suspends the Mishkan, or rather that the rules of Shabbat are suspended with regard to the Mishkan?

The rabbis end up saying that the Shabbat overrides the *construction* of the Mishkan, but that the *activity* of the Mishkan supersedes Shabbat. What justifies this apparent paradox?

My suggestion is that the Rabbis understood that the Mishkan had changed its nature as the result of the Sin of the Golden Calf. It had been intended to be a symbol that the first Sin was undone, that humanity was back in Eden. Instead, it became a symbol that we had sinned – an atonement, with cherubs at its heart guarding the route back to Eden.

Now the Rabbis understood as well that the Mishkan symbolized the world – there are linguistic markers of this throughout, of which the most prominent are the constant use of *melakhah* and *ויכל משה*. They knew as well that the world is created twice in Bereshit, once (1:1-2:3) without sin and once (2:4 – 3:24) with. It therefore seemed reasonable that the Mishkan as originally commanded – before the Calf – symbolized the world *as it is presented in the first Creation narrative*, whereas the Mishkan after the Calf also symbolizes the world *as it is presented in the second Creation narrative*.

The first Creation narrative ends with Shabbat. It follows that the construction of the Mishkan – which was commanded before the Calf - must not take place on Shabbat, lest in the very building of our symbol we deny the Creation it symbolizes. But in the second narrative, Shabbat is never reached. It follows that the work of the Mishkan – the work of repairing humanity so that the world can reach Shabbat – must never cease.

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