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Review Essay
Return of the Pashtanim

Between the Lines of the Bible: A Study from the New School of Orthodox Torah Commentary
by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom
The Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Tanakh Companion: The Book of Samuel
Ed. Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot

INTRODUCTION

Imagine the following. You are fifty years back in time, at the doorstep of your high school yeshiva. Curious, you choose to sit in a Talmud *shiur*. You enter the classroom, and you quickly detect the changes: clothing styles, the chalky blackboard standing in place of today's sleek modern whiteboard. Desks covered with pens, papers, and *sefarim* all compete for the prime location - around the rebbe's desk, and not for the site closest to the nearest outlet for the laptop. However, as you sit down, you find yourself quickly immersed in the *shakla ve-tarya* of Abaye and Rava, Rambam and *Tosafot*, R. Akiva Eiger and Reb Hayyim. The students read from the *daf* and the *rishonim*, and the rebbe tries to organize the material into larger conceptual categories.[1] Despite the external dissimilarities, the basic nature of the class has not changed. Getting up to leave, you decide to see how the yeshiva's Bible class is progressing. You sit down, and find yourself in the back row.[2] The teacher reads a verse, goes into Rashi and Ramban, and continues onto the next verse. Everything that you are accustomed to—analyzing the verses' structure, identifying the prevalent *leitvort* (leading word), citing modern academic scholars, even providing a quick explanation of the story's geography, is completely missing. The teacher was quick to silence the one out of bounds student who dared to ask, "What's bothering Rashi anyways?" The teacher finishes with a flourish, quoting an inspirational

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Midrash. As you leave the classroom, you reflect that you did not hear the word "*peshat*" once. How did the transformation occur?

We take for granted the vibrant nature of our Bible studies today. Unending commentaries on Tanakh fill our bookshelves[3]; traditional favorites like *derush*, ethics, and translations of major commentators now share the shelf with literary readings and psychological analysis. The Internet has only amplified this trend exponentially: every Shabbat, congregants fill synagogue benches clutching their weekly *parashat ha-shavua* handouts printed from myriad sites. Two recent releases exemplify these new developments[4]: R. Yitzchak Etshalom's book *Between the Lines of the Bible*, and Yeshivat Chovevei Torah's *Tanakh Companion: The Book of Samuel*. An engaging educator and lecturer from Los Angeles, R. Etshalom authored a popular series of online Torah shiurim.[5] *Between the Lines of the Bible* collects many of these essays on Bereishit, expands them, and organizes them methodically by the literary tool used in analyzing them. In addition, R. Etshalom added a chapter on the history of Biblical interpretation and an appendix that surveys the major commentators in Jewish history. The genesis of *Tanakh Companion: The Book of Samuel* is different. For almost fifteen years, Makhon Yaakov Herzog[6] hosts its celebrated *Yemei Iyun be-Tanakh*. For three days, thousands of Israeli Tanakh teachers and aficionados descend upon the quiet *yishuv* of Alon Shevut to experience three days of Tanakh study taught by Israel's best teachers. Recently, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah has attempted to recreate the magic of these *Yemei Iyun* with its own three-day conference in New Jersey, with two days dedicated to Tanakh study and the third day dealing with issues in Jewish thought. *Tanakh Companion: The Book of Samuel* compiles these *shiurim* into one volume. Their subtitles outline their common goal. *Between the Lines of the Bible* identifies itself as "A study from the *new school of Orthodox* Torah commentary," while *Tanakh Companion: The Book of Samuel* announces that it contains "Bible study in the spirit of *modern and open Orthodox* Judaism." Do these books fulfill their claims of successfully combining "new/modern" and "Orthodoxy?" To respond properly, we shall briefly review the development of Tanakh study in the past half-century, identify those qualities that qualify a commentary as "new/modern," and evaluate how both books measure up to their claims.

WHAT IS MODERN TANAKH STUDY?

Simply put, modern Tanakh study is all about the "*peshat*." Like Rashi, its practioners assert that while others offer *derash*, they "have only come to

explicate '*peshuto shel mikra*.'"[7] This claim alone is not revolutionary. The Talmud already asserts that "*ein ha-mikra yotsei midei peshuto*."[8] However, *peshat* study is not simple. The Talmud demands that a person divide his study time equally between the study of Mikra, Mishna, and Gemara.[9] However, yeshiva curriculae largely abandoned this rule, standing firm instead with Rashi's interpretation of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's dictum: "*Manu beneikhem min ha-higayon*"—prevent your children from studying Bible![10] More important, it was not until the Middle Ages that "*peshat*" study was viewed as independent from Talmudic exegesis. From Rashi's differentiation between "*peshat*" and "*derash*" to the Ibn Ezra's and Rashbam's rejection of rabbinic tradition in their interpretations, the medieval commentators produced seminal works on "*peshuto shel mikra*."[11] By the 16th century, however, homiletic works and super-commentaries (mostly on Rashi) replaced *peshat* study. Even the 19th century renaissance in Bible study did not denote a return to study of *peshat*. While their commentaries reflect deep sensitivity to the text's literary variances, R. S. R. Hirsch, R. Naftali T. Y. Berlin (Netsiv), R. Y. Mecklenberg, R. Meir Simcha ha-Cohen, and Malbim invested their energies in refuting the claim that rabbinic tradition had distorted the text's true meaning. Unlike the medieval interpreters who worked independently of the Talmud's exegetical agenda, the 19th commentaries identified themselves with it. In doing so, they allowed "the talmudist's literary world to dominate the biblicist's,"[12] so that the vast majority of literature produced in the past two centuries by Orthodox thinkers was either "Talmudic-Midrashic" or "Midrashic-Kabbalistic." Studying Tanakh alone was considered akin to heresy.[13]

We can easily identify those individuals in our *bet midrash* whose efforts revived *peshat* study. The overwhelming popularity and influence of Professor Leibowitz's *gilyonot* (and the subsequent publication of her Iyunim BaTanach series) made the name Nechama a household name. Soon, it seemed that every Tanakh teacher was asking one of two questions, "What's bothering Rashi?" or "What would Nechama say?"[14] Her efforts redirected the study of commentators from what they said to how those commentators read the text.[15] R. Mordekhai Breuer, adopting and combining Kookian thought with Soloveichikian terminology and methodology (*shitat ha-behinot*), attempted to demonstrate that a believing Jew faced no threat from the different sources that the Bible critics had discovered in the text.[16] *Tradition* has recently documented both their efforts, as well as the far-reaching influence of R. Yoel Bin Nun.[17] In addition, two major publications from *Mossad ha-Rav Kook* strengthened the movement towards *peshat* study. The *Da'at Mikra* series on Tanakh combined philological and literary interpretations with insights from archeology, history,

and geography. The *Torat Hayyim Humash* refocused readers on medieval Jewish interpretation to the exclusion of later homelitical commentators.[18] While the vast majority of this rebirth occurred in Israel, a new generation of teachers who came to Israel for study brought these new approaches to their schools and communities. English speakers benefited even more with the technological explosion of the past decade. The advent of the internet helped introduce and solidify R. Menachem Leibtag (with his structural readings of the weekly parsha) as one of modern Orthodoxy's leading and most widely read Tanakh teachers.[19] Yeshivat Har Etzion's Virtual Beit Midrash hosts a group of websites and blogs that provides surfers with in-depth Tanakh study.[20] Our generation can and should take legitimate pride in these accomplishments.[21] Celebrating within our *bet midrash*, however, can lead us to ignore the conditions that made these accomplishments possible. I would suggest that just as we saw a revolution in the study of Tanakh, Bible study in the university underwent a similar metamorphosis, a development that led to much of our new methodology.

NEW TRENDS IN ACADEMIA

Despite the traditional openness to academic studies that characterizes Modern Orthodoxy, an adversarial relationship existed with respect to academic Bible studies. Fifty years ago, it seemed scholars only asked two questions: "who authored the text?" and "what can we know about the author's history/culture?" Julius Welhausen's theories on multiple authors and redactions were accepted by academia as dogma. Clearly, as these issues go to the heart of our beliefs, specifically our insistence on the Divine authorship of the *Humash*, it seemed that Orthodox Jewish Bible scholars would find no common ground with the university. Even to this day, consensus is out of the question. However, this century has seen researchers stop occupying themselves solely with historical issues in order to understand or derive meaning from a text.

As different schools of literary analysis arose, new approaches to the Bible proliferated. Scholarship broadened its scope from atomizing and dissecting individual verses to analyzing larger narratives as complete works of literature in their own right. Final form analysis replaced discussions about a text's prehistory (oral histories, successive redactions). By 1980, "a threshold was crossed"[22] and narrative criticism took its place alongside historical criticism, and the university relocated Bible studies from the Ancient Near East Department to the Department of Literature. In 1964, the Anchor Bible commentary to Genesis 34 (1964, by E. A. Speiser)

opened its discussion on The Rape of Dinah, wondering whether the chapter is solely a 'J' text, or contains intrusions by 'P' or 'E'. A generation later, both Meir Sternberg and Adele Berlin discuss the work as a literary whole from the narrative-critical perspective.[23]

We can partially attribute this development to the sense of frustration felt by scholars as they pursued Higher Critical goals. Identifying each individual text's author was equivalent to identifying the original eggs within an omelet.[24] Meanwhile, several renowned professors of literature turned their attention to the Bible, and produced groundbreaking works that are required reading for anyone wishing to understand the Bible's literary qualities (i.e., Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Adele Berlin's *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, and Meir Sternberg's *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*[25]). In particular, Alter and Sternberg attempted to identify the singular characteristics of ancient Hebrew narratives. Alter demands the reader pay careful attention to what he identifies as the four main techniques employed by the Biblical narrator: "type-scenes" and conventions, dialogue, repetition, and characterization. Variations, omissions, and divergences from these norms provide the reader with grist for the interpretive mill. Often, those techniques differ greatly from Western literary norms. By consistently demonstrating that many apparent textual "discrepancies" were part of a consistent internal methodology, Alter et al. demonstrated how previous attempts to remedy those "discrepancies" by recourse to an imagined textual pre-history fell intellectually short. Looking back in the past half-century, we can identify three major movements in academic literary criticism whose emphasis on the text and the reader in producing meaning opened the gateways for Orthodox participation: "New Criticism," "Structuralism," and "Reader-response criticism."

The first movement, "New Criticism," a dominant Anglo-American approach of the mid 20th century, heavily influenced much of the early literary study of the Bible. Distinctly formalist, New Criticism stressed close attention to the internal characteristics of the text itself, and discouraged the use of external evidence (history, the author's milieu, etc.) to explain the work. Their foremost methodology was a close reading of the text, demonstrating how aspects of a text serve to support the structure of meaning within the text. While the New Critics preferred poetry over other forms of literary expression (viewing the poem as the purest exemplification of their literary values), their techniques of close reading and structural analysis were applied to other literary forms. By freeing Bible studies of the historical shackles that had bound it for almost two centuries, "New Criticism" created room for Orthodox scholars to rejoin the discussion. The emphasis on formal aspects such as rhythm, meter, theme, imagery,

metaphor, etc. suited the emerging methodology of the Orthodox Bible scholars. Nechama Leibowitz, among others, would occasionally mention New Criticism in her classes.[26]

In the university, however, a new movement, Structuralism, quickly overtook New Criticism. Based on the works of the early 20th-century linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, Structuralism attempted to analyze the system of relationships within a language that makes acts of speech possible. It stressed that meanings are produced not so much by simple definition as by a network of contrasts. The first chapter of Bereishit, for example, contains the oppositions, light/darkness, order/disorder, heavens/earth, etc. Further, this school of thought argued that these binary oppositions that structure human thought are essentially universal and unaffected by culture or history. Biblical scholars and literary theorists quickly applied these approaches to the Bible—specifically Bereishit's "mythic" narratives and genealogies.[27] However, Structuralism, which dispensed of both the text's historical background and the role of the reader, was challenged in the broader world of philosophical and literary studies. While Structuralism understood itself as a scientific method, different readers regularly reached different understandings of the same text. Structuralism also seemed limited to explaining myths and folktales, not complex narratives. This led to the rise of a third influential movement in literary thought: reader-response criticism.

Unlike New Criticism's focus on supposedly objective texts and Structuralism's focus on impersonal and universal codes, reader-response criticism emphasized the essential role played by the reader in the production of meaning. Stanley Fish argued that by seeing a literary work as an object, claiming to describe what it is and never what it does, a person misconstrues the very essence of literature and reading. Literature exists and signifies when it is read, and its force is an affective one. Finally, reading is a temporal process, not a spatial one, as formalists assume when surveying a literary work as if it were an object spread out before them. Applying this to Bible studies, Professor Meir Sternberg, in his pioneering *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, demonstrated how the Bible reader only gradually gathers information, which he then progressively organizes and reorganizes to create meaning. In addition, Sternberg's work demonstrates that Biblical texts often contain "gaps" which the reader then fills in both consciously and unconsciously (e.g., details concerning characters, aspects of motivation or causality, connections between events). The reader's involvement in the reading process creates engagement with plot, character issues, and values (which the reader may choose to embrace or resist). Through the subjective element in reading, we can account for how different readers can arrive

at different understandings of the "same" text. Countering the deconstructionist claim that the text has no inherent meaning, and that every reading is by necessity a subjective creation, Fish argues that what the reader's community considers plausible limits the subjective factor.[28] Much of the modern fascination with Midrashic interpretations focuses on these qualities, with the Midrash's intertextual basis and its ability to countenance multiple (and even contradictory) interpretations of the same text.[29]

Recently, newer trends in literary studies, including deconstruction, social-scientific criticism, and feminist and other ideological-based criticism, have overtaken the focus on narrative criticism that dominated the academic discourse of a generation ago. With the post-modern rejection that a text has a "true" meaning, many of the fruits of their labors are less palatable to the Orthodox Bible scholar. However, some modern streams, including the dialogism of Mikhail Bakhtin, the narratology of Mieke Bal, and the growing interest in intertextuality, may provide fertile grounds for further study. Despite this, due to the efforts of Alter, Sternberg, Berlin, et al, no one would deny that the academic world has been much more hospitable to Orthodox Jewish scholars.

CREATING A NEW *"DEREKH HA-LIMMUD"*

In our imaginary visit to the yeshiva of fifty years ago, we noted the differences between the Tanakh class then and now. We can categorize these differences into two groups: means and ends. Until recently, discovering "*peshuto shel mikra*" was never viewed as the ultimate purpose of Tanakh study. If in Talmud study, the "mitnagdic" definition of "*lishmah*" reigned -for understanding the text, in Tanakh study, "*lishmah"* was understood in the Hasidic manner – for approaching G-d.[30] Studying *Torah she-be-al peh* often detaches the student from the subject manner.[31] As a Divinely revealed text, Tanakh study automatically demands the involvement of all the student's faculties - intellectual, moral, and spiritual. It discusses the Divine writ and the ancestors of our people. R. Shalom Carmy's comment that any "shift in the mode of biblical study that detaches the reader from the exigency of the text . . . undermines the very *raison d'etre* of [that] learning"[32] reflects a hesitancy to fully embrace the study of *peshuto shel mikra* as an end of itself. Notably, R. Carmy terms the new methodology "the literary-theological approach"—as if to remind us that finding *peshat* is not the ultimate purpose of Tanakh study. While viewing favorably the pursuit of *peshuto shel mikra*, he argues that such endeavors can

only find their place "within an overall program of *Mahshevet Yisrael*, Torah study and theological reflection," or else "the novelty or strangeness of a certain methodology" will "interfere with the primary vocation of elucidating *devar ha-Shem*."[33] R. Carmy's view reflects many educators' tentativeness when encountering the return to *peshuto shel mikra*.

Whether the goal is the discovery of *peshuto shel mikra* or the accompanying spiritual benefits, we can identify and classify the modern methodology's components. The new *derekh ha-limmud* embraces many different forms and approaches. Like the New Criticism, there is a heavy emphasis on "close readings," with special sensitivity to grammatical inconsistencies, repeated and leading words (*leitworten*), and word plays. Structuralism is given its due as stress is placed on identifying larger literary units, narratives, and genres, as well as identifying the parallelisms and structures within the text. Together, these elements distinguish the "new" Orthodox school from its predecessors. Classic commentators generally concentrated their efforts on explaining the meaning of individual words and verses, not in discovering the underlying structures of a narrative section. Though their commentaries reflected sophisticated methodology, their primary focus was not in identifying what R. Nathanel Helfgot describes as the Bible's "recurring themes, underlying motifs and overarching meta-concepts."[34]

In addition, the new *derekh ha-limmud* draws on other modern literary tools. The modern reader is sensitive to the intertextual references and literary echoes of each phrase, and draws upon these connections to produce new and additional levels of meaning. Literary terminology freely falls from his/her lips, including discussions of characterization, plot development, and role of the narrator. There is an awareness of the differing levels of knowledge of the characters, the readers, and the omniscient narrator. Like life, the new approach eschews simplistic and one-dimensional portrayal of characters and their psyches. Finally, it draws upon areas of knowledge generally unavailable to earlier commentators, including the geography of the land of Israel, the history and surrounding culture of the Ancient Near East, and recent archeological findings. All these tools serve one purpose—to arrive at *peshat*.

BETWEEN THE LINES – NEW SCHOOL OR OLD SCHOOL?

Between the Lines of the Bible simultaneously serves as a commentary on Bereishit, and as a demonstration of the methodology of the "new Orthodox school." R. Etshalom uses an impressive variety of modern tools in his

commentary. Some of these are structural (chiasms, parallels, *leitworten*, and inner-biblical exegesis); others include the use of modern geographical and archaeological information; still others ask literary questions that stem from modern sensibilities (does the omniscience of the reader help or hinder his/her understanding of the text? What nuances would the original audience have noticed when confronted with this text?). As his stated goal is to "introduce to the English-reading public to the various methodologies that the 'new school' uses. . .to bring the text back to life," R. Etshalom dedicates each chapter to demonstrating a specific methodological tool.

The real strengths of the volume derive from R. Etshalom himself. One only has to read several chapters to recognize both his tremendous breadth of knowledge and his passion for teaching. Every chapter finds the material capably and pedagogically organized. He has the master teacher's knack of finding the right question to ask, of leading the students carefully towards his stated goals, and summarizing the results. His presentation of several issues is nothing short of masterful. His discussion of the question of the location of Rachel's tomb should be required reading for anyone teaching chapters 35 or 48 of Bereishit. He outlines the problems with identifying the tomb with today's Kever Rachel, and carefully and analytically presents two possible solution (In I Samuel 10:2, the *navi* parts from Shaul with the sign "you shall find two men by *kevurat* Rachel in the border of Binyamin by Zelzah"—an indication that the tomb was located to the north of Jerusalem, and not south, as normally assumed). Using modern archeological findings combined with careful textual analysis of Biblical and rabbinic sources, R. Etshalom provides convincing arguments for both sides, before humbly (and correctly) concluding that some issues may not be resolvable. He is an excellent reader of text, is much attuned to fine details, and draws liberally from Jewish commentaries throughout the ages. His early chapters deal with modern questions raised by reader-response theory: what inside knowledge can we attribute to Yosef in Egypt that may not have been apparent to the reader? Is his confidence in his youthful dreams a childish reflection of self-confidence/overconfidence, or does Yosef recognize similarities to his father's dreams that he proceeds forward to actualize his own? When comparing texts (e.g. – his comparison of the two covenants that Hashem made with Avraham, and intertextual allusions to previous covenants in Bereishit), R. Etshalom is thorough, detailed, and convincing. In short, this volume should be on the bookshelf of anyone wishing to glean new insights on Bereishit.

Where Between the Lines is less consistent is in its stated goal of explicating the tools of the new methodology. The chapters that sketch the history of traditional and modern exegesis could have benefited from

detail, organization, and source material. More importantly, each chapter provides only one example of each tool. In doing so, R. Etshalom inadvertently risks tying the tool to the quality of his example. In several cases, the essay jumps into the interpretation, without fully explicating the function and nature of the literary issue at hand. For example, how does one identify a chiasm? Do we require specific word linkages? Are related themes and concepts enough? Are there differences between chiasms within a single verse, a textual unit, or a larger narrative structure (his main example outlines thematic parallels over a three-chapter section)?[35] His essay rises and falls based on a chiasm that he identifies in chapters 1-3 in Bereishit. Centering on the interaction (or lack thereof) between the spiritual and physical realms, R. Etshalom attempts to structure the first three chapters around Shabbat, which bridges the two realms. In most of the axis, the parallels are conceptual, not verbal, and do not arise easily from a simple reading of the verses. As such, an average reader would not recognize the chiasm.

Similarly, while attempting to tease new meaning out of Bereishit's first six chapters, R. Etshalom creatively suggests a series of themes that we would have overlooked, but would have been apparent to the original intended audience of the text. Interestingly, R. Etshalom assumes that this audience was the Jewish slave population of Egypt (a minority approach mentioned in *Shemot Rabbah* 5:22; to his credit, R. Etshalom also brings the prevalent alternative opinions of Har Sinai (Rashi) or the plains of Moav (Ramban)). While no one questions the assertion that Bereishit contains several fundamental tenets of Jewish belief (per Rashi's opening comment), his suggestions that the Garden of Eden narrative would inspire slaves "to accept the 'burden of liberation,'" or that the primary message of the Kayin-Hevel episode is to "avoid one-upmanship in the realms of piety" appear contrived.

Perhaps this reviewer's greatest disappointment with *Between the Lines of the Bible* was the overwhelming feeling of reading apologetics. Instead of boldness, the text creates a sense of "methinks the lady doth protest too much." The book explicitly names several chapters of this volume "Biblical Criticisms - Countering the Critics," in which R. Etshalom brings a standard Higher Criticism interpretation, and attempts to demolish it through the advancement of his own alternative interpretation. While his ideas are fresh and creative, no believer in Higher Criticism would consider them worthy of note. Even more disconcerting, with the introduction of almost every new literary tool, R. Etshalom takes great pains to reassure the reader that it is not in fact, new. In his introduction to the phenomenon of chiasms, he vaguely states that "all of

our traditional predecessors were familiar with literary structure;" while introducing *leitworten* (the leading word), he tells us that they are "a significant tool of interpretation that was always recognized by the classical commentators."[36] Unfortunately, he does not substantiate these claims. Even granting sensitivity to literary structures does not imply that they were used systematically in interpretation. Only in a footnote do we discover that the first person to "systemize the phenomenon" of *leitworten* was Martin Buber.[37] The determination to reassure the reader that "what we are doing is exactly what the original commentators did" unwittingly undercuts those aspects that make his approach revolutionary. Despite these issues, *Between the Lines of the Bible* remains an engaging read for the casual student and a treasure trove of insight for the Tanakh scholar.

YCT'S *THE BOOK OF SAMUEL* – WHAT DOES READING MEAN?

Unlike *Between the Lines of the Bible*, which began as written essays, *The Book of Samuel* collects transcriptions of 13 addresses from the YCT *Yemei Iyun*. Most of the contributors follow what R. Nathaniel Helfgot describes as "the systematic use of all of the literary tools and methods that have come to fore in the last hundred years . . . the primary goal [to] apprehend the plain sense of the text . . . filtered through the prism of a religious world-view." Methodology is implied in this book, not explicit. R. Helfgot states that this is to preserve the "oral nature" of the addresses, and preserve these essays as "popular presentations of profound and sophisticated ideas," not as "full-blown academic treatments of the topic in hand." To do so, the essays "thus retain elements of their oral nature," in order "to create a sense of shared learning." However, by not providing fuller explications of the methodology, YCT's *The Book of Samuel* inadvertently demonstrates one of the central weaknesses of the modern approach, as the following comparison between the volume's first two essays illustrates.

Both Rabbis David Silber and Yehuda Felix discuss the role of the first two chapters of I Samuel. Each suggests, in his own way, that the literary function of these chapters is to prepare the reader for the emergence of kingship as the central theme of the book.[38] Both draw heavily from outside texts (R. Silber draws mostly from parallels to the Book of Judges, R. Felix from the vast rabbinic and medieval commentaries) and clearly articulate their positions. However, they diverge dramatically on the question of Elkanah's character, and this divergence displays the strengths and weaknesses on the modern approach.

The book's first verse begins: "And there was a certain man of Ramatayim-Zophim, of the hill country of Efrayim, and his name was Elkanah, the son of Yehoram, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephrathite." After briefly describing his marital situation, the text continues, "And this man ascended from his city year by year to worship and sacrifice to the G-d of Hosts, in Shiloh. And there the two sons of Eli, Chofni and Pinchas, were priests of G-d." What can we learn about Elkanah from this abnormally lengthy introduction? After providing a close reading of the first verse, heavily influenced by other Biblical texts and rabbinic thought, R. Felix concludes that we should recognize Elkanah as nothing less than "a pioneer of moral education." He describes the challenges and tensions faced by a person who recognizes the corrupt nature of the officiating priests, yet still wishes to educate his children in the importance of the pilgrimage to Shiloh.[39] Struggling to balance his recognition of the present corruption with the educational need to preserve the ideal of communal worship at the Tabernacle for his children, Elkanah visited Shiloh on a yearly basis. R. Felix's portrayal presents us with an Elkanah who recognizes the complexity of the religious milieu in which he lived. From this positive and realistic portrayal, we begin to approach the rabbinic contention that Elkanah's concern was not just for his own family, but extended to the broader community. According to a midrash, it was in this merit that he fathered Samuel.[40]

R. Silber's portrayal of Elkanah differs dramatically. Ignoring the first verse's lengthy introduction of Elkanah, he develops his thesis based on the sudden interpolation in verse 3 that Hofni and Pinhas were serving at Shiloh.[41] Why does the text suddenly interject Eli's sons into the narrative? R. Silber suggests that not only is Elkanah's regular worship at Shiloh crucial to his identity, but that "his very service reinforces the bad atmosphere that Chofni and Pinchas create at Shiloh." He contrasts the well-meaning but pious fool Elkanah, whose actions are rote and mechanical, with his wife Hannah, whose actions represent true service of the heart.[42] While acknowledging at the beginning of his essay that "how others have understood this material is important," he confidently informs the reader that he is "going to explicate what we call *peshat* (the unadorned narrative) and see what the text is actually saying." R. Silber's approach nicely outlines the tension that exists between formalized, institutionalized religion versus spontaneous, intimate encounters with the Divine.[43] However, his *peshat* eviscerates the rabbinic portrayal of Elkanah (as so developed by R. Felix with some variations), and also fails on two basic levels crucial to the new methodology, so ably demonstrated by R. Felix. First, it ignores the excessive description of Elkanah in

verse 1. Second, it portrays Elkanah as a simplistic cardboard character, oblivious to the corruption around him. Did Elkanah really feel no tension upon arriving in Shiloh? Unwittingly, the exchange between Silber and Felix illustrates the one of the main dangers of the new methodology: over reliance on the Biblical text alone. Not always can a one volume Tanakh replace the *Mikra'ot Gedolot* to achieve *peshat*.

The patient reader of YCT's *The Book of Samuel* will uncover many interesting insights. R. Silber's article on the people's request for a king eloquently explains both the vehement opposition Samuel felt towards kingship while maintaining the book's overall positive portrayal of the institution (Hannah's prayer illustrates this: "And He will give strength to His king; and He will exalt the horn of His anointed." (2:10)). R. Silber demonstrates how the narrator is able to exploit and create literary tension between the two viewpoints by constantly providing several perspectives on the issue. R. Helfgot utilizes the story of Shaul and Amalek as a springboard to discuss two streams of thought regarding the morality of total warfare. Unlike the *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*, Maimonides argues that the commandment of complete annihilation is only applicable within the context of total war; should Amalek be willing to sign a peace treaty, the commandment no longer applies. The discussion on how commentators interpreted this dispute is nicely tied into an inquiry into Euthyphro's classic question (rephrased for our monotheistic ears): Did God command moral behavior because it *is* moral, or is it moral because God commanded it? R. Helfgot articulately plumbs the depth of Jewish tradition to present both sides of the issue. R. Avraham Weiss clever uses the dueling intertextual allusions to Esav and Yaakov in Chapter 25 to portray the moral challenges that David confronted while facing Avigail.

"Reader-response criticism" receives its due in R. Josh Berman's discussion on David's request to build the *bet ha-mikdash* in II Samuel 7. As the reader acquires new information from the book of Kings, he/she must re-read the previous text to fill in the ambiguous gaps left behind. True to the goals of the "literary-theological" methodology, R. Silber extracts moral meaning from the chiasm that structures the last four chapters of II Samuel. Among the volume's gems was R. Shmuel Herzfeld's discussion of Nathan's parable to David before accusing him regarding Batsheva. Interestingly, the text never clarifies *exactly what David was accused of*; Nathan simply stands, points, and states "You [are] the man!" The narrator's intention, apparently, is to allow the reader (and quite possibly David) to fill in the gap caused by the lacking information. Drawing upon Robert Polzin, R. Herzfeld demonstrates how identifying the

parable's key word, *"ish"* (man), unlocks the meaning of Nathan's rebuke to David. In the parable, the *"ish"* refers to several men – the poor man, the rich man, and the wanderer for whom the lamb is slaughtered. In his lifetime, David faced all these situations. God caused his enemies' wives to be brought to him like the wanderer (and David's fleeing Shaul definitely paralleled the wanderer's travels). Like the poor man, his one wife (given to him despite his protest that he was a poor *man)* was taken from him and given to another. Now, implies Nathan, like the rich man, he has taken wrongly from another.

Unlike *Between the Lines of the Bible*, *The Book of Samuel* clearly does not suffer from excessive apologetics in its methodology. However, as an attempt to popularize the new methodology in English,[44] the volume should have been more conscious of potential pitfalls. A fascinating article by Leeor Gottlieb compares the Masoretic version of I Samuel 10:27-11:1 with corresponding variants from the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint. Gottlieb makes a convincing argument that our received text, both in letters and in the punctuation of the verses, is corrupted. While an interesting intellectual foray into comparative texts—a field not often explored within the new methodology—the book should have addressed the potential fundamental challenges to our beliefs that this approach poses, if even briefly.

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

Readers must commend both R. Etshalom and Yeshivat Chovevei Torah for their trailblazing efforts. Both produced important works worthy of inclusion in the library of the thinking modern Orthodox Jew who has a love for Tanakh study, whether that person is an avid practitioner of the new *derekh ha-limmud*, or even mildly curious. While neither book provides a thorough study of the modern methodologies, each book provides tantalizing samples of what the "new school" of Bible studies is producing. We can only hope that they continue to be, in R. Kook's metaphor, "overflowing wells" for what has become a growing thirst among our people.

NOTES

1. This is not to suggest that no fundamental change has occurred in the methodology of Talmud study – note R. Eliyakim Krumbein's article in *Netuin* 9 that analyzes the development of Soloveichikian interpretation from the *Beit ha-Levi*, through the Rav, and down to R. Aharon Lichtenstein.
2. A la Moshe Rabbeinu in R. Akiva's classroom; see *Menahot* 29.

3. Granted, the quality of these books is uneven, as *Kohelet* complained – "of making books there is no end" (12:12).
4. Not surprisingly, the book is published by R. Gil Student of Yashar Books Publishing. In addition to his publishing ventures, Rabbi Student maintains the extremely popular and award winning blog, www.hirhurim.blogspot.com, on issues in Jewish thought.
5. Available at the Torah study section of www.torah.org.
6. Affiliated with Yeshivat Har Etzion in Alon Shevut, Israel.
7. Rashi, Bereishit 3:8.
8. *Shabbat* 63a, *Yevamot* 11b, 24a. See L. Rabinowitz, "The Talmudic Meaning of *Peshat*," *Tradition* 6:1, 1963.
9. *Kiddushin* 30a, brought as halakha by Maimonides in *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:11.
10. Rabbeinu Tam on *Kiddushin* 30a rules that the study of the Babylonian Talmud encompasses Mikra, Mishna, and Gemara, and Maimonides limits his ruling as referring to a student at the beginning of his studies. For a fuller discussion of the role of Tanakh study in the traditional yeshiva curriculum, examine R. Breuer's article "The Study of Tanach in the Yeshiva Curriculum," *Studies Presented to Moshe Arend*, p. 229, or the author's essay "Of Wells and Fainting Maidens: Bible Study in the Traditional Yeshiva Curriculum"/available online at www.atid.org/journal/journal98/beasley.doc
11. See U. Simon, "The Religious Significance of the *Peshat*," *Tradition*, 23:2, Winter 1988, p. 44-46.
12. B. Barry Levy, "The State and Directions of Orthodox Bible Study," p. 47.
13. Personal conversation with R. Yoel bin Nun. Additional examples are available in the author's "Of Wells and Fainting Maidens" above.
14. *What's Bothering Rashi?* became the name of one of her student's (Avigdor Bonchik) series on how to read Rashi. For other "how-to" books on Tanakh study bearing her imprint, see *Studying the Torah*, Bonchik, Aronson 1996; *To Study and To Teach: The Methodology of Nechama Leibowitz,* by Shmuel Peerless, Urim Publications, 2005; and the recently released *Studies in the Weekly Parashah: Based on the Lessons of Nechama Leibowitz*, Urim Publications, 2007 by R. Dr. Moshe Sokolow.
15. For discussions of her influence, see *Pirkei Nehama: Sefer Zikaron le-Nehama Leibowitz*, Jewish Agency Press, 2001, and Yael Unterman's recently released *Nehama Leibowitz: Teacher and Bible Scholar,* Urim Publications, 2009, which provides an updated, straight-forward evaluation of her waning influence and occasionally painful description of the eclipse of her methodology in modern Israeli religious Bible classes in favor of the "text-only" approach advocated by Rabbis Bin-Nun, Medan, et. al.
16. His influence warranted not one, but three separate articles in the Orthodox Forum's *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah (ed: Shalom Carmy; Jason Aronson Publishing), 1996.*
17. R. Hayyim Angel, "The Contributions of Rav Yoel Bin Nun to Religious Torah Story," *Tradition* 40:3, Fall 2007.
18. See B. Barry Levy's article "Rabbinic Bibles, Mikraot Gedolot and Other Great Books," *Tradition* 25:4, Summer 1991.
19. www.tanach.org.

20. www.vbm-torah.org.
21. I am not suggesting that the path was devoid of conflict and tension. Several major issues became the focus of disagreement from within and without: the deviation (return) from traditionally accepted methods of study, the treatment and portrayal of the forefathers and mothers; the use and reliance on outside secular sources, and the ever-present question of balancing arriving at an acceptable *hiddush* versus potential uprooting accepted interpretations and thought.
22. David M. Gunn, "Narrative Criticism," *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticism and Their Applications* (ed. Haynes and McKenzie; Louisville, Westminister/John Knox, 1993), p. 175.
23. See Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 445-475; A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), p. 76-78.
24. See Alter, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative,* ch. 7. This is not to suggest that scholars rejected the theory of multiple authorship – both Alter and Sternberg vehemently protest that this isn't so. What they questioned was the feasibility of engaging in the fruitless scholarship that had occurred until then.
25. Also of importance are Simon Bar-Efrat's *Narrative Art in the Bible*, Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989, which catalogs the various elements of Hebrew narrative technique, and David Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell's *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford University Press, 1993, which differs from the previous scholarship in many of the underlying hermeneutical assumptions (primarily regarding narratorial reliability and omniscience).
26. Personal communications from several of her students.
27. See, for example, Jacob's Licht's *Storytelling in the Bible*, (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press), 1978, and Northrop Frye's *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, Harvest Books, 2002.
28. See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities,* Harvard University Press, 1982.
29. Much of the summary of the modern trends in literary criticism is based on Carol Newsom's article "Probing Scripture - The New Bible Critics," Christian Century, January 3-10, 2001, p. 21, available online at http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2179; and Terry Eagleson's *Literary Theory*, Blackwell, 1996, specifically chapters 2 and 3. Also worth investigating are "Narrative Criticism and the Hebrew Scriptures: A Review and Assessment" by R. Christopher Heard, *Restoration Quarterly* 38:1 (1996), and "Down with History, Up with Reading: The Current State of Biblical Studies," address by Gary Rendsburg, Cornell University to McGill University Department of Jewish Studies, May 9-10, 1999 (available online at http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/jewish/30yrs/rendsburg/index.html).
30. R. Dr. Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishma*, KTAV Publishing House, Inc. p. 190-198.
31. No one (in mainstream Orthodox thought, at least) would question the inherent legitimacy of the involvement (if not over-involvement) in Talmudic study regarding goring oxen, indentured Canaanite servants, or freshly hatched eggs; despite their lack of applicability to the student's personal life.
32. R. Shalom Carmy, "A Room With a View, but a Room of our Own," *The Orthodox Forum: Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*, 1996, pg. 2.

33. Ibid, pg. 4.
34. From the Introduction to *YCT: The Book of Samuel*. I would suggest that the Ramban's and Netsiv's introductions to the books of the *Humash* are the pleasant exception to the above rule, although they did not systematically use their ideas as a framework for interpreting the texts at hand.
35. A full discussion of the use and misuse of chiasmus as an interpretive tool can be found in N Klaus' "Pivot Patterns in the Early Prophets," ch. 1; M. Boda's "Chiasmus in Ubiquity: Symmetrical Mirages in Nehemiah 9" in *JSOT* 1996.
36. *Between the Lines of the Bible*, p. 159 and p. 191.
37. Others have attempted to argue R. Etshalom's case. In a personal conversation with the author, R. Yoel Bin Nun suggests that the midrashic concept of *binyan av* is simply the *leitvort* in a different guise, and quoted a midrash that could be understood to allude to an understanding of chiasm. Nissim Eliyakim writes that several of Rashi's commentaries are clearer if he is alluding to the use of a "leading word" (*Shematin* 128). However, clearly this methodology was not wide-spread. I would suggest that neither has yet made the convincing case that allows us to equate the halakhic methodology of the Talmud or the *darshanut* of the Midrash with an orderly and defined literary tool to interpret *peshuto shel mikra*.
38. More than any other contributor, R. Silber refers to the book's overriding theme in his three essays. R. Silber's approach has appeared in an article written by him in *Tradition* 23:2, Winter 1988, p. 64.
39. Interestingly, both approaches ignore the information that the text actually provides by interpreting this first mention of Pinhas and Hofni in a negative light. This interpretation is correctly reread back into the text after reading chapter 2, but does not appear immediately. I would suggest that in addition to the obvious foreshadowing, both directly to their later sinful behavior, and to the general distrust of sons that permeates the book, the text wishes to contrast their presently neutral behavior with the error-filled conduct of Eli later on in the chapter.
40. *Tanna de-Bei Eliyahu Rabbah* 8 states: "Elkanah would go up to Shiloh four times a year: three as enjoined by the Bible and once of his own volition … and they would stop in cities along the way and spend the night in the city square . . . [when the people would ask] 'Where are you going?' they would reply, 'To the house of ha-Shem in Shiloh . . . Let us go up together!' . . . and the route he traveled one year, he would not travel the next year, but an alternative route, until all of Israel would go up."
41. A full and fascinating reading of the first chapters, which includes a development of the literary phenomenon where the narrative spotlight shifts back and forth from Elkanah's family to Eli's family and back can be found in Uriel Simon's *Reading Prophetic Narratives* p. 2-3.
42. In doing so, R. Silver is following in the footsteps of Professor Uriel Simon, who argues that all secondary characters in the Tanakh serve as foils to the primary characters. See Simon, p. 263-269.
43. Modern academic works also suggest this interpretation. See Barbara Green's *King Saul's Asking*, p. 2-5, with its fascinating use of Bakhtin's dialogism.
44. To ease the neophyte reader's experience, the volume much of the original Tanakh is quoted in both English and Hebrew, the common English variations of names are used, and the text is unencumbered by footnotes.