

EDITOR'S NOTE

IS SOPHOCLES LITERATURE? IS ANYTHING NOT? ON THE WAY TO RAMBAN

Isn't that treating the Torah like literature? Here's the original question: Why, I am asked, when the Torah recounts the story of Phineas's intervention at Ba'al Peor, are the names of the transgressors omitted, and filled in only afterwards? I suggest that Phineas's intervention is spontaneous rather than reflective—as the Halakha states, had he consulted, he would not have been allowed to proceed (*Sanhedrin* 82a). The Torah's hurried narration, one that does not pause to identify the actors but only the acts, conveys the lack of deliberation in Phineas's act.

“But isn't that treating the Torah like literature?” Well, I say, the Torah is written with words and is written for human ears and eyes. Why should it not communicate effectively? Should the Torah be inferior, in its use of language, to other kinds of writing? As the question was a question and not a challenge, no further exchange was necessary.

Notice that this question has nothing in common with the usual complaints we hear about “Bible as Literature” reducing Biblical heroes to mere mortals or even detecting their supposed imperfections. It is a straightforward question about the legitimacy of taking literary style into account. So what's behind it? Why does it come up at all? Is there more to it than meets the eye?

Some may experience, even if they cannot avow, the nagging sense that literature is associated with literacy, and that being literate, in some obscure way, is not a good fit with authentic Jewishness. If God must use language rather than mathematical symbols, why can He not hover over the text, sentimental and *schmaltzy*, like an avuncular Hasidic rebbe, or descend upon us like a furious Mussarnik, or, if He must put on fancy airs, why not the magisterial and orotund formalities of a provincial master of ceremonies? Attributing literary quality to the *Ribbono shel Olam's* words, however vague our notion of what this means, as if He were comparable to a great author, as if He engaged in exacting craftsmanship, mining the

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resources of language and rhetoric in order to communicate the kind of powerful yet subtle message that requires the harnessing of language and style, seems incompatible with our cultural expectations, the way some people feel that an African-American celebrity who speaks grammatical English is not sufficiently black.

The underlying problem is that the word “literature” can mean almost anything. If the Torah’s style was *heimish* or middle brow, that too would be a “literary” mode of presentation, albeit not of the “highest” order. We would then rightly inquire why that style is appropriate for the word of God, and that would bring us back to treating the Bible as literature.

When educated people talk about reading the Bible as literature, they usually attribute to certain passages, the ones that interest them, some of the characteristics of high quality literature, which, from any religious point of view except that of Jewish populism, is a good thing. But insisting on the adjective “literary” implies they are reading it *only* as an aesthetic object, as opposed to reading it as something else; they embrace literary form as a substitute for substance. When academics “do” “Bible as Literature,” it is often because they prefer to sidestep the historical content or theological claims of Tanakh. Some believe that teaching the Bible as literature avoids breaching the high wall of separation between religion and education, in order to salvage the book as a secular resource of Western culture. This should trouble us. The prevalence of such attitudes led the poet, in “Under Which Lyre,” to warn against fraternizing with “guys in advertising firms” and those “who read the Bible for its prose.”

If Tanakh uses words, we said, that makes it “literature.” What kind of literature? First and foremost religious literature, so that any reading subordinating religious content to aesthetic form goes against the grain. But even this is too general. The Bible contains passages of law, narrative, and poetry; it contains commandments, prophecy, and wisdom. Just as it would be foolish to impose one paradigm of “literature” on non-sacred works, it would be erroneous to apply one model of literary examination to the variety of Biblical texts.

Later we will look at Biblical narrative, particularly the characterization of Jacob in Genesis. And we will see that even narrative literature is too broad a term for what is happening in the Torah. First, with your permission, a detour through two 20th century approaches to Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and a parallel issue about modern novels. Appreciating the complexities of profane literature will prepare us for literary perspectives on the Torah.

II

In the 1970's, Aristotle ("Telly") Savalas starred as *Kojak*, and non-Jewish literature could still be found in public places frequented by Orthodox Jews. When he shared his *weltanschauung* with a popular magazine I could peruse the result at the local barbershop. Perhaps deeming his status as a Greek-American show business icon authorization to muse on the glory that was Greece, he devoted much of the interview to manhandling Sigmund Freud.

Freud, you may recall, held that small boys unconsciously desire to kill their fathers in order to possess the mother. In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus's parents are alarmed by a prophecy that their son would kill his father and marry his mother, and abandon the infant, who is saved by a shepherd. Oedipus learns of the prophecy: believing the shepherd to be his father, he leaves home to avert his fate, only to run into and kill his real father and subsequently marry his real mother. In this tale Freud found an anticipation of his theory. The incensed Savalas, proud son of Hellas-Hollywood, savages the old Viennese psychiatrist with a breathtaking knockout punch: Evidently Freud hadn't bothered to read the entire play; if he had, he would have learned that the Greek heritage, far from accepting the universality of perverted desire, portrayed Oedipus as blinding himself in horror upon learning what he had done.

What is the dispute, the *nekuddat ha-mahloket*, between Savalas and Freud? Both regard Sophocles' play as "literature" and thus are ready to read it as "literature." The conflict is about what kind of literature it is and what conclusions to draw from this. Savalas treats *Oedipus Rex* as a drama of social realism. From his point of view, the literary truth is in the behavior of the characters, and Oedipus judges his transgressions, albeit unintended, with utmost revulsion. On this premise, one could go further than Savalas. The story of Oedipus, horrific as it is, is not tragic but ridiculous. It asks us to assume that Oedipus and his mother went to extraordinary lengths to stop the dreadful prophecy's fulfillment, yet they did not think twice before he married a woman old enough to be his mother, and nobody investigated the identity of the man, old enough to be Oedipus's father, whose life he took about the same time his new wife's first husband lost his.

Freud, for his part, is above such practical concerns because his eye is on the plot. Precisely because the story is odd and unsettling, one is intrigued, not by the dubious verisimilitude of the characters, but by the indubitable fascination of the story. He concludes, rightly or wrongly, that we are attracted by the plot because it touches on occult themes concealed

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from our conscious life, glimpsed obscurely behind the theatrical veil. Greek drama, at least early Greek drama, may differ from much modern drama in that the Greeks presented archetypal truths, personified by almost allegorical characters, where their modern counterparts, from Shakespeare to Ibsen, concentrate on the unfolding of individual characters.

III

One more essential point before we turn to Genesis. Our previous discussion should not be taken to set up a dichotomy, where a work is either psychologically realistic or archetypal. Serious writing often fulfills multiple goals. E. M. Forster, in his classic *Aspects of the Novel*, distinguishes between novelists driven by character and those driven by plot. The former create exciting characters and build stories around them: one thinks of Dickens or Dostoevsky. The latter formulate an interesting plot, and develop characters in line with the needs of the plot. Offhand it seems that the first kind of novelist cares about psychological reality, while the second is primarily a storyteller. Under that impression I was puzzled at Forster's citing Henry James as an example of the plot-driven novelist. James' fiction is known for excruciatingly intricate examination of the inner lives of his characters; external action is correspondingly sparse. Despite this, Forster's judgment is on the mark: James takes pains with the shape of the narrative; in the course of elaborating his story he explores endlessly the consciousness of his characters, but he does not allow them to undermine the structure he has chosen. I bring this to your attention to show that orientation to plot need not entail indifference to personality, nor does the importance of individual characters exclude emphasis on the narrative context in which the characters are embedded.

IV

In our community, treating the Bible as literature often means remarking on the psychology of Biblical characters. Advocates of this approach are often accused of shrinking great Biblical personalities to everyday dimensions. The worry about diminishing the religious stature of the *avot* and *immahot* is legitimate. Elsewhere I have argued that this is less due to viewing these figures as human beings than to the debased pop psychology language employed and the cheapened, secularized conception of religious life it represents: "Casual deterministic assumptions, clichéd depictions of

emotion, a philosophy that cannot grasp the dramatic, absolute, momentous solemnity of the moral-religious life.”¹ There is nothing religiously wrong with considering the humanity of Biblical figures, as long as we do so with appropriate reverence; if anything, appreciating the religious humanity of ideal figures may help our emancipation from the shallow understanding of the human condition inculcated by our culture.

Now let us confront a different objection to analyzing Biblical figures. This argument grants the religious legitimacy, even the salubriousness, of the psychological approach but questions it on literary grounds, as *peshat*. The psychological approach to Biblical figures regards them as resembling characters in a particular kind of modern text, namely modern biography or fiction. In such literature, the center of attention is the individual and his or her relationships to others. We see them struggling against temptations and obstacles; we contemplate the trajectory of their lives. Genesis is not that kind of literature, because its stories are less about individuals than about God and about the destiny of Israel. On this reading the personalities and personal travails of the *avot* and *immahot* are peripheral.

Indeed, the reader of Genesis will encounter substantial divergence from the paradigm of the modern novel or biography, including ubiquitous divine intervention and frequent highlighting of divine promises. Ramban, no stranger to *peshat*, interprets some of the stories of the *avot* typologically, as a blueprint for later Jewish history, underscoring the inadequacy of reading them individualistically. Traditional Jewish interpretation often looks at the *avot* and *immahot* not only as immeasurably greater than us, an attitude that might limit or constrain our applying to them ordinary psychological categories, but as belonging to a different dimension, the significance of which does not pertain to their personal lives but to their function within the story of *kelal Yisrael* or even as virtually symbolic elements elevated to the stratosphere of theosophy. We are all familiar with the mystical identification of Abraham with the divine attribute of *Hesed*, Jacob with *Emet*, and so on. In effect, the lecturer who focuses on the text wholly as a source of realistic psychological insight is not only shrinking the *avot* to our size, but looking at the narrative through the wrong lens. He or she is reproducing, with respect to Tanakh, the approach exhibited by Telly Savalas’s polemic on Sophocles, stuck to a contemporary view of how a plot works. He is not simply reading the Bible as literature, but imposing on it the preoccupations of a particular kind of modern literature.

¹ See “Imitate the Ramban, not the Professors: An Interview with Asher Friedman” (*Hamevaser*, 2000); available at www.atid.org/resources/carmy/imitate.asp.

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As a criticism of a popular trend in “Bible as Literature” education, this objection is accurate and needful. To skip over the prominent role of divine intervention, to overlook the extraordinary aspect of the relationship between the *avot* and *immahot* and God, to ignore the tight link between the patriarchal narrative and the divine promise to the people and land of Israel, risks a selective and misleading interpretation of Genesis. As an objection to literary reading of Tanakh, the criticism is vitiated by the faulty premise that there is a contradiction between the *plot*-oriented perspective, according to which the characters are subsidiary to the arc of the narrative, and the *character*-oriented perspective, which experiences the plot as the product of individual moral drama. As we have seen, both perspectives are present in creative works, albeit in differing combinations.

There is a fundamental reason to insist, not only on the legitimacy as *peshat* of the character-oriented perspective, but on its necessity. Think once more of Oedipus, and the vision of man he represents. The play is haunted by an awful prophecy. Oedipus and others endeavor to avert it, but to no avail. Fixity of character is emblematic of the outlook of Greek tragedy, and, to a large degree, of Greek culture in general. Plot is destiny; character is fate and cannot be escaped. It is not surprising that the literature of Greece, from Homer through the great tragedians, reflects the supremacy of plot over the free choice of the individual. For Judaism, by contrast, human choice is crucial; hence character is not static. Despite divine control of the story’s outcome and the symbolic role assigned to the *avot* that invite mystical deterministic readings, the capacity of characters to change *must* play a role in Biblical narrative.

V

In order to secure his father’s blessings, our father Jacob, at his mother’s bidding, misleads him. Later he acts craftily towards his father-in-law Laban. Added to the moral problem, those guided by widely accepted mystical doctrine have another worry. “You have given truth (*emet*) to Jacob” (Micah 7:20) is taken to imply that Jacob’s inherent trait is truth, so that he and truth are welded together, so to speak, unchangeably. Even taking into account the efforts of our greatest commentators of the modern period, Malbim, Netsiv, R. Hirsch, and others, to justify or extenuate his actions, they hardly qualify as the quintessence of truthfulness.

Defenders of the identity of Jacob and truth have felt pressure to come up with creative and sometimes counterintuitive definitions of

truth. We will not survey these attempts. It is most plausible to maintain that the Biblical word *emet*, in our connection, does not pertain to Jacob's truthfulness but to God's faithfulness and steadfastness towards Jacob. I am not sure why this idea, stated by Ramban (Genesis 32:11) is rarely cited by these writers.² But Ramban provided the basis for another approach:

[God] had always led [Jacob] on the path of truth but not particularly with this trait until his return to the land of his fathers; also because he had to conduct himself with Laban in a contorted manner that is not the way of truth. (Commentary to Genesis 48:15; cf. 46:1).

Biblical psychology, as noted, is a dynamic psychology. Abraham after his ordeals is not the man we first meet, nor is Moses. Ramban, a master Kabbalist, who fully appreciated the symbolic and figurative dimension of the patriarchs, is, all the same, equally sensitive to their psychological development.

When you experience a demanding work of art, you may assess a character in terms of his or her moral struggle, as an individual agent who is the origin of his actions, or in terms of the situation they are in and must navigate. These are complementary responses to the drama of human life. Ramban's double interpretation, in the passage just quoted, illustrates his awareness of this interpretive duality, and our study of literature helps us notice what he is doing. Ramban's first explanation of Jacob's evolution is that the virtue of truth became Jacob's distinguishing trait only after his long Aramean vale of soul-making. The second stresses circumstantial pressures that made the virtue of truthfulness unrealizable at early stages of his journey. Both presuppose that God's action as the architect of Biblical history and the exemplary standing granted to the *avot* in that history do not preclude the kind of respect and attention we owe real people in the real world.³

² See also R. Hutner, *Pahad Yitshak, Sukkot* 20:5.

³ Much of this discussion was formulated in conversation with Yitzchak Fried and Charles Wollman, with an assist, on one point, from Aaron Perlow.