

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Fundamental Issues in the Study of *Tanakh*
By Rav Amnon Bazak

This week's shiurim are dedicated in loving memory
of Yehuda Nattan Yudkowsky z"l whose yahrzeit is 17 Cheshvan

Shiur #11b: The Sins of Biblical Figures
(Part 2 of 4)

b. Avraham and Sarah

We will look at three actions of Avraham and Sarah, where in each instance the action seems to be presented in a questionable light. Two fundamental approaches will be presented: one maintains that the plain reading of the text suggests that the acts in question were wrong – perhaps even serious sins – and are recorded with a view to instructing the readers how not to behave. The other view seeks to cast their actions in a positive light and regards them as a model for emulation.

In light of the famine prevailing in the promised land, Avraham goes down to Egypt and asks Sarai to pretend that she is his sister (*Bereishit* 12:10-20). Both of these steps arouse lively debate among *Chazal* and the commentators alike. Our discussion will start with a focus on Avraham's leaving the land. Some opinions view this as a test that Avraham passed successfully, as Radak explains (*Bereishit* 12:10):¹

"This is one of the tests with which God tested Avraham, and he withstood all of them, never questioning the Holy One, blessed be He, saying, 'Yesterday [God] told me, "Through you shall all the families of the earth be blessed," but today there is famine in the land in which I am dwelling, such that I am forced to leave it for a different place.' Rather, he accepted everything with love."

According to Radak, Avraham's test here consisted of dealing with the conflict between the Divine promise of the land and the severe famine that was now forcing him to leave the land. A lesser man than Avraham might have

¹ See also *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* chapter 26, and Rashi ad loc.

blamed or questioned God, but Avraham bore the contradiction in a silence that expressed his faith.²

In contrast, the Zohar presents a negative view of the descent to Egypt:

"Rabbi Yehuda said: Come and see – because Avraham moved to Egypt without permission, Bnei Yisrael were enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years. For it is written, 'Avraham went down to Egypt,' but not [a command,] 'Go down to Egypt,' and it was for that reason that he was troubled all that night on account of Sarah." (Zohar, *Lekh lekha* 71b)

The negative judgment of Avraham's action, as interpreted by the Zohar, arises from the fact that there is no Divine command instructing Avraham to go to Egypt, and for this reason the fact that Sarah is seized should be viewed as an immediate punishment. Furthermore, Avraham's act also has ramifications for future generations: in its wake, it is decreed that Bnei Yisrael will be enslaved in Egypt. In a similar vein, Ramban writes in his commentary (ad loc.):

"Also his leaving the land, concerning which he had originally been commanded [to go to], owing to the famine, was a misdeed that he committed, for God would have delivered him from death in the midst of the famine. And for this act his descendants suffered exile in Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh, where instead of justice there was wickedness and sin."

In Ramban's view, since God had commanded Avraham to go to the land, it was forbidden for him to leave it; he should have trusted in God even under conditions of famine. In other words, one might say that Avraham failed in this test – a failure that brought about the subjugation of Bnei Yisrael in Egypt. Thus, while Radak believes that Avraham's descent to Egypt was a test that Avraham withstood, Ramban believes it was a test that Avraham failed.

Opinions are similarly divided concerning Sarai being presented as Avraham's sister. Here, too, Radak views Avraham's decision as the right step:

"Avram feared this and did not rely on God's promise to him, for he said, 'Perhaps my sins will cause [the promise to be annulled].' Likewise Yaakov feared even after God had made a promise to him, and so it is proper that every righteous man not rely on miracles in a situation of danger, but rather protect himself with every possible tactic. Concerning this Shlomo said, 'Happy is the man who is always fearful' (*Mishlei* 28:14), and so *Chazal* taught – that one should not rely on a miracle."

² According to Radak's explanation, the structure of the test here resembles that of the binding of Yitzchak: in both instances God makes a significant promise to Avraham (the land / progeny), which starts to be fulfilled (he reaches the land / Yitzchak is born). In both cases there is then a Divine decree that negates the fulfillment of the promise (famine / binding of Yitzchak). Ultimately, Avraham passes both tests, and the promises remain valid.

Radak is aware that Avraham's act might be perceived as evidence of a lack of faith, and so he is quick to assert at the outset that there is nothing wrong with the fact that "Avraham feared and did not rely on God's promise," and he even goes on to present his actions as a model for emulation for future generations: "And so it is proper that every righteous man not rely on miracles."

Ramban, in contrast, criticizes Avraham:

"Know that Avraham unwittingly committed a great transgression in exposing his righteous wife to the possibility of sin owing to his own fear of being killed. He should have trusted that God would save him, and his wife, and all that he had, for God has the power to help and to deliver."

According to Ramban, here too Avraham's act was a transgression that brought suffering upon his descendants when they were subjugated in Egypt.³ Thus, while Radak thinks that there is nothing wrong with Avraham "not relying on God's promise," Ramban insists that he "should have trusted in God."

In a different episode involving Avraham and Sarah, Radak adopts a critical view of their actions, in contrast to the positive position he has adopted so far. After Sarah, who is barren, gives her handmaid Hagar to Avraham and Hagar becomes pregnant, we read:

"And when [Hagar] saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes. And Sarai said to Avram, 'My anger be upon you; I gave my handmaid into your bosom, but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes; may God judge between me and you.' And Avram said to Sarai, 'Behold, your maid is in your hand; do to her as it pleases you.' So Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from before her." (*Bereishit* 16:4-6)

Ramban views the treatment of Hagar as a sin, not only on the part of Sarah, but also on the part of Avraham:

"Our matriarch sinned in this harsh dealing, and so did Avraham, in permitting her to do so. And God heard [Hagar's] affliction, and gave her a son who would be a wild man who would afflict the progeny of Avraham and Sarah will all kinds of harsh dealings."

Ramban asserts that this misdeed, too, had long-term historic ramifications, for it resulted in the birth of Yishmael, who was destined to afflict the descendants of Avraham and Sarah over many generations.

³ Compare, for example, Avraham's words (*Bereishit* 12:12), "They shall kill me but leave you alive," and Pharaoh's words (*Shemot* 1:22), "Every son that is born you shall cast into the Nile, but every daughter you shall leave alive."

Radak pre-empted Ramban in criticizing Sarah's actions, although he does not attribute any wrongdoing to Avraham in this instance:

"What Sarai did here was neither proper nor pious behavior. Not proper – because even though Avraham was willing to forego his own honor, and told her, 'Do to her as it pleases you,' she should have restrained herself out of honor for him, and not dealt with [Hagar] harshly. Nor was it pious behavior reflecting a good soul, for it is not proper for a person to do all that he can to those who are subject to his authority... And that which Sarai did was not good in God's eyes, as the angel tells Hagar: 'For God has heard your affliction,' and he gave her a blessing to compensate for her affliction. Yet Avram did not prevent Sarai from afflicting [Hagar] even though it was evil in his eyes, in order to preserve peace in their home. And this entire story is written in the Torah in order for a person to learn good traits from it, and to distance himself from evil ones."

Radak concludes his commentary with a most important comment: the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs are recorded not only so that we can learn from and imitate their positive actions, but also so we can learn and avoid repeating their misdeeds.

Here, too, the view attributing sin to Sarah is not universally accepted. The Tosefta notes that the second time that Sarah asks to banish Hagar, together with Yishmael (*Bereishit* 21:9-21), after she sees him "making sport," God intervenes in the disagreement between her and Avraham, telling him, "All that Sarah tells you – listen to her, for in Yitzchak shall your seed be called" (21:12). According to the Tosefta, this Divine ruling retroactively justifies Sarah's original banishment of Hagar:

"God decided between her words and his, as it is written, 'All that (*kol asher*) Sarah tells you, listen to her' – for what extra meaning is added by the word '*kol*' (all)? This teaches that God ruled in the second instance as Sarah had ruled in the first."⁴

This approach is adopted by R. Yehuda ben Elazar, one of the Tosafists, in his work *Minchat Yehuda*:⁵

"And R. Elyakim gave a reason for this: How could so righteous a woman as our matriarch Sarah behave this way? Because Hagar first afflicted Sarah, in accordance with R. Shimon's explanation concerning, 'Her mistress was scorned in her eyes' (*Bereishit* 16:4), and therefore Sarah

⁴ Tosefta *Sota* 5:12, Lieberman edition p. 181

⁵ His commentary on the Torah was written in 1313. For more about him and his commentary, see H. Touitou's introduction to his critical edition of the commentary: *Minchat Yehuda: Perush le-Rabbi Yehuda ben Elazar mi-Ba'alei ha-Tosafot*, Jerusalem 5772, pp. 11-40.

afflicted her lawfully, for in the *Sefer Mitzvot ha-Gadol* it is written, in the commandment of 'You shall not afflict' (*Vayikra* 19:33), that if someone behaved in that way towards you, you may act in the same way towards him, for he is not 'your fellow,' since he has afflicted you." (*Minchat Yehuda* on *Bereishit* 16; Touitou edition pp. 54-55).

Thus we see that different commentators are at odds with one another in their interpretation of the stories of Avraham and Sarah. Where it appears to the commentators that Avraham and Sarah's actions were improper, they do not shy away from criticizing them, even though there is no doubt that overall the Torah stresses very clearly the greatness of Avraham and Sarah's character.

c. "Anyone who says X sinned, is simply mistaken"

Those who seek a favorable interpretation of all questionable actions of biblical characters rely, as one of their central sources, on a well-known discussion in *Massekhet Shabbat* (55b-56b) which lists six figures who seem, according to the plain text, to have committed various transgressions – some of them extremely serious ones. In each case, Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani teaches, in the name of Rabbi Yonatan, that "anyone who says that so-and-so sinned, is simply mistaken."

Let us examine the first three figures discussed in the Gemara. From these instances we will already be able to see that R. Yonatan's view is not the only view – sometimes not even the majority view – to be found in rabbinic literature, and even among the later commentators it is subject to debate. In addition, we will try to arrive at the message arising from the plain reading of the text according to those views that maintain that a transgression was indeed committed.

1. Reuven

The first source discussed in the Gemara concerns the verse:

"And it was, when Yisrael dwelled in that land, that Reuven went and lay with Bilha, his father's concubine; and Yisrael heard [of it]; and the sons of Yaakov were twelve." (*Bereishit* 35:22)

The plain text suggests a very serious transgression; even if Bilha was considered only a concubine, she was still forbidden to any other man, and especially to Yaakov's son. However, according to Rabbi Yonatan, Reuven did not actually engage in relations with Bilha:

"Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: Anyone who says that Reuven sinned, is simply mistaken. As it is written, 'And the sons of Yaakov were twelve' – this teaches that they were all considered

equal. So what are we meant to learn from the words, 'and lay with Bilha, his father's concubine'? This teaches that he moved/overturned his father's bed, and the text compares this to lying with her."⁶

Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar expands on Rabbi Yonatan's approach:

"It was taught: R. Shimon b. Elazar said: That righteous man [Reuven] was saved from that sin, and he did not come to perform that deed. Is it possible someone whose descendants were destined to stand on Mount Eval and proclaim, 'Cursed is one who lies with his father's wife' (*Devarim* 27:20), could himself have committed this sin? But how do I then understand the words, 'and he lay with Bilha, his father's concubine'? He demanded [redress for] his mother's humiliation. He said, [Even] if my mother's sister was a rival to my mother, shall the handmaid of my mother's sister be a rival to my mother? [Thereupon] he arose and moved her bed... Thus it is written, 'You defiled it; you went up to my couch' (*Bereishit* 49:4)."

Thus, those who wish to argue that Reuven did not lie with Bilha bring two arguments. First, from the verse "and the sons of Yaakov were twelve" they deduce that all were equal in righteousness, and hence it cannot be that one of them committed such a terrible transgression. Second, the tribe of Reuven was among those that stood at Mount Eval, as witnesses to the curse against one who lies with his father's wife; hence, it cannot be that Reuven himself could have committed this sin (even if his sin was not specifically lying with his father's wife, but rather with his concubine).

On the plain level of the text, neither of these arguments is particularly compelling, and we can even point out their weaknesses.⁷ It seems that the view seeking to clear Reuven of the sin arises not from the plain reading of the text, but rather from fundamental assumptions concerning the righteousness of Biblical characters. As we find in *Bereishit Rabba*:⁸ "Did Reuven then engage in forbidden sexual relations? God spare the righteous man!" In other words, it is unthinkable that so righteous an individual as Reuven would commit such a terrible sin, and if the text appears to imply otherwise, then the text must be reread accordingly.

Many people present the above view as "the view of *Chazal*," but Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua maintain that the text is meant to be understood literally, and that Reuven indeed engaged in sexual relations with Bilha. They

⁶ See the lengthy discussion in the article by Rabbi Yaakov Medan, "Kol ha-Omer Reuven Chata," *Megadim* 37, 5763, pp. 9-32.

⁷ Concerning the first proof, we might argue that the twelve tribes included also Shimon and Levi, who were sharply criticized by Yaakov prior to his death. Concerning the second proof, we might counter that the division of the tribes for the blessings and curses was part of an event that included the entire nation; the entire tribe of Reuven could not have been barred from it.

⁸ *Bereishit Rabba parasha* 97 (new system), Theodor-Albeck edition, p. 1205

each explain Yaakov's words to Reuven, "Unstable (*pachaz*) as water, you shall not excel" (*Bereishit* 49:4), as acronym suggesting three aspects of his sin. Although they do not question Reuven's righteousness, they maintain that his level of piety did not prevent him from sinning.

The debate surrounding the story of Reuven and Bilha continues to rage among the medieval biblical commentators. For example, Rashi adopts the approach of Rabbi Yonatan, who clears Reuven of wrongdoing, while Radak understands the account in the literal sense:

"'Reuven went...' – he went to the tent of Bilha, and lay with her. 'His father's concubine' – she was his father's wife, but she is referred to here as his 'concubine' because Reuven thought that she was not forbidden to him, since she had first been a handmaid and afterwards his father took her as his concubine; but the text testifies that she became his wife, as it is written, 'And she gave him Bilha, her handmaid, as a wife' (*Bereishit* 30:4), so she was forbidden to him, for the children of Noach were commanded concerning forbidden sexual relations... and how much more so the children of Yaakov. Therefore his birthright was taken from him, as it is written, 'But when he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to Yosef'⁹ (*Divrei Ha-yamim* I 5:1).

Radak explains Reuven's act as a "halakhic" mistake, in an attempt to mitigate somewhat the severity of his transgression. Ibn Ezra, Ralbag and Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor explain the verse in the literal sense, without seeking any sort of favorable interpretation.

What is the meaning of Reuven's sin? It seems that his act is meant to express his desire to be designated his father's heir already at this stage. There are several places in *Tanakh* where we find sons who take their father's concubines in order to proclaim themselves as their father's successors. The most prominent example is Avshalom – who, taking Achitofel's advice, lies with his father's concubines upon the roof in the sight of all of Israel (see *Shmuel* II 16:20-22). The same thinking prompts Shlomo's anger towards Adoniyahu, when the latter seeks to take Avishag the Shunamite as his wife (*Melakhim* I 2:13-25). Ish Boshet likewise accuses Avner of taking his father's concubine (*Shmuel* II 3:7).

In light of the above, the continuation of the description of Reuven is most instructive. As we know, Reuven is the only one among the brothers who tries to save Yosef in order to return him, alive, to his father (*Bereishit* 37:21-22). This may be understood as a profoundly restorative act, a *tikkun* or repair, for his sin concerning Bilha. While his motive in sinning with Bilha had been a desire to press forward in the struggle for the status of his father's successor, in the story

⁹ Our Masoretic version reads, "But when he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Yosef, son of Yisrael."

of Yosef he acts to save his brother even though he has heard Yosef's dreams which express Yosef's own desire to become the central figure among the brothers. In contrast to his actions in relation to Bilha, here Reuven acts contrary to his personal interests and is motivated by a spirit of repentance and responsibility. In fact, the connection between these two situations is noted by the midrash, which comments on Reuven's absence from the scene when the brothers conspired to sell Yosef, as evidenced by the verse, "Reuven returned to the pit and behold, Yosef was not in the pit; and he tore his garments" (v. 29). The midrash asks where Reuven had been, and answers: "R. Eliezer said: He was busy with sackcloth and fasting. When he was finished, he went and looked into the pit." Thus, the midrash draws a direct connection between Reuven's regret over his behavior with Bilha and his behavior in the episode of Yosef, and concludes by conveying the main message of the story:

"The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: No one has ever sinned before Me and then repented; you are the first to introduce repentance! By your life, a descendant of yours will likewise spearhead a call to repentance. And who was that? It was Hoshea, who said: 'Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God'" (Hoshea 14:2)."¹⁰

According to this approach, the message of Reuven's story is captured not by an attempt to belittle or clear his sin, but rather by an appreciation of his process of repentance.

2. The sons of Eli

The conduct of the sons of Eli is described in detail in *Shmuel* I, ch. 2, along with the half-hearted rebuke of their father, and the heavy punishment that the house of Eli incurs as a result of their sins. Nevertheless we find once again in the aforementioned Gemara in Shabbat:

"Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: Anyone who says that the sons of Eli sinned, is simply mistaken. As it is written, 'And there the two sons of Eli, Chofni and Pinchas, ministered unto God' (*Shmuel* I 1:3)."

Later in the Gemara, it becomes clear that this conclusion is reached in two stages. First, Pinchas is cleared of sin, as Rav argues:

"Pinchas did not sin, as it is written, 'And Achiya son of Achiuv, brother of I-Khavod, son of Pinchas son of Eli, a Kohen unto God...' (ibid. 14:3). Is it possible that he could have come to sin, if the text traces his [respected] lineage?"

¹⁰ Bereishit Rabba *parasha* 84,19; Theodor-Albeck edition p. 1023.

The second stage deduces from the verse cited by Rabbi Yonatan that Chofni, too, did not sin, since "the text juxtaposes Chofni and Pinchas; hence, if Pinchas did not sin, neither did Chofni."

This is a strange midrash. Thus far we have seen that there is a tendency to defend biblical figures against accusations that they sinned, even when such defense goes against the plain meaning of the text, but what sort of "interest" is there in defending Chofni and Pinchas, who are characterized quite plainly in the text as "worthless men" (*benei beliya'al*) (2:12), and whose actions are recorded in great detail?

Rashi and the Tosafot explain that the discussion in the Gemara concerns not the cheapening of the sacrificial offerings as documented in the story, but rather the specific sin concerning the women, which is mentioned further on in the discussion:

"What, then, are we to understand from the words, 'that they lay with the women' (2:22)? Since [Chofni and Pinchas] delayed [the women's] bird offerings, such that they could not return to their husbands, the text regards them as though they had lain with them."

According to this explanation, the attempt to mitigate the transgressions of the sons of Eli pertains only to the part of the account that appears most serious – engaging in sexual relations with the women visiting the *Mishkan*. But here, too, we must ask why Rabbi Yonatan tries to mitigate the impression arising from the textual description of the sins of these "worthless men."¹¹ The simple answer is given in another midrash:

"Is it possible that *the sons of the righteous Eli* would behave in this way? How can that be? Rather, when the women brought their bird offerings they would cause them to spend a night away from their homes, and by virtue of that the Holy One, blessed be He, considers them as though they had committed forbidden acts with them."¹²

¹¹ Ralbag (on *Shmuel I* 2:22) raises an additional argument as to why the description of sexual immorality should not be taken literally: "For if it were so, the prophet who came to Eli would have denounced this tremendous sin, but we find him denouncing only the sin mentioned at the outset." The rebuke conveyed by the man of God to Eli (*Shmuel I* 2:27-32) mentions only the sins concerning the sacrificial offerings, but not the women (the source for this is in the Yerushalmi, Sota 1:4, 16d). It must be acknowledged that the prophet's avoidance of any mention of the matter of the women in his rebuke is indeed surprising, but it seems that the same surprise remains even according to Rabbi Yonatan's interpretation, for if the text takes such a negative view of the sin of delaying the women that it depicts Chofni and Pinchas as though they had engaged in relations with them, why would the prophet not rebuke them for such serious wrongdoing?

¹² *Bereishit Rabba parasha* 85,12, Theodor-Albeck edition, pp. 1046-1047.

The mitigation of their sin therefore arises from a desire to alleviate the righteous Eli of responsibility. This in turn reflects not only a general tendency to defend the upbringing of the children of central characters in *Tanakh*, as we have seen in relation to Avraham and Yishmael, but also the special circumstances of the story of Eli's sons, where their father, too, is punished for not giving them effective rebuke: "for the iniquity that he knew that his sons were blaspheming, but he did not restrain them" (*Shmuel I* 3:13). The more limited the description of the sin, the better our understanding of why Eli failed to rebuke his sons as he should have.

Thus, this *parasha*, too, exposes a difference of opinion amongst *Chazal*. The discussion in the Gemara cites the opinion of Rav, who maintains that Pinchas alone did not sin, but is nevertheless punished, for "because Pinchas should have protested Chofni's behavior but did not do so, the text considers him as though he himself had sinned." This view suggests that there is no attempt here to mitigate Chofni's sin.¹³ Moreover, the Gemara in *Yoma* (9a) cites a teaching by Rabbi Yochanan ben Torta:

"Why was Shilo [the site of the *Mishkan*] destroyed? Because of two things that happened there: sexual immorality and dishonor towards the sacrificial offerings."

This version suggests that according to Rabbi Yochanan ben Torta, the description of sexual immorality should be understood literally.¹⁴ The commentators cite both opinions. Rashi writes, "'That they lay' – literally; but our Sages taught that because they delayed the women's bird offerings... the text considers them as though they lay with them." From Radak's commentary, however, it appears that he takes a middle path between the two approaches: "This is meant literally, but some of our Sages interpreted it not in accordance with the plain meaning." Rabbi Yosef Kara suggests only the *peshat*

¹³ The Gemara discusses Rav's opinion and reduces all expressions that are written in the plural, to the singular – even at the expense of clear speech: "Pinchas did not sin. But what about the verse that states, 'that they lay (*yishkevun* – in the plural)' (*Shmuel I* 2:22)? It is written without the 'vav' (alluding to something less than a plural). But it is written, 'No, my sons (*banai* – in the plural); for it is not a good report that I hear?' [To this] R. Nachman b. Yitzchak responded: The word can also be read as 'my son' (*beni* – in the singular). But it is written, 'You cause the people to transgress' (*ma'avirim* – in the plural)? To which R. Huna, son of R. Yehoshua answered, It is written without the 'yud' (alluding to something less than a plural)." Rav's opinion is that Chofni alone sinned, "but R. Yonatan disagreed and said that neither of them sinned" (*Tosafot ad loc.*).

¹⁴ Concerning the dishonor of sacrifices there is no argument, but with regard to sexual immorality this source is formulated as follows: "But nevertheless Rabbi Shmuel b. Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan [Rabbi Yonatan in *Shabbat*] that 'Anyone who says that the sons of Eli sinned, is simply mistaken,' because they merely delayed the women's bird-offerings and the text therefore regards them as though they had engaged in forbidden relations with them." According to this version, even Rabbi Yochanan ben Torta accepts Rabbi Yonatan's interpretation, but he still sees some justification for referring to this sin as sexual immorality. However, the *Ritva* cites a different version: "But he disagrees with R. Shmuel bar Nachmani."

interpretation, while Ralbag and Metzudat David adopt Rabbi Yonatan's interpretation that the text does not refer to actual sexual relations.

Thus we find that both amongst *Chazal* and among the medieval commentators there exists a view that follows a literal understanding of the account concerning Eli's sons. Of course, a literal understanding raises the issue of the danger involved in having unworthy individuals holding senior positions, and it teaches us the need to avoid corruption among those in positions of power. The dynasty of the house of Eli is destined to be replaced by "a faithful Kohen who shall do according to that which is in My heart and in My mind" (Shmuel I 2:35),¹⁵ who will lead in the way of truth and uprightness and will not be blinded and corrupted by the power that he wields.

3. The sons of Shmuel

The sins of the sons of Shmuel are referred to briefly in the text:

"And it was, when Shmuel was old, that he made his sons judges over Israel... but his sons did not walk in his ways; they turned aside after unjust gain, and took bribes, and perverted justice" (Shmuel I 8:1-3).

Here again we find Rabbi Yonatan seeking to mitigate their behavior description:

"Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: Anyone who says that the sons of Shmuel sinned, is simply mistaken, for it is written, 'And it was, when Shmuel was old... but his sons did not walk in his ways' – it says merely that they did not walk in his ways, but it does not say that they sinned. What, then, are we to understand from the words, 'They turned aside after unjust gain'? That they did not act as their father did. The righteous Shmuel would travel to all the places in Israel and would judge the people in their own cities, as it is written, 'And he went each year on circuit to Beit El and Gilgal and Mitzpa, and he judged Israel' (*Shmuel I* 7:16). But they did not do so; rather, they remained in their own cities, so as to increase the income of their clerks and scribes."

Once again, the sin that is indicated explicitly in the text is diminished: this time the seeking of unjust gain and taking of bribes is interpreted as abandonment of the unique habit followed by Shmuel, their father. It seems clear that here, once again, the attempt to mitigate the sin arises from the desire to protect the honor of Shmuel himself. Indeed, the midrash questions, "Is it then possible that the sons of the righteous Shmuel could act in this way?"

¹⁵ For the identity of this "Kohen" see my book, *Shmuel Aleph: Melekh be-Yisrael*, Jerusalem 5773, pp. 41-44.

Here again, "Chazal's view" includes not only those who clear Shmuel's sons of sin, but also others who understand that their actions were indeed as described explicitly in the text:

"There is disagreement among the Sages concerning the words, 'turned aside after unjust gain.' R. Meir said, [That means,] They openly demanded their portions.¹⁶ R. Yehuda said: They forced goods on private people.¹⁷ R. Akiva said: They took an extra basket of tithes by force. R. Yossi said: They took the gifts by force."

Here again, the commentators address both views, but Radak concludes his discussion with an interesting comment:

"Our Sages taught that the sons of Shmuel did not sin; rather, because they did not visit all the places in Israel, but rather remained in their places so as to increase the wages of their clerks and scribes, the text considers them as though they had taken bribes. Some of the Sages maintain that they demanded their portion outright; others say that they took it by force, but **the plain meaning of the verse seems to indicate that they sinned.**"

Ralbag and Rabbi Yosef Kara likewise understand the verse in accordance with its plain meaning.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

¹⁶ Rashi explains: "The *ma'aser rishon*, to which, as leviim, they were entitled, they demanded openly, as the leaders of the generation and as the judges, and no one objected, and the other leviim, who were left without (*ma'aser*), suffered on account of this. According to Rabbi Meir, the sons of Shmuel did not actually commit the sin of perverting justice."

¹⁷ Rashi explains: "They gave them merchandise in which to trade and to bring them profit, and this caused their hearts to incline their rulings towards them when they came before them in judgment, and this was their sin." The Meiri adds, "This is no justification for the sin, since there is no greater bribery than this."