

BOOK REVIEW

Pursuing Peshat – Tanakh Parshanut and Talmud Torah, Dr. Moshe Sokolow (Jerusalem: Kodesh Press, 2024), 372 p. Reviewed by Yonatan Horovitz

As a seasoned teacher of Tanakh, I opened Dr. Moshe Sokolow's book entitled *Pursuing Peshat*¹ with much anticipation, and I was not disappointed. History, methodology and pedagogy are all tackled in the various sections of this work. Dr. Sokolow demonstrates that he is comfortable both in the academic world of Bible study and on the yeshivah benches while learning Tanakh.

The book is comprised of three sections. The first is titled "The Theoretical Realm" in which we are introduced to different forms of Bible interpretation and how to discern validity in this discipline. Dr. Sokolow also takes us on a journey into the place that Tanakh study has held in Orthodox Jewish education over the centuries.

Section two, which makes up the bulk of this work, relates primarily to the difference between *peshat* and *derash* as is indicated in the book's title. The question addressed is how each of the classical exegetes reconciles their commitment to tradition with a literal reading of the text. We also begin to learn some pedagogical lessons to be implemented in teaching Tanakh.

The last part of section two forms a perfect segue into the third section which provides us with didactic suggestion on several sections of Tanakh. Here Dr. Sokolow shows how to adapt some of the ideas raised in the earlier chapters into the classroom situation.

Sokolow, using his wide range of knowledge cites many scholars and educators and some of these quotes are real gems. From Professor Lee Shulman's "Professing Understanding and Professing Faith: The Midrashic Imperative," we hear: "This emphasis – this conception of the ever-disputed nature and status of knowledge – calls naturally for a pedagogy of dialogue and debate rather than of exposition and inspiration" (p. 3). In embracing this idea, Dr. Sokolow includes us in his outlook as to how Tanakh should ideally be studied.

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On a different occasion, we learn from Seymour Papert's book *The Connected Family: Bridging the Digital Educational Gap* that: "The scandal of education is that every time you teach something, you deprive a child of the pleasure and benefit of discovery" (p. 275). Here too we note that Sokolow has internalized this message, something which is conveyed in the chapter entitled Pedagogy of Tanakh.

While there is much to be gained from this book, one can tell that it is a compilation based on earlier essays and this creates some repetition and lack of organization. (Chapter numbers would have been helpful as a start.) Several times over the course of the book, we are introduced to different commentators only to focus on one aspect of their exegetical methodology. It may have been simpler to combine all these into one section and also to add further examples in order to enhance our understanding of each exegete and their unique method of interpreting the text.

In addition, one factor which seems to be lacking from the historical overview is how our return to living in Israel has affected our contemporary study of Tanakh. As Rabbi Dr. Yoel Bin Nun has said on many occasions, with our return to our Biblical homeland, Tanakh should ideally be taught in the places where it actually took place. While Sokolow does give credence to archeological discoveries, seeing the lay of the land can often add a further level of comprehension to the Biblical narrative.

This leads me to a further insight. In the latter section of the book, we find a discussion as to the age at which Rebecca married Isaac and to how to relate to the different approaches of the commentaries, particularly in a classroom setting. One may ponder the following: if the Torah does not note Rebecca's age why should this be of significance to us? This actually raises a larger question in the study of Tanakh which hinges around the dilemma as to what is more important, what actually happened or what is recorded. I think it crucial that our students are sensitive to this consideration when delving into Tanakh and its commentaries.

We could simply conclude with Sokolow's words at the end of his introduction to the third section of the book (p. 242), "If I had to condense the entire theoretical platform on which this book is constructed, it would identify the *peshat* with the explicit meaning of Tanakh, and *derash* with its implicit meaning. Occasionally the two agree; at other times, they converge, and

