

BOOK REVIEW

Echoes of Eden: Sefer Vayikra, In Search of Holiness by Ari D. Kahn, Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2013, 256 pp. Reviewed by Yonatan Horovitz.

One wonders what yet another volume of essays on the weekly Torah reading could contribute to the Jewish bookshelf. The past half-decade has witnessed a plethora of works on this very subject, and one might therefore assume that both market and reader were already saturated. However, anyone familiar with the first two volumes of Rabbi Ari Kahn's *Echoes of Eden* will know that he makes a unique contribution to the study of Torah text and ideas.

At first, one might be perplexed with regard to the methodology employed in *Echoes of Eden*. Is the author elucidating the plain meaning of the text by means of linguistic analysis or is he searching for a platform to convey certain messages deemed pertinent to contemporary Jewry? Is this book intended for the more intellectual readers who wish to enrich their study of Scripture, or does *Echoes of Eden* hope to find its way into the hearts of the masses? The answer would seem to be that the book operates on many different levels, whether in terms of the author's erudition and insight or in regard to its layout. Allow me to expand by the use of an example.

The first essay begins with a discussion of the opening verse of the Book of Leviticus (*Sefer Vayikra*) and Rashi's comments thereon. The questions posed relate to the simple meaning (*peshat*) of the text. The quest for answers leads us on a journey through the midrash, medieval commentaries, kabbalistic sources, Hasidic works, and contemporary thinkers. One may feel at times that the thread has been lost, yet Rabbi Kahn skillfully ties all these sources together, piece by piece, until he brings us back to the opening verse. In so doing, he provides new insights into the text, introduces us to commentators with whom many readers would otherwise be unfamiliar, and conveys a message relevant to all – about the attitude with which we, as mere humans, should approach God.

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This refreshing method of analysis is very readable and does not require much background knowledge of Torah and biblical exegesis. However, this work provides even the scholar with new food for thought. In addition, sources quoted in the main body of the text appear in full in the footnotes, and in the original Hebrew. This gives ample opportunity for further study and investigation for those who so desire.

Evidence of the author's creativity may be seen in the fact that the second essay of *parashat Vayikra* begins by quoting the very same verse as the first, yet the discussion that follows is completely different and leads us in another direction altogether.

Ideas which I found particularly illuminating include the thematic connection between the three Pilgrimage Festivals and the corresponding notions of time, space and matter found in the second essay on *parashat Tzav*. The connection woven between the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, the child sacrifice ritual of Molekh, and the forbidden sexual relations is intriguing and provides the reader with a timeless message about passion and how it should be channeled.

The Book of Leviticus obviously presents a unique challenge to any writer, as it is filled with laws rather than narrative and so does not lend itself to the character analysis and psychological interpretation of the earlier books of the Torah. Having noticed how Rabbi Kahn overcomes this obstacle in the earlier essays, I was keen to read the chapters on *Tazri'a* and *Metzora* which detail the intricate laws of biblical *tzara'at* (leprosy). It was here that I encountered my first disappointment.

Although these essays, like the others, are fascinating and well-written, all three are based on the well-known documented connection between *tzara'at* and *leshon ha-ra* (slander). I find it strange that this author, who draws much of his inspiration from works of the midrash, should choose to ignore the many comments of the Sages regarding other possible reasons for being smitten with *tzara'at*. For example, this statement appears in TB *Arakhin* 16a: "R. Samuel bar Nahmani said in the name of R. Johanan: *Tzara'at* results from seven things: 1) *leshon ha-ra*; 2) murder; 3) false oaths; 4) immorality; 5) arrogance; 6) theft; 7) stinginess." This idea is reflected in the *Keli Yakar*

commentary of Rabbi Ephraim Solomon of Luntshits, at the opening of Leviticus 13, whereby he deduces from various midrashic works that *tzara'at* is a punishment for one of three things: slander, haughtiness, and an overwhelming desire for wealth. These *midrashim* allow for an alternate interpretation of the biblical notion of *tzara'at*, and I feel that this work would have been a suitable place for such a discussion.

This brings me to another concern. The beauty of *Echoes of Eden*, as indicated above, lies in its ability to provide something for everyone; simple meaning, complex ideas, a wide variety of sources, and a relevant message. Therein, however, lies the book's possible weakness. At times, when reading it, I was unsure about what I was supposed to glean from a particular essay. If I began looking for an insight into the words of our Sages, and was led to a profound reading of the text, I ended with a message that seemed unconnected, leaving some of my questions unanswered.

I have noted how the author artfully connects all the strands together, which is generally the case, but when the task undertaken is so complicated and intricate, the end product can stray far from his original intent. In the essay about the blasphemer (*parashat Emor*), the opening discussion comments on the strange setting of the story. Although this is explained along the way, the many different *midrashim* employed leave us with what could be construed as a rather narrow, far-fetched version of the events. This problem might perhaps be overcome by treating *Echoes of Eden* as less of an easy read and more as a text to be studied. I believe that reading any of the essays two or three times will enable one to appreciate the elaborate labyrinth built by the author.

In summation, my overall impression of the book is definitely positive. Any reader of *Echoes of Eden* is bound to find interest and profundity in the author's work. If that reader does find that not all of his questions are answered, the book has surely achieved its intended goal. After all, the subtitle is "In Search of Holiness" and this volume encourages us to pursue that quest. In so doing, it adds a new dimension to our study of *Vayikra*.