

BOOK REVIEW

YAKOV AZRIEL, *THREADS FROM A COAT OF MANY COLORS: POEMS ON GENESIS*. (ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI: TIME BEING BOOKS, 2005) 115, N.P. REVIEWED BY DAN VOGEL.

One of the 70 ways of interpreting biblical texts is poetry. Yakov Azriel has set himself a difficult task: he wants to perceive the immediacy and the relevance of the Torah by highly personalized poetic approaches. There are prerequisites in such an approach: First, his own understanding of the text must be justified; second, the play of his personal imagination must not be so radical as to demand rejection; third, the quality of his poetry must make it an instrument of pleasurable communication. In the main, this first volume of his series passes these tests.

Most of it is in free verse, a form which denies itself the attractions of rhyme and rhythm in the belief that modernity demands its realism. From the pen of a desirous but untalented writer, the lines come out prose broken arbitrarily to fill the page with some sort of poetic form. At his best, Azriel avoids this defect. In fact, his free verse can demand attention and engender the feelings he wants in his reader by using the break at the end of the line to emphasize the last of that line and the first word of the next one. In "A Woman of Valor," Abraham is lamenting the death of Sarah:

Most of all, I regret
Never having the courage,
During of the years of our marriage,
To say,
"I love you."

It is worth reading his poems carefully to spot such effective lines.

A good many of the poems are from the mouths of biblical characters – sometimes chosen idiosyncratically, it seems. Not so is "The Sacrifice of Sarah," which concludes:

No shrieks, no screaming
That morning,
As she shuffled back to bed,
Closing mouth – no more prayer;

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Closing heart – no more hope.

The old mistress is gone –

She

The sacrifice

That morning.

Thus Azriel takes the enigmatic *Akedat Yitzchak* out of the millennia of attempts to justify the test by philosophy, theology, national history, and so forth. He confines its enormity to a single character, the mother of all Jewish mothers, a new meta-biblical light on the famous story. It is at once biblical and, lamentably, personal, always relevant, never anachronistic. (I felt this poem to be the best in the book.)

Read the book. It will surprise you, challenge you, affect you, sometimes mystify you, but it will give new life to the stories and personalities that heretofore were confined to classrooms and sermons and quick reading in the synagogue. It may even inspire you to imagine your own *midrashim*.

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