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THE “NEW SCHOOL” OF BIBLE STUDY: AN EXCHANGE

R. Blau:

R. Yaakov Beasley's review essay, “Return of the *Pashtanim*” (*Tradition* 42:1, Spring 2009) champions the rise of the so called “new school” of *parshanut* over, what is presented as, the rather backwards “old school.” This description itself deserves a more critical, closer reading. Certainly the more recent embracing of literary methods such as *milla ha-manha*, inclusio, parallelism, etc. have added many important new facets to the discussion of *parshanut* and should be viewed as a welcome addition. (More theologically troubling methods, such as *behinot*, are a separate discussion, as R. Beasley himself indicates regarding Dead Sea Scroll variants.) However, I believe that these methods are best served as the “icing on the cake” to the “main dish” of the classic *pashtanim*. All too often though, subscribers to the “new school” reverse the order, often not bothering with the *pashtanim* at all.

The review opens with a contrast of how Tanakh study has evolved, while gemara study remains almost identical to the methodology of 50 years ago. R. Beasley presents the “old school” of Tanakh study as a rote listing of the opinions of various *Rishonim* with no analysis whatsoever. This “straw man,” of course, looks foolish compared to the sophisticated literary methods of the “new school.” However, a chasm divides those two extremes. As R. Beasley himself points out, the *Rishonim* used a sophisticated methodology and I would argue that studying them in a similarly sophisticated way could, by itself, serve as a fruitful endeavor for someone searching for *peshuto shel mikra*. Moreover, the same way both the “old” and “new” approaches to gemara presuppose a serious reading of the *Rishonim* (as R. Beasley describes it), the study of Tanakh deserves no less.

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Let me give an example to illustrate the *Rishonim* adding a layer of complexity to *peshuto shel mikra*: the debate between Ibn Ezra and Ramban as to when the Korah insurrection happened. Ibn Ezra's approach—that the story is out of chronological order—touches on a fundamental structural question of whether or not the Torah is in chronological or conceptual order. Ramban's response—that Korah waited for the right moment to rebel—relates to both that fundamental structural issue and a deep psychological understanding of human nature. Neither approach includes a hint of midrash. I believe that the *Rishonim* are replete with rich discussions of this sort.

Moreover, the *bekiyut* of the *Rishonim* in Tanakh far outstrips any of the current practitioners of the new methods. In particular, Ibn Ezra's commentary is overflowing with oblique references to parallels throughout Tanakh, and a careful study will reveal a plethora of “meta concepts.” For example, his commentary on just one *pasuk* in *Isaiah* 1:1 touches on four issues: how to understand a lineage list; whether Isaiah had a royal background; if Uzziah died or just contracted leprosy; and if Isaiah's career extended to the time of Menashe. In order to deal with all these issues he marshals *Isaiah* 50:6, II *Samuel* 23:1, I *Kings* 19:16, II *Chronicles* 32:32, II *Kings* 19:2, *Zephaniah* 1:1, and *Isaiah* 6:1 as proofs. I think that one can accurately view this as both a “close reading” and “looking at the big picture.” A group looking for a serious discussion of *peshuto shel mikra* would do well not to ignore such resources.

Now, R. Beasley does, much later in the article, stress the need not to replace the *mikra'ot gedolot* with just a Tanakh. In fact, I have full faith that the progenitors of this new approach, such as R. Yoel Bin Nun and R. Meidan have thoroughly studied all the relevant *Rishonim* before formulating their novel approaches. However, having been involved in *binnukh* in America for many years and having some exposure to Israeli *binnukh* as well, I feel confident in saying that the *shiurim* of a large percentage of the followers of this methodology, do not always exhibit serious engagement with the *Rishonim*, especially when studying *Navi* and *Ketuvim*. All too often the claim that one is looking for *peshuto shel mikra* translates into a desire to say what he/she thinks without having to work through the *Rishonim*, and “doing a close reading” has become a phrase that may more accurately be described as highly speculative interpretation.

Overall, I think that the study of Tanakh has been greatly enhanced by the new approaches and methodologies, but believe that the *Rishonim* need to be analyzed rigorously before moving on to modern literary analysis.

R. Beasley responds:

R. Yaakov Blau's insightful letter raises a pressing issue for Jewish educators—the practical application of the new methodology within the school setting. Here, R. Blau firmly expresses his preference for the “main dish” of the “old school,” with insights deriving from the modern scholars serving at best, as “icing.” Though the purpose of my review essay was solely to describe, not champion, the components of the new methodology and identify the parallel trends in academia that led to its emergence, I welcome the opportunity to discuss how the new literary tools can and should be applied within the classroom.

The primary difficulty faced by all educators is the finite amount of time and resources available. We all desire that our students achieve total fluency of the complete range of texts before them, and ideally, we would teach every section of every book, using every possible approach and commentator available. Until that point in time, however, I suggest that R. Blau's approach, though lofty, does not meet the goals of a self-aware Bible educator.

R. Blau argues that the opening paragraph pits “a straw man” of the old, tired methodology against the new school's “sophisticated literary methods.” He then suggests that as “the *Rishonim* used a sophisticated methodology . . . studying them in a similarly sophisticated way could, by itself, serve as a fruitful endeavor for someone searching for *peshuto shel mikra*.” Unfortunately, R. Blau fails to differentiate between the sophisticated nature and breadth of knowledge of the *Rishonim*, which is not in question, with the reality that these texts were not studied in an organized fashion that would allow a proper methodology for studying them to develop, until Professor Nechama Leibowitz began her studies on *Parashat ha-Shavua* two generations ago. (I interested readers in the role of Tanakh studies in traditional yeshiva curriculums can look at Mordechai Breuer's, “The Study of Tanakh in the Yeshiva Curriculum,” *Studies Presented to Moshe Abrend*, or my ATID article on the topic at <http://www.atid.org/journal/journal98/beasley.doc>.)

Even if R. Blau acknowledges the historical reality, he may still rightly ask: but Nechama did develop a sophisticated methodology. Surely it is enough for the Tanakh teacher? The *Rishonim* had *bekiut*, they were sophisticated, they raised complex and multi-layered issues. Why go to the new school when finally the old approach is starting to bear fruit? (Similarly, Yael Unterman bemoans the eclipse of Nechama's approach in the Israeli system by the new methodology in the final chapter of her recently released biography *Nechama Leibowitz: Teacher and Bible Scholar*). I would suggest

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that several pedagogical considerations guide us in favor of the new methodology serving as the foundation of any serious Bible study endeavor:

1. Educational psychology demonstrates that the proper learning of any text involves seeing the “big picture” (Williamson McDiarmid, Deborah L. Ball, Charles W. Anderson, “Why Staying One Chapter Ahead Doesn’t Really Work: Subject-Specific Pedagogy,” in *Knowledge Base for the Beginning Teacher*, ed. M.C. Reynolds (Pergamon Press, New York, 1989), p. 193.) For Tanakh teachers, this refers to what Esther Lopian has correctly identified as the identification of the “meta-themes” (see her article and additional sources “Fear of the Forest: Avoiding Meta-themes and Overviews in Orthodox Bible Education,” *Edah Journal* 3:2). By commenting word-by-word, line-by-line, and not on larger texts, the very nature of the *Rishonim*’s writings generally precluded the development of commentaries geared towards the larger picture, though they may draw on a wealth of sources to deal with a localized issue (and yes, I recognize the tremendous wealth in the introductions of the Ramban, the Abarbanel, and the Netsiv to the various *Humashim*). This is blatantly evident when dealing with the *Nevi'im Aharonim* and *Ketuvim*, where the interpretations in the *Rishonim* tend to be atomized and ahistorical, leaving the reader unaware of their context. Too often our students leave without being able to articulate the overriding themes of what they have learned—What purposes do the Joseph narratives serve? How do the prophecies of Amos and Isaiah differ? Even the fundamental skill of reading a chapter of Tanakh and seeing the internal structures and components is lost when we proceed verse by verse. The emphasis of the new school on the text’s larger structures is a prerequisite to a total understanding of the text. Only from this basis should we proceed to extensive study of the commentators.
2. Just as our study of any other subject does not end with the 16th century (would R. Blau suggest that R. Soloveitchik’s insights to Gemara are only “icing” to the Rambam’s “cake,” or are they an integral part of the process of learning), why should the study of Tanakh be frozen in time? According to Rashbam, Rashi would have changed his interpretations to encompass the “*peshatot ha-mit’haddeshot*,” while Ramban changed his opinion based on new archeological evidence before him. What educational value is there in presenting the Tanakh—a “*Torat Hayyim*” nonetheless—as a book where nothing of value has occurred since the apostate Yaakov ben Meir printed the first *Mikraot Gedolot* in 1523?

3. Third, whether or not Wellhausen's Higher Criticism is at the forefront of our students' minds (most times, I'm not sure if we really want to know what they are thinking in class), at the right stage, we have an obligation to prepare them for what they will confront, whether questions of multiple authorship, claims that the Tanakh is anti-feminist/queer, etc. In addition, I would suggest that any extended study of Tanakh must attempt to incorporate the issues on their minds. I suggest that a class in Bereishit that covers all the *mefarshim* but ignores the creation of healthy family dynamics (without reducing the text to pop psychology), or a class that covers all the literary patterns in Shemot without dealing with the relationship between freedom and laws, does not fulfill its full mandate to its participants.
4. Finally, to paraphrase both Nechama and Dr. Breuer, didn't Rashi study the Humash without commentaries? From an educational point of view, doesn't demonstrating to the students how the *mefarshim* arrived at their conclusions have value?

Having stated the above, I wish to assure R. Blau that I do not advocate the complete abandonment or emasculation of the Tanakh curriculum of two thousand years of commentators, God forbid. An approach that suggests that nothing of value occurred in Jewish thought is just as false educationally as an approach that suggests that nothing of value as occurred in the past 500 years. I repeat—the journey towards “*peshuto shel mikra*” cannot bypass a “*mikra'ot gedolot*.” What I champion for our *talmidim* is the broadest, largest picture possible, where decisions in methodology are made on solid pedagogic grounds and not historical\sentimental ones, in order that they arrive at an appreciation of *Devar Hashem* in its fullest form.

R. Blau continues:

I very much enjoyed R. Beasley's thoughtful counter-response. Now, one could reasonably conclude that our two positions are not that far apart from each other. R. Beasley has repeatedly stated that the *mikra'ot gedolot* is an indispensable part of how he views that one should approach *Tanakh*. Similarly, I see tremendous value in the insights that are being produced by the “new school” approach. Having said that, we do, I believe, disagree on where the major emphasis of time and focus should be placed, and that is a fundamental difference.

R. Beasley raised several rather cogent arguments for why the new methodology should serve “as the foundation of any serious Bible study

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endeavor.” He first argued that the proper learning of a text involve seeing the “big picture.” Even if we grant this assertion, how can one discuss said “big picture” without first deeply understanding what the *pesukim* mean line by line? He gives the example of asking how the prophecies of Amos and Isaiah differ. I certainly concede that this is a worthy issue, but I wonder how many of our students understand either *navi* well enough on their own to move on intelligently to the broader issue. Even with the Joseph narratives, I feel that too many of our students are working from the understanding of the story that they acquired in fifth grade. The first step ought to be to work through the stories on a more sophisticated level and then to ask about what general purpose they serve.

(Parenthetically, I take issue with the assertion that the *Rishonim* on *Neviim Abaronim* were ahistorical. Just for a few counter examples: see Radak’s introduction to *Isaiah* discussing when Chapter 6 occurred; Radak on *Isaiah* 1:2 and 8; Mahari Kara on 1:8, and Ibn Ezra on 1:26 all discussing when the first *perek* happened; Mahari Kara to *Isaiah* 7:2 discussing *II Chronicles* 28 as context; Abarbanel on *Jeremiah* 26:9 connecting 7 and 26; Radak on *Joel* 1:1 trying to discover when the prophet lived; Ibn Ezra on *Amos* 1:3 using *II Kings* 10:32-33 and Mahari Kara on *Zephaniah* 1:1 explaining why there are negative predictions during the reign of a good king.)

Let me raise two other issues along these lines. First, R. Beasley paraphrases R. Breuer’s famous quote that he learned Tanakh as Rashi did—that is, without Rashi. By the same token, Rashi learned the gemara without Rashi and I hope that R. Beasley will agree that Rashi should be a major focus of gemara study (I am well aware that there is a movement to bring academic Talmud scholarship into the *bet midrash* as well, but that is a discussion for another time). “Demonstrating to the students how the *mefarshim* arrived at their conclusions” certainly has value, if the *mefarshim* are then analyzed rigorously. Second, I would caution against blind acceptance of literary theory as produced by the universities. The same universities that gave us worthy approaches, such as new criticism and reader response, subsequently gave us deconstructionism and queer theory, which I hope we can all agree have no place in Tanakh study.

Once again, I thank R. Beasley for his insights and join him in hoping for Tanakh study to once again take its rightful place as a serious form of *talmud Torah*.

R. Beasley concludes:

I want to thank R. Yaakov Blau for his insightful response to my previous letter. Our discussion has identified several of the pitfalls that lie

before the practitioners of either school of Tanakh, both problems of ideology and pedagogy. I wish to take the opportunity to clarify several of the suggestions I made earlier, and to provide one general response to his thesis.

First, I must explain my intent in describing the traditional commentaries to the *Nevi'im* as “ahistorical.” Clearly, as R. Blau impressively points out, many commentators dealt with questions of chronology and of dating the various prophecies (especially at the beginning of *Isaiah*, where it seems clear to many that the first chapter occurred in the time of Hezekiah, after the devastation of the Assyrian invasion (see 1:9), while his earlier “*nevu'at bak'dasha*”, consecration vision, in chapter 6, appeared several decades earlier in the time of Uzziah). My intended usage of the term “ahistorical” was to describe their exegesis. Perhaps guided by the dictum that “only those prophecies intended for all generations were preserved,” very few commentators deal with the specific historical context of the prophecies they discuss, preferring to extract what they consider the universal, timeless message of the text. Ultimately, while both Isaiah and Jeremiah rail against the idolatry of the people, we err if we conflate the idolatries that arose from prosperous, luxurious, peaceful Yehuda under the reign of Uzziah, with the idolatries of a humiliated, emasculated, questioning Yehuda under Yehoyakim, after the sudden and unexplained death of their greatest king Josiah. I argue that the new school’s sensitivity to the historical context of the prophecies, and not just their chronology, are essential for full understanding of *Nevi'im*.

However, let us ignore the potential pitfalls and failed applications of both methodologies, and concentrate on how we approach the ideal classroom. Obviously, we all hope and pray for a situation where our students can read both *Amos* and *Isaiah*, and are prepared to understand the Joseph narrative at a mature level. Providing them with the necessary skills to navigate the text and its commentaries requires time and effort (however, I do not accept the equation that allocation of time and focus equals importance, especially in the educational realm: we invest tremendous energy in teaching skills, but as means to larger goals—understanding and implementation—not as an end). Precisely here, as R. Blau points out, “a fundamental difference” divides our pedagogic approaches. The new school champions the reader discovering both the text’s larger structures, and how the individual components interact to reveal the message. R. Blau asserts that discussing said “big picture” is impossible “without first deeply understanding what the *pesukim* mean line by line.” Who is correct? I believe that a gemara regarding the building

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of the *Mishkan* found on *Berakhot* 55a provides us with a direction to the answer:

R. Shmuel bar Nahmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: Betsalel was so named because of his wisdom. Though God said to Moses, “Go tell Betsalel to make Me a *Mishkan*, an ark, and vessels,” Moses reversed it and said to him, “Make an ark, vessels, and a *Mishkan*.” Betsalel responded, “Moshe Rabbeinu, it is the way of the world that a person first builds a house and afterwards puts vessels into it. Yet you are saying, ‘Make me an ark, vessels, and then the *Mishkan*!’ The vessels that I will make—where would I put them? Perhaps God said to you, ‘Make a *Mishkan*, an ark, and vessels?’” Moses responded, “Perhaps you were in the shadow of God (*be-tsel E-l*) and you knew this!”

The argument between Moses and Betsalel regarding the building of the *Mishkan*, I suggest, parallels our discussion regarding how to approach the text of the Tanakh. Like Moshe Rabbeinu, who sees the importance of every single detail of each of the vessels, R. Blau prefers that the students first confront the text verse-by-verse, commentary-by-commentary (obviously in a sophisticated manner as developed by Dr. Leibowitz and others), and only afterwards see the larger picture of the narrative. Only by appreciating the trees, can we deal with questions of the forest. (I would hazard a guess that this approach is a natural development from what James Kugel describes as the rabbinic vision of “omnificance”—“that [all of] the slightest details of the Biblical text have a meaning that is both comprehensible and significant”).

Alas, a heavenly vision is one thing—implementation on earth (or in the classroom), however, is another. Like Betsalel, who patiently explains to Moses that it is physically impossible to build the vessels without creating the larger *Mishkan* to contain them, I argue that in the educational realm, when dealing with texts, we are not reading words or even verses, but Tanakh. Just as one does not reduce the forest to a mere collection of trees, or examine a painting one section at a time without looking first at the overall picture, the Biblical text contains stories, laws, and narratives—all of which contain the larger structures that contain the deeper meanings both R. Blau and I wish to uncover.

In conclusion, I stand with Matthew Arnold’s famous dictum about reading the Bible as literature: “that no one knows the truth about the Bible who does not know how to enjoy the Bible” (*The Complete Prose of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 7, ed. R. H. Super [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press], 148, cited in David Norton, *From 1700 to the Present*

Day, vol. 2 of *A History of the Bible as Literature* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 273). In many cases, the “new school” methodologies are not just an additional way available to the reader who wishes to read and interpret text; in many cases, they reflect the original poetics by which we are meant to read the Tanakh. As teachers, we attempt to provide our students with not only respect for the text and the wealth of meanings to be found within it throughout the ages, but also to demonstrate an openness to innovation when logic and truth demands what Rashbam labeled the “*peshatot ha-mit’haddeshot be-khol yom.*” May Hashem bless our efforts to create a community of students, committed to the study of the text with all the tools available to them, “old school” and “new,” eager to understand the Tanakh’s message.