

## BOOK REVIEW

*Redeeming Relevance in the Book of Exodus: Explorations in Text and Meaning*, Rabbi Francis Nataf; Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2010. Reviewed by Aharon E. Wexler.

The second volume of Rabbi Francis Nataf's exploration of the Bible is filled with insights and is a fresh take on an ancient text. Perhaps more than any other text, the reader approaches the Bible with preconceived notions and assumptions carried from childhood, forcing us to read the Bible with decades of baggage. Nataf, on the other hand, does a commendable job of looking at the text anew and reads the text like the Commentators did, without commentaries, a strategy Nataf calls 'an invitation for a very *personal* involvement' (p. 14).

Rabbi Nataf begins by noting the difficulty of God revealing Himself to man, and does not shy away from the questions raised by modern scholarship. While Nataf doesn't deal with biblical criticism directly, he is aware of the issues raised by the traditional claim of Divine authorship. He puts a new spin on the ancient rabbinic aphorism that 'the Torah speaks in the language of man' and points out that if in fact the text is written in the language of man, then we can not expect it to always be logical, rational, or systematic. Nataf invites us to examine the twentieth century literary device "stream of consciousness," made famous by James Joyce, in which the thought process of the protagonist is revealed to the reader. This makes for a difficult read, as any reader of Joyce would acknowledge, but it also provides an "unusually accurate portrayal of human thought" (p. 18). To Nataf, "Torah study is the art of listening to God's conversation."

Referencing Joyce and other writers as diverse as Bertolt Brecht and Mitch Albom, Nataf proves to his readers that he possesses a vast field of knowledge and that there is value to the secular world outside of Torah. Nataf freely uses his broad approach in his study of Torah yielding a rich and diverse take on the text. An anecdote regarding his decision to ban a book from the kindergarten library because of its unflattering depiction of Gentiles amplifies this message of openness directed at his orthodox audience.

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This wide approach allows for unique insights into the Bible. While most scholars concentrate on the Exodus *from* Egypt, Nataf examines the love/hate relationship between Israel and Egypt and its importance in the development of the Jewish people. Israel's time in Egypt helped shape it to become God's people. The Bible's first mention of Egypt in Genesis describes the country as God's garden. In Exodus, we are told that even slaves had pots full of meat. This wealth and bounty, according to Nataf, prevented the Egyptians from establishing a rich *spiritual* life. Israel, however, needed "to be impressed by [Egypt's] temptations of prosperity. Were they to be divorced from any material ambitions they would never fully know the important human tension between spirituality and physicality" (p. 29).

From Egypt on, Nataf shows a keen understanding of Jewish history and explores the motif of the Jewish people arriving in a host country as honored guests only to become enslaved, persecuted, and/or expelled. This is to be the lot of the Jews in every generation and Nataf does an excellent job in showing the germination of this theme in Exodus.

Rabbi Nataf also writes about the connection between Jacob and Moses. "There appear to be no two extended narratives in the entire Torah as similar as Ya'akov's exile to Lavan's house and Moshe's exile to Yitro's house" (p. 47). Nataf astutely points out that while *Bereishit Rabbah* 84:6 suggests a parallel between the lives of Jacob and Joseph; the lives of Moses and Jacob seem to parallel each other more faithfully. Nataf sees these two characters as bookends to Israel's exile. Nataf demonstrates the fascinating contrasts and similarities of their lives and their relationships with their fathers-in-law. Both are shepherds, both flee for their lives suffering alienation and exile, and both meet their wives at a well. Nataf explores the theme of exile and the biblical emphasis on many of its heroes serving as shepherds. He notes that while the sheep are obviously analogous to the Jewish people, "more subtle is the further analogy created by the fact that the shepherd leader is usually tending his or her father's flock" (p. 62). The father, Nataf points out, represents God, yielding a full imagery of Israel as God's flock entrusted to others to guide and care for them. Nataf explores the role of leadership in Jewish tradition and sees parallels between Jacob having twelve sons that form the

demographic basis for the Jewish people and Moses' giving of the Law forming the ideological basis of the nation centuries later, each one providing a different form of leadership.

While this point was new and entirely appropriate in its connection to Genesis, Nataf too often deals with Genesis, the subject of his previous book, and not enough with Exodus, the subject of this present volume. Far too many of his teachings are tied to Genesis, leaving one with the feeling that we are retreading old territory. A glaring example of this is the chapter entitled "Clothing Aharon." The chapter comprises more than a fifth of the book, and yet Aaron and the priestly vestments are barely mentioned. Instead, Nataf weaves a great lesson about clothing in general and Genesis' Joseph and Tamar in particular. When Nataf does briefly talk about Aaron, he is compared to Adam, yet another figure from Genesis.

This 'criticism' is actually an expression of a desire to read more of Nataf's thoughts about Exodus. Themes like the Revelation at Sinai, Hebrew Law, and the Golden Calf are not discussed, leaving us hungry for Nataf's analysis and exploration of these seminal issues sorely missing from any exploration of the text and meaning of Exodus.

Nataf is a master educator who looks with fresh eyes at the text yielding many new insights. Yet, I fear Nataf sometimes brings his points too far by connecting and comparing the lessons learned to the situation in modern day Israel, or Jewish existence in the Diaspora. Nataf is so adept in elucidating his points that it makes any further discussion superfluous. It might have been better to let the reader come to his or her own conclusions and not walk us through it. I believe it takes away from his point and turns a great teaching moment into a sermon.

The bottom line is that Nataf's analysis is impressive and brings something new to Biblical scholarship but this reader would like to see his next volume complete the themes left out here.