

BOOK REVIEW

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire*
Jewish Publication Society, 1995, Paperback, Doubleday 1996.

This extraordinary book (which was awarded this year's National Jewish Book Award of the Jewish Book Council) is a compendium of essays devoted to each of the 12 *Parshiyot* of Genesis, based on classes in *Parshat Hashavua* that the author has been giving for 10 years in Jerusalem. I write "extraordinary" advisedly because, despite the fact that discussions on *Parshat Hashavua* are such a well-trodden literary genre that one wonders how one can still find something fresh to write which will stir the mind or heart, Zornberg's method of treatment is highly original and unique, and comes to impress us once again with the vitality and power that the Biblical tales can still hold for a mind that has been shaped by the best of Western thought. As one reviewer successfully phrased it: "Not quite scholarship as such, nor exegesis, nor literary criticism or theology, it partakes of them all, filtering familiar texts through a richly intelligent and transforming sensibility."¹

Avivah Zornberg's influence as a teacher has been compared to that of Nechamah Leibowitz, in drawing wide circles of students to a new and heightened interest in Torah, studied through the prism of Midrash and the classical Biblical commentators. Aside from the fact that Zornberg has so far limited herself only to English-speaking audiences, the excitement and following that her teaching has elicited does bear such comparison, but there the similarity ends. While Leibowitz's approach is mainly methodological and analytical, systematically mapping out the field of exegetical material and establishing well-defined criteria for approaching and analyzing the various commentators' understandings of the Biblical source (such as training us to ask the "What-was-Rashi's-difficulty?" — a question that has now become legion), Zornberg's approach is more suggestive and introspective. The guiding principle implicit in Zornberg's method is that the central medium through which the mystery of God's revelation is articulated and deciphered is a psychological one. The seamless continuity between the psychological and the religious life which Zornberg presupposes is already intimated in the title of the book, which is drawn from the poet, Wallace Stevens, who wrote that "not to have is the beginning of desire." The suggestion is that only a creature set down in the midst of limitations, and perceiving those limitations, can be moved in the direction of desire. The patriarchs and matriarchs, whose characters she brings

to life with the vividness of a novelist, are viewed as subjects of limitations and therefore desires. In recognizing and formulating paradigmatic motifs and patterns embedded within the divinely choreographed lives and events of people who confront God's presence, or try to evade it as they struggle to carve out their particular identity and destiny on the granite of eternity, we learn the meaning of all existence. Sometimes the very heavily-laden chapters betray the fact that they are an attempt to fuse together in writing the fruit of disparate classes formulated over many years of teaching. In such instances, the individual themes create a layered rather than a unified effect, and the central motifs tend to get lost in the myriad of material without consistently carrying the wealthy and variegated sources loaded upon them via a very tightly threaded fabric. Because of this, there are points at which the reader would do well to digest the material piecemeal, rather than trying to trace and follow a single theme throughout, even though it all purports to belong to one heading. It is not so much the structure, or a single message, but rather the richly empathetic presentation, alive to the dramas and timeless resonances of the Biblical situation, and expressed in an elegant, eloquent prose of great beauty, that provides the common thread and keeps the reader enthralled.

As Zornberg herself aptly puts it in the introduction to the book, her psychologically reflective approach and eclectic storehouse of associations provides her audience with the opportunity to "eavesdrop" on "personal meditations" based on a "weaving of biblical, midrashic, and literary sources." Relying on Gerald Brun's distinction, she characterizes her mode of inquiry as closer to the "rhetorical" than to the "methodical" mode, which is "more concerned with finding than with proving, is more speculative than analytical, more heuristic than polemical." Her interest is in exploring "problems, relationships, patterns, without arriving at single-minded or schematic theories." In a method that is at once both deeply in keeping with the traditional exegesis of rabbinic midrash and medieval commentary in its keen sensitivity to the nuances of the texts and to the many voices speaking through them, yet fiercely contemporary in the sometimes startling literary associations, Zornberg transposes the perceptions of the ancients into a modern key. With imaginative freedom, she applies the contemporary insights of modern civilization and culture to the vulnerabilities and dilemmas of our Biblical forebears.

To an academic audience of the older generation, spoiled by the "scientific truth" notion of the "historical-philological" method, such personal readings may be dismissed as too subjective to warrant serious scholarly attention. Even the more stodgy traditionalist Torah scholar might question whether Zornberg's particular method of reading texts can be classified as *אמיתתה של תורה* (the truth of Torah), or whether it might not just be a vehicle and filter for the

expression of her own unique imaginative דרשנות (homiletics). If so, the value of her essays would be less exegetical than aesthetic, parallel to that of a lyric poem, with the texts upon which the various insights are pegged subsidiary to the main content, which is to reveal the personal sensibilities of the author. In the introduction to her book, Zornberg already attempts to disarm any anticipated critique in this vein on the part of her readers by supplying them in advance with a definition of her particular mode of reading texts. She declares quite frankly that she is not looking simply to elucidate what the Bible “really means” or what moral or homiletical uses can be made of the Biblical narrative. Her method is rather to let the text illuminate life, and then let that life reflect back on the text, in what she aptly terms a dialectical hermeneutic. Such a method gives up from the very beginning on the notion that there is one “correct” intention or interpretation of the text, which transcends the reader’s subjectivity. The task of interpreting is much more creative and fluid.

Although Zornberg refuses to feel apologetic regarding this conception of textual interpretation, at several points, she also expresses her awareness that if this reading of personal history in the Torah is not to degenerate into a reading *into* the Torah, there should of course be — as she puts it — “rules, decorums, a sense of traditional understandings.” For her this involves spreading her net out far and wide, collecting together the broadest possible range of sources, intuitively selecting them in a manner which has not yet presented itself in any intelligible order, until what finally occurs is the mystic experience of “Aha!” when suddenly all falls into place, and a unified meta-theme or sensibility is evoked. Nevertheless, there always remains the nagging suspicion that one may have run away with the text and that this is not what traditional “learning Torah” is all about. This is especially so when the range of sources brought to bear on the topic includes not only the traditional Jewish texts, but also Zornberg’s wide knowledge and extensive readings in psychology, philosophy, anthropology, general literature and literary criticism.

In this connection, it might be worth noting that one of the formative influences in Zornberg’s upbringing was the years she spent in Gateshead and in the environment of Musar. Some of her anxiety regarding the distinctive method of interpretation she employs could be regarded as a vestige of that Gateshead past, for one of the central concerns of the Musar movement was deliberating on the question: How indeed does one learn Torah, and to what extent should one include one’s subjectivity in the process? On the one hand, one must have a basic empathy with the text in order to understand it, but, on the other hand, the Musar teachers were all too aware of the function of גניעות (personal biases) which could distort one’s understanding and render it false.

Actually, the problem that the Musarniks raise is related to a more general

hermeneutical concern that has been articulated in the world at large following the new awareness of the role that interpretation plays in the reading of texts. Ever since Kantian critique of knowledge, there has developed in the critical reading public a growing consciousness that there is no such thing as a raw text, fixed and unchanging, leaving the task of the reader as merely to uncover and rediscover what is quietly waiting to be revealed. Inevitably, there is always a process of identification and selection that takes place. The words do not speak for themselves. They are mediated by the sensibilities of the reader, who must understand and interpret them.

In reaction to this new consciousness, there have developed at least three different interpretive approaches as to how one should react to the hermeneutical dilemma, which — for our purposes — I shall label the historic (which is largely the approach of the aforementioned “historical-philological” school), the experiential, and the subjectivist. The historic approach seeks to overcome the gap between the reader and the text by neutralizing the active participation of the reader and trying as best as one can to understand the text on its own terms, bringing to bear scholarly, textual, and philological tools with as much intellectual integrity and reliability as possible, in order to reconstruct the original context and intent of the writer. At the other end of the scale are the members of the *verstehen* school, who believe that in order to interpret texts accurately, the skilled reader must develop a special power of understanding, which is quite different from the external objectified knowledge of the historicist. The power of *verstehen* is what allows the reader to participate in the spirit of the text in an experiential and intuitive manner, and to partake of the unique and ideal flavor within it that transcends time and place, and is not achieved by ordinary intellectual activity. Although these two groups differ radically in their approach to texts, the common perception that binds them together is the belief that the text *does have* one true, fixed, objective and unequivocal meaning that must be gleaned. A third group, however, denies the possibility of ever reconstructing accurately an original meaning. We always approach texts with prior spiritual baggage, which colors our reading from the very outset, and although we engage in a dialectic with the text which can serve as a check and balance against our original hypotheses and expectations, this dialectic process itself takes place within parameters that are determined by our own subjectivity. Therefore instead of trying to overcome this difficulty, the third school will flaunt it by turning it on its head. The gap between the reader and the text is not a phenomenon to be decried and neutralized, but rather a legitimate tool to be embraced to the maximum. The more initial assumptions and expectations and subjective baggage we bring with us and invest in the text, the richer our understanding will be.

As is usual in the world of ideas, these general hermeneutical reflections did not pass over the Jewish scene leaving it untouched. Within the Musar movement itself, all three schools can find their respective representatives. Although the Musar teachers in general were extremely wary of the distorting influence that subjectivity can play in the learning of Torah, they nevertheless distinguished between illegitimate biases, which relate to our own personal and selfish interests, and legitimate ones, whose authority stems from a living and hallowed tradition. In the eyes of the Musar teachers, acceptance of traditional interpretations does not necessarily involve unthinking acquiescence and irrational blinkers, or giving up the idea of objective truth. It might just be another way of arriving at it. So what ultimately distinguished between the various Musar schools was not whether or not relying on the predefined expectations of tradition is a legitimate way to study Torah. The issues that divided them were rather: (a) whether it is the job of tradition to merely unearth one unequivocal meaning of the text, or perhaps it too can allow for something more flexible than that, and (b) what role does the student's own understanding of the text play in applying traditional perceptions to it?

It is here, interestingly enough, that we can find within the traditional approach, three subcategories that more or less parallel the same three hermeneutical schools I referred to earlier. On the one hand, we have the rationalist approach of R. Simcha Zissel of Kelm — who regarded traditional biases as a necessary shortcut to a pure and original intent of Torah which does exist, and should subsequently be fortified by independent inquiry; in this he is similar to the historical school. Then we have the anti-rational approach (Zornberg's spiritual mentor through her Gateshead experience, R. Eliyahu Dessler, is one representative of that approach), which also assumes that the Torah bears only one true interpretation, but that this understanding should never be sought by our own independent efforts, for it can only be achieved by totally giving up our sense of self, and submitting unthinkingly and passively to the unified voice and authority of tradition. But the school of Musar that I would like to focus on now — because I think it is the most germane to Zornberg's approach — is a third one, which I will term the creative approach. As opposed to the previous two views, the proponents of this school deny the ability of the student to ever rid himself of his subjectivity when approaching the Torah and to arrive at a single and exclusive meaning of the text. Nevertheless they do not look unfavorably upon the role that our independent and subjective human understanding has to play in the act of study, because they do not see the purpose of learning Torah as merely uncovering a pure and pristine original and objective meaning.

The first representative of this approach was R. Yisrael Salanter himself, who

was convinced that no human perception can ever totally transcend personal biases. *בקיאות* (erudition) and *חריפות* (acuity) can help mitigate the distorting influence of our subjective interests, but one can never avoid the need for a certain measure of *שיקול דעת* (judgment) when weighing up the relative force of various arguments, and it is in this area that room is left for irrational, subjective considerations and for disagreement, especially when dealing with non-halakhic material. The best way to avoid this hazard is to turn to *תלמידי חכמים* (Torah scholars), who have a higher measure of control over their objectivity. But even here arbitrariness is not totally avoided, because the decision as to who is an authorized *חכם* is ultimately determined by considerations of popular consensus — in other words, the number of people that actually appeal to him for his decisions. Interpretations that are based on pure and objective reason and merely reveal what was already in the text still bear a superior status in R. Salanter's eyes, but even blatantly subjective interpretations are also regarded as Torah, and as legitimate supplements to its original meaning, so long as they stem from pure motives.

A more significant extension of the subjective approach can be found in the *שיחות מוסר* (moral discourses) of R. Yosef Bloch, the founder of the Telz school of Musar. Although he too emphasized the necessity for certain neutral and objective criteria in the process of learning Torah which are entailed in the neutral intellectual skill of *חכמה* and *בינה* (knowledge and understanding), he also admits that the subjective factor can never be absent from the final result. *חכמה* (the stage of passively imbibing material from the outside) is similar to R. Salanter's stage of *בקיאות* (erudition), and *בינה* (drawing conclusions independently from within) is similar to the level of *חריפות* (acuity). But the most crucial step, to his mind, is the final stage of *דעת* (judgment), "*כאשר הוא מרגיש*" — *ידיעות אלו במלוא רחבן והיקפן*" — where he feels the full breadth and implication of what he has learned and makes it come alive by weighing and judging its significance, utilizing his own independent judgment and critical powers in the process.

The main difference between R. Salanter and R. Bloch is the manner in which they describe and evaluate the experience of *דעת*. R. Salanter describes it in naturalistic terms and as something we just cannot avoid, but for R. Bloch it is a mystic process and much more positive in nature. If *חכמה* is imbibed from others, and *בינה* from oneself, *דעת* is a kind of *רוח הקודש* (holy spirit) that comes to us from above, with God breathing it, as it were, into our souls. The experience of *דעת* is one of absolute certainty: "*הוא מרגיש ושומע צלצול מלמעלה*" — *המאשר ומקיים את האמת*" (the individual feels and hears the resonance above that verifies and establishes the truth). This description is strikingly similar to that of Zornberg's, who writes (p. xix): "Ultimately the interpretive act becomes

similar to the creative act. One reads, and one begins to hear a certain hum in one's ears," which signals a feeling of identification with the interpretation that transcends any rational explanation.

Up to this point, however, R. Bloch has not spoken of creativity. Relying on intuitive powers need not necessarily involve forfeiting the idea of objectivity, and of merely discovering a truth that is already there, rather than establishing a new one. But the truth is that the creative element is central to R. Bloch's approach, and involves extreme awareness of the extent that the personal character of the reader and the nature of his knowledge will influence his discovery of Torah. Just as we learn to reveal our innermost selves in the study of Torah, so too do we discover Torah by reflecting inward — a process that sometimes appears to render impersonal research as almost superfluous. This understandably could raise severe doubts regarding the absolute nature of the truths gained, for if the Torah we glean is bound to our particular nature, how can it be equated with God's eternal truth? To this, R. Bloch has an original and astoundingly post-modernist kind of answer: Just as the nature of original reality was actually determined according to the dictates of the primordial Torah (הקב"ה איסתכל באורייתא וברא עלמא), so too is the nature of our evolving reality determined by the ongoing interpretations of subsequent generations of Torah scholars, who in this act of interpretation exhibit the human partnership with God in the act of creation.⁴

It is quite likely that Zornberg's Musar background, supplementing the Hassidic style of דברי תורה (Torah teachings) that she absorbed in her parents' home in Glasgow, had a formative influence upon the method that she herself developed in reading the weekly Torah portion. When this spiritual storehouse was subsequently extended by her studies of English literature at Cambridge, it seems to have led to an unconscious process in which she reproduced, in her own highly individual manner, the line of reasoning that R. Yosef Bloch had in mind. Perhaps unwittingly this is what led her to join that same search for the "resonance from above that certifies and establishes the truth," as filtered through her unique amalgam of traditional Jewish exegesis and the sophisticated techniques of modern psychological and literary analysis. So, what I wish to suggest is that this דעת approach may be the link which solves Zornberg's dilemma. For what does this dynamic and psychologicistic Musar understanding of Torah study teach us? It teaches that it is misplaced to seek one fixed and true understanding of Torah, because Torah is the stuff of life itself, fluid and infinite in its possibilities. God gave us a written and predefined text, but he also left us with a few empty pages to fill in. The more we let established Torah flow into our life and shape it, the more our life provides new insights into its inexhaustible ramifications. The broader and fuller the life, the more genuine

and profound the Torah, and testimony to that fact — according to R. Yisrael Salanter's criterion — is the number of people that seek out your Torah and find it meaningful. From the popularity that Zornberg's book is enjoying, one might conclude that her psycho-literary 20th-century way of reading the Bible will also find its place within the hallowed tradition as an authentic exegetical method.

The idea that the Torah contains infinite possibilities of understanding, which are all authentic, has been expressed in many forms. In this connection it is worthwhile quoting something R. A. I. Kook had to say regarding the subject of exegesis. The quote is an excerpt of what he had intended to serve as an introduction to his commentary on *Aggadot Hazal*:

יש בטבע העניינים שנאמרים מאז, והרעיונות שכבר נאמרו, שני עניינים. האחד: להביץ אל נכון יסוד אותו מאמר מצד עצמו, את המונח בו בכלליו ובפרטיו — זאת היא תכונת הפירוש...הרחבה של אותם הדברים שכבר ישנם בתוכנו של המאמר, אלא שהם מקופלים בו. על כן עלינו להרחיב הקמטים כדי לעמוד על כל הרחבתו של המאמר. אמנם יש עוד יחש ידוע, כמה יש בכח של אותם רעיונות הכלולים במאמר לפעול על רעיונות שיש להם יחש עמהם ע"פ חוקי הקישור ההגיוני, וכל המוכן שיש בכל מאמר זה וכל הפרטים שבהרחבתו להפעיל על טבע השכל לחולל ולהוליד דברים חדשים. גם זה היה נכלל במאמר, לא מצד תכונת עצם המאמר הפרטי, כי אם מצד הגבורה האלוקית שהכינה את העולם השכלי ערוך בכל צרכיו ומוכן להרחבה אין קץ, מזה הצד יוקחו הדברים באופן רחב מאוד. על זה נאמר, כמעייך המתגבר וכנהר שאינו פוסק. זהו הצד העליון שבדרכי הדרישה, וביאורו הוא השם הנראה לו, מלשון 'באר', באר מים חיים.⁵

(There are two matters that lie in the nature of things that are repeated from times gone by and ideas that have already been expressed. One of them is to properly understand the basis of the given statement itself, what it contains in its generalities and in its details — this is the characteristic of commentary...elaborating upon those things that already exist within the statement, but in enfolded fashion. Therefore we must stretch the folds open in order to reveal all that is contained within the statement. But there is another known relationship, to what degree those ideas that are contained within the statement have the power to act upon other ideas that relate to them according to the principles of logical connection, and all the meaning that lies in this complete statement that can act upon the nature of the mind to innovate and give birth to new matters. This too was included in the statement, not by virtue of the character of the individual statement itself, but rather by virtue of the divine power which fashioned the rational world ready with all its needs and prepared for unlimited extension. It is from this aspect that things can be taken very broadly indeed. Regarding this it has been said [that Torah is] as an ever-flowing

fountain and a ceaseless river. This is the superior aspect of exegesis, and "Be'ur" [explanation] is its suitable description, since the word stems philologically from the term "Be'er" [well], the well of living waters.)

For those academicians who still feel squeamish about the legitimacy of creative interpretation, R. Kook's words will allow them the option of categorizing Avivah Zornberg's book as one more example of this process in which ביאור (explanation) opens a new "well of living waters." They can then overcome their dry and scholarly inhibitions and relax and enjoy the work as a specimen of living Torah, representing a contemporary form of דעת, rather than just חכמה in the sense of the scientific understanding of an ancient text.

Tamar Ross

NOTES

- 1 Yehudah Mirsky, in *The Jerusalem Report*, 10 May 1995.
- 2 שעורי דעת א (ניו יורק, תש"מ), עמ' 158
- 3 שם, עמ' 23
- 4 שם, עמ' 25: "כשם שע"פ יסוד התורה נברא העולם בששת ימי בראשית, כמו כן בהמשכת ענייני הבריאה תלוי הכל בקביעת הלכות התורה, ומיום שניתנה תורה לישראל, נמסרה לחכמים התורה לקבוע הלכותיה, ועל פיהם יהיה מהלך העולם וחוקות הבריאה, והרי הם ממש שותפים להקב"ה במעשה בראשית"
- 5 This passage, which was intended as an introduction to R. Kook's commentary to the Aggadot of Hazal, appeared in an article entitled "פירוש וביאור", in הדביר — a journal for Torah and Judaic studies, in the year תרפ"א.