



## Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

### Contemporary Parshanut

Alan Goldman

If most of us were asked where to find a commentary on the *parsha*, we would likely go to our edition of the *Mikraot Gedolot*, a compilation of Torah commentaries first printed in the early 1500s. While the layout and the readability of this *sefer* have (thankfully) improved over time, the set of commentaries found in any edition has remained substantially the same for five centuries. They include the ancient *Targum* of Onkelos, the primary medieval commentators (notably Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban), and some later *parshanim*, such as Sforno, Or HaChaim, and Kli Yakar. As a result, these commentaries have remained the primary lenses through which we read the Torah.<sup>1</sup>

*Parshanut* (exegesis) developed further in the modern era. The Hasidic movement introduced its own methods of reading the text, heavily influenced by Kabbala and the movement's own ideals. The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the influential *peirush* of R' Samson Raphael Hirsch, which aimed to elucidate Torah for a contemporary audience facing the challenge of Reform Judaism. Also well-known from this later period are the works of the Malbim, the Netziv, Shadal, and others.

During the past fifty-plus years, the Torah community has benefited from the work of a new generation of *parshanim*, most of whom are based in Israel. These commentators are worth noting because of the approaches they take and the insights they offer, some of which we'll consider here:

**The 'big picture'** – Several contemporary *parshanim* look at the text with a broad view. They consider the structure of sections within the Torah, as well as the overall structure of entire *parshiot* and *chumashim*. At the same time, they are sensitive to specific word choices, as are the medieval *pashtanim* like Rashi. Nechama Leibowitz z'l and Rabbi Menachem Leibtag are two prominent writers whose works take such an approach. To cite just one of many examples, see R' Leibtag's analysis of Sefer Vaykira, and how it can be divided into two thematically distinct halves.<sup>2</sup>

**Influence of Jewish independence** – Not surprisingly, the creation of the State of Israel, which we celebrate in the month of Iyar, has had a deep impact on many *parshanim*. Writers such as R' Yaakov Medan and R' Yoel Bin-Nun frequently refer to the theme of *geula* (redemption) in their work, and explore how an independent Jewish society should function according to the Torah. They are

also sensitive to the self-image of the Jew: Rav Bin-Nun once spoke in Cleveland, and opened his lecture by saying, "For many years, I've been troubled by *Parshat Vayishlach*," referencing that *parsha's* description of Yaakov's humbling himself before Eisav.

**Wisdom from other fields** – Today's *parshanim* draw from a range of fields, including archeology, psychology, and linguistics, among many others. Through their knowledge of these disciplines, they arrive at new (and often startlingly original) explanations, while maintaining fidelity to the core elements of Jewish belief. Dr. Avivah Zornberg is one such commentator; her analysis of Biblical characters is grounded in keen psychological reflections on human behavior.

One of my favorite insights of Dr. Zornberg's came during an appearance of hers in town several years ago. She commented on the *pasuk* in *Parshat Ki Tisa* (Shemot 31:10), in which Hashem says to Moshe, "*Ve-atah hanicha li*" (loosely translated "Now, let me be"), as he tells Moshe he will destroy the Jewish people for worshipping the Golden Calf. Dr. Zornberg read the word "*hanicha*" as related to the Biblical personality Noach, since both words share the root letters *nun* and *chet*. That is, Hashem was saying to Moshe, "*Noach* me" – don't intercede on behalf of Bnei Yisrael, just as Noach did not intervene to prevent the Flood from happening.

Every generation gives rise to its own set of Torah commentaries, since each generation is faced with its own circumstances – religious, political, social, psychological, etc. – and seeks a Torah message that responds to these concerns. Committed Jews want to engage with the text on their own and produce writings reflecting their understandings.

By studying contemporary *parshanim*, we are not only engaging with new ideas and approaches to Torah. We are also actively participating in the *parshanut* conversation, and thereby demonstrating that Torah interpretation is a living phenomenon. The classical *mefarshim* continue to retain their importance, even as they are joined by additional thinkers who further enrich our understandings.

Obviously, this short piece is merely a brief overview of a vast topic. If you are interested in suggestions for further reading, please contact me at [agoldmanesq@hotmail.com](mailto:agoldmanesq@hotmail.com).

<sup>1</sup> My focus here is on the Torah, but a similar statement can be made about both *Neviim* and *Ketuvim*, though the commentaries in the *Mikraot Gedolot* on *Nach* are different (except for *Targum* and Rashi) from those in the *Mikraot Gedolot* on Torah.

<sup>2</sup> <https://tanach.org/vayikra/ach/achs1.htm>.

## The Challenge and Blessing of the Land of Israel

Sarah Rudolph

When is a curse not a curse?

After the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, G-d tells the serpent, "Because you did this, you are cursed above all animals... you will go on your belly and eat dust all the days of your life" (Bereishis 3:14). Eating dust sounds like an awful fate, and the Gemara in Yoma 75a records a dispute about the exact nature of the awfulness: either that every food will taste like dust, or that the serpent will crave dust above all foods. However, there is another side to the story: The Gemara continues with a statement from Rabbi Yosei highlighting the benefits present even in G-d's punishments – such as the fact that "when [the serpent] goes up on the roof, its food is with it; when it goes down, its food is with it."

Some curse! True, we might prefer to enjoy good food, but merely *having* food (however we understand the precise notion of "dust" as food) at the ready, all the time, still seems like a fairly good deal. In fact, the Gemara in Berachos 57a says that a serpent in a dream symbolizes ready livelihood – just like dust is always available to a serpent.

Why curse the serpent with what sounds like a blessing of never going hungry?

While Rabbi Yosei's point is about the wonder of a G-d who punishes without completely destroying, the Chiddushei HaRim (cited in *Maayanah Shel Torah* by Alexander Zusha Friedman) offers a poignant explanation from a different angle:

*What, exactly, is the curse?*

*Indeed, the curse is in the fact that [the serpent] was distanced so far from holiness, to the point of preventing him from ever needing to raise his eyes toward Heaven, like other creatures who search for their food and sometimes raise their eyes heavenward to request food from Hashem.... Essentially, Heaven doesn't want to hear his voice, in the sense of "Take what's yours and get out of My sight, so I don't see you or hear from you again."*

The promise of perpetual sustenance might seem like a blessing – until we realize what it means one will lack. If the food is always there, where is the need to turn to G-d? If there is no need to turn to G-d, where is the relationship, the spiritual connection? Everything the serpent needs is provided, sure, but it is dry, meaningless, literal and figurative dust of the earth.

So, the curse that seems to be a blessing – really is a curse.

And when is a challenge – maybe even an apparent curse – really a blessing?

In Devarim 11:10, Moshe tells the people that the Promised Land, which they're on the verge of finally entering, "is not like the land of Egypt," where it was easy to irrigate and create a lush, fertile garden. Rather, as Ramban paraphrases, it is "a very thirsty land and needs rain... And if you transgress G-d's will and He doesn't seek it with rains of *ratzon*, behold it is very bad; it won't plant and won't grow... [but] if you listen to My commandments and I give rain..." – that's when it's a land flowing with milk and honey.

Basically, the Promised Land is full of uncertainty, a land of mountains and droughts which might be very very bad or might be very very good.

Is that supposed to inspire the people, get them all excited on the eve of their entry into this uncertain, demanding, difficult place? Yes, it is.

G-d could have given us a land like Egypt, where the water is there for the taking and crops are easy to grow – but then, like the serpent, we would never have to turn to Him. And what a curse that would be. Instead, He puts us in a land full of all kinds of challenges. These challenges are no curse, but provide an opportunity to recognize the need for G-d in our lives. These challenges can be overcome through Torah and *mitzvos* – including prayer – basically, through developing a relationship with Him. And there is no greater blessing than that.

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