



Dedicated by Nathan Kirsh in recognition of the tireless efforts of the members of the Beit Midrash Zichron Dov in disseminating Torah learning and Torah values throughout the community

1. Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom, *Heroes and Villains*, torah.org

One of the remarkable, often overlooked features of Torah narrative is that the text rarely passes explicit judgment on the various individuals we encounter. We are familiar with heroes (e.g. Avraham, Rivkah, Mosheh), villains (Lavan, Pharaoh, Bil'am) and persons of questionable character (Lot and his daughters, Nadav and Avihu), despite the fact that at no point does the text explicitly "rate" these people. (There are two exceptions: Noach... and Mosheh Rabbenu...) We recognize these classifications – which have engendered a typology so ingrained that "Esav" is a Midrashic code-word for Rome (at its most despicable and terrifying), "Yitzchak" is the ultimate model of martyrdom and so on – we must admit that at no point in the text are any of these people defined as good or evil. How did each of them achieve their storied place in our tradition, in our liturgy and literature and, most significantly, in our mindset?

Preliminary Questions

2. Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim 2:8

It is very clear that every new event cannot happen unless an immediate cause catalyzed it, and that cause also has a cause, and so until it reaches the First Cause of all, meaning the Divine will and choice. Therefore, prophets sometimes subtract all of the intermediaries in speaking, and attribute a new human act to the Creator... It says of something caused by human choice, in a nation's war to control another nation, or a man's arousal to harm another, or even to shame him, it said when Nevuchadnezzar and his camp came to power, "I commanded My holy ones; also, I have called My warriors in My rage" ... And regarding Shimi ben Gera, it said, "For Gd told him to curse David," and when Yosef haTzaddik escaped jail, it said, "He sent a king, who freed him" ...

3. Talmud, Sanhedrin 102b

Rav Ashi was dealing with the three kings [who were not admitted to *olam haba*]; he said, "Tomorrow, we will begin with our peers [or: friends]." Menasheh appeared to him in a dream, and said, "You call us your peer, and the peers of your father?" ... [Rav Ashi] said to him: Since you are so wise, why did you serve idolatry? He replied, "Had you been there, you would have lifted the hem of your tunic and run after me." The next day, [Rav Ashi] told the Sages, "Let us begin with our masters."

4. Midrash, Bereishit Rabbah 30:10 – Part 1

"Noach walked with Gd" Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Nechemiah [debated]: Rabbi Yehudah said: This may be compared to a noble who had two children, one older and one younger. He told the younger, "Walk with me," and he told the older, "Come walk before me." Avraham was strong, "Walk before Me and be complete." Noach was weak, "Noach walked with Gd."

An approach

5. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (20th century USA), *Halakhic Man* (Kaplan translation, pp. 100-101)

The Scriptural portion of the creation narrative is a legal portion, in which are to be found basic, everlasting halakhic principles... If the Torah then chose to relate to man the tale of creation, we may clearly derive one law from this manner of procedure – viz, that man is obligated to engage in creation and the renewal of the cosmos.

6. Rabbi Tzvi Tau, *Tzaddik Be-emunato Yichyeh* pp. 12-14, cited at <https://etzion.org.il/en/introduction-ii-legitimacy-literary-reading-bible>

Some people think we can approach the Bible with our human intellect, removed from all holiness and faith, with a dry, secular, academic approach where the scholar stands above the material he is studying. The scholar determines what should be brought close and what should be pushed away... Rav Kook compares this to the distant past, when they

would look at the moon without a telescope. The moon is very far from us, and because it is so far, people who looked at it with the naked eye thought that the moon is smiling or winking, that it has a person's face, etc. They would worship the moon, sacrifice to it, speak to it, and why would they do all of this? Because of the great distance... So too regarding the Holy Writings: We are so far away from prophecy, that when we look at it we just read ourselves into it – our intellect, our opinions, our petty concerns. It is like looking at the moon without a telescope! Rav Kook says, what is our "telescope?" What will allow us to bridge the great distance? It is faith... Even though we are not prophets, we are privileged to have *Chazal*, who were closer to prophecy... This is crucial to know, that via *Chazal* we can see more deeply... When you look at the Bible with your own two eyes, it is like looking at the moon without a telescope – you don't see the moon at all, just yourself and your own imagination.

7. Talmud, Sanhedrin 104b

בקשו עוד למנות אחד, באה דמות דיוקנו של אביו ונשטחה לפניהם ולא השגיחו עליה, באה אש מן השמים ולחכה אש בספסליהם ולא השגיחו עליה, יצאה בת קול ואמרה להם "חזית איש מהיר במלאכתו לפני מלכים יתניצב בל יתניצב לפני חשפים (משלי כב:כט)", מי שהקדים בייתי לביתו ולא עוד אלא שביתי בנה בשבע שנים וביתו בנה בשלש עשרה שנה, לפני מלכים יתיצב, [בל יתיצב] לפני חשכים! ולא השגיח עליה. יצאה בת קול ואמרה "המעמך ישלמנה כי מאסת כי אטה תבחר ולא אני ומה ידעת דבר (איוב לד:לג)"

They wanted to list one more [King Solomon]. The image of his father came and bowed before them, and they paid no attention. Fire came from heaven and licked at their benches, and they paid no attention. A small [Heavenly] voice emerged and said, "'Have you seen a man who is quick in his work? He will stand before king, he will not stand before those who are darkened.' He put My house before his house, and not only that, he built My house in seven years while he took thirteen years to build his house. He shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before darkened ones!" And they paid no attention. A small [Heavenly] voice emerged and said, "Shall you be in charge of payment, such that you can reject it? Shall you choose, not Me? Speak of what you know!"

8. Talmud, Shabbat 56a

אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמני אמר רבי יונתן: כל האומר דוד חטא - אינו אלא טועה, שנאמר ויהי דוד לכל דרכיו משכיל וד' עמו וגו', אפשר חטא בא לידו ושכינה עמו? אלא מה אני מקיים מדוע בזית את דבר ד' לעשות הרע - שביקש לעשות ולא עשה

Rav Shemuel bar Nachmeni cited Rabbi Yonatan: Anyone who says David sinned is only mistaken, as Shemuel I 18:41 says, "And David was insightful in all of his ways, and Gd was with him, etc." Can it be that sin came to his hand and the *Shechinah* was with him? Rather, how do I explain Shemuel II 12:9, "Why did you degrade the word of Gd, to practice evil?" He tried to do it, and did not do it.

9. Rabbi Dr. Shalom Carmy, *Imitate the Ramban, Not the Professors*, <https://www.lookstein.org/professional-dev/imitate-ramban-not-professors/>

Asher Friedman (interviewer): Our growing sensitivity to psychological and moral complexities gives us great tools for analyzing narratives in *Tanakh*. Yet often those who attempt such analysis end up turning our *Avot* and *Immahot* into pop-psychology case studies. How should we provide psychological depth to our understanding of *Tanakh* without falling prey to these dangers?

Shalom Carmy: Are we modern people, or modern Orthodox Jews, really more sensitive to psychological and moral complexities? We definitely talk about them a lot. Yet explosion of verbiage, like monetary inflation, does not inevitably make one spiritually richer; it may simply cheapen the currency.

One reason that people shrink the larger than life personalities of *Tanakh* to pop-psychology size is that they are accustomed to treat themselves the same way. What characterizes pop-psychology? Casual deterministic assumptions, clichéd depictions of emotion, a philosophy that cannot grasp the dramatic, absolute, momentous solemnity of the moral-religious life. This is not the way I think of myself; it is not the way I think of you. It is not the way one should think about any human being created uniquely in the image of G-d. Once people see nothing wrong in entertaining secular conceptions of themselves, once they take for moral and psychological insight the tired idiom of the therapeutic, it's no wonder that they are tone-deaf to the grandeur of the *Avot* and *Immahot*.

How can we retrieve an appropriate reverence for the *Avot* and, in the process, enhance our own stature as spiritual beings? One crucial step is to take responsibility for our language. Rather than accept our language and habits of thought off the rack, so to speak, we must struggle to create the authentic words adequate to the depths and sublimity and uniqueness of our experience.