

Dvar Torah on Shabbat Bereishit – 2 October 2021

From Meira:

Unfortunately. I didn't actually write it down, but here's the gist:

I started by saying the parasha gave us an opportunity to look at two cases where contemporary scholarship into linguistic cognates (words that have the same linguistic derivation) has opposite effects on how we understand and approach the text. Interestingly, both involve cognates between a biblical word and Arabic.

The first is the name Chava. I pointed out that the folk derivation in the text doesn't make sense: the name derived from "eim cal chai" should be Chaya, not Chava. Then I pointed out that the name Chava is cognate with both Aramaic and Arabic words for snake. (I wrote about this in the Rosh Hashanah 2020 issue of our magazine... unfortunately I didn't say there where this information came from, but it might be the Anchor Bible. I'd have to check once I'm back home). We've already learned explicitly in the text that the negative aspects of snakiness (deception, slyness etc.) are part of humankind because of the double use of the word arum (translated as sly for the snake, and naked for the humans). But if Chava is also linked with the snake, this brings up positive aspects of snakiness (healing, fertility, rebirth, growth). Indeed, one might say that Adam and Chava didn't even need to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, because the fundamental elements of both tov (good) and ra (bad) are already inherent in humankind. So altogether, this is a case where looking at Semitic cognates enriches and broadens our understanding of the text.

I took the opposite case from this article: <https://www.thetorah.com/article/woman-helpmate-no-longer> . The phrase he discusses is ezer k'negdo. Ezer is usually translated as "helper" or something along those lines, raising interpretive questions (are Adam and Eve not equal??). Here, looking at an Arabic cognate reveals that the word ezer may more simply be translated as woman. This resolves the interpretive problem by narrowing our understanding of the text (rather than broadening it as in the previous case).

I hope I remembered all the important bits.... and I hope it still sounds as interesting now that you see it in writing.

See you in a couple of weeks,

Meira