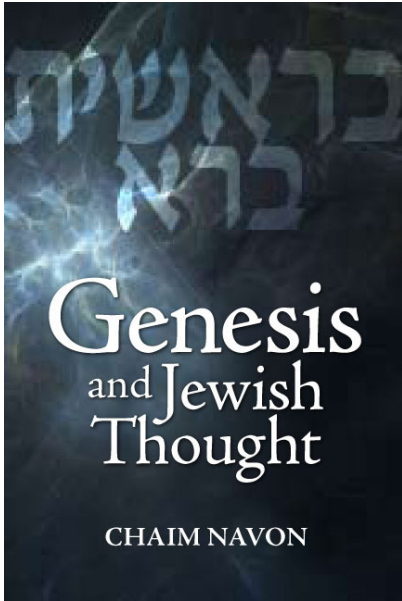


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**Navon, Chaim**

***Genesis and Jewish Thought***

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Navon opens *Genesis and Jewish Thought* by noting a fundamental irony in any study of Genesis: its familiarity belies the difficulty in its comprehension. Instead of seeking greater understanding of Genesis through exegesis, Navon underlines fundamental philosophical concepts that arise out of selected passages in Genesis. The book, outside of its omission of a single class on “Biblical Criticism,” largely duplicates a course on theological issues in Genesis through Yeshivat Har Etzion (Gush), the largest Hesder Yeshiva in Israel. Hence, the book resembles more a series of essays than a thesis-driven investigation. The contents, translated by David Strauss, who also translated this work, were already available online at [www.vbm-torah.org](http://www.vbm-torah.org), but obviously the publication of this book makes Navon’s classes more widely accessible to the general public.

In his brief introduction (ix–x) Navon articulates four “circles” that attracted his interest. Navon seeks to understand the philosophical underpinnings of the biblical material in Genesis, the ancient commentators, the viewpoints of more recent Jewish thinkers, and the wider Gentile perspective. Hence, in theory he circles around conceptual issues in Genesis from different ages and from widely divergent perspectives.

However, as Navon himself concedes, each chapter draws a different circle. By a wide margin, modern Jewish thinkers such as Rabbis Joseph Soloveitchik and Abraham Isaac

Kook, from the sixteenth century (Acharonim) onward circumscribe the largest circle. Alongside these modern thinkers Navon juxtaposes biblical material, traditional rabbinic commentators such as Rashi and Maimonides, and selected midrashic and talmudic excerpts, but these appear much less frequently. Surprisingly, especially given its rich philosophical orientation, Navon interacts with Genesis Rabbah in only a handful of cases. While he lists almost three hundred citations, only 7.7 percent derive from a non-Jewish writer.

The individual chapters spring from a verse(s) or a larger philosophical conundrum arising from Genesis. Many of the chapter titles probe implications from an obvious locus in the biblical text, such as “The Image of God,” “The Sin of the Tree of Knowledge,” “The Tower of Babel,” and “The Binding of Isaac.” Others, such as “Torah and Science,” “The Torah and the Ancient Near East,” “Inborn Essence and Selection,” “Prayer,” and “Is the World Moving Forward, or Is It in Decline?” derive from more obscure passages in Genesis or even introduce abstract topics closer to contemporary concern than to a specific biblical passage in Genesis.

Although Navon never lays out a specific methodology, he follows a common pattern throughout. After extracting either explicit or latent philosophical implications from a verse or event in Genesis, Navon explicates it largely through a series of well-placed and thoughtful subheadings that guide the reader through the discussion. For instance, he splits up a long chapter on the “Reasons for the Commandments” into the following segments: “Do the Mitzvot Have Reasons?”; “Is It Desirable to Seek the Reasons for the Mitzvot?”; “What Type of Reason?”; “Do the Mitzvot Benefit God or Man?”; “Do the Mitzvot Have a Psychological or a Real Effect?”; “Spiritual Law or Halakhic Abstraction?”; “Mitzvot as Symbols”; “Historical Reason or Spiritual Reason?”; and “The Reasons for the Mitzva of Circumcision.” These rubrics effectively focus the reader on specific aspects and distinctions of each topic, as well as serving as a cross-reference for future study.

Once begun, Navon relies heavily on extracts from a veritable Who’s Who in Jewish thought through the ages. All told, his book contains an impressive 292 excerpts from other writers of a paragraph length or longer, and some even extend over several pages. He employs a diachronic approach with various sages, Jewish and Gentile alike, as it were, at a common academy weighing in on the philosophical issues even though sometimes even a millennia separate them. Navon makes such a shift in time and culture when he moves from Plato to Rabbi Hirsch (nineteenth century.) when discussing the equality of woman relative to man (156). However, this represents just one example, as Navon freely mixes choice examples of reflective thought from any age or culture.

Navon, with a few exceptions, closes each chapter without any conclusion. Only under his subheading “Suggested Understanding in Chapter 9 on ‘The Sin of the Tree of Knowledge’” does Navon present what could loosely be called a conclusion (134–36). Chapters 3, 10, 12, and 13 all end simply with a quote, which Navon may or may not preface with an endorsement. The rest of the chapters offer only a few brief sentences following a salient quote from an author, usually without any summary of the prior discussion. Consequently, the chapters end abruptly, leaving the discussion open-ended. Navon carries this strategy through to the end, since his book contains no final conclusion after his analysis of each chapter.

Undoubtedly, some readers will wish Navon had taken a more definitive stance. However, Navon favors a dialectical approach to the complex issues raised in each chapter instead of opting for an overly facile synthesis. For instance, in the first chapter, “God and the World,” Navon explains Judaism’s stance on the presence of God in the world according to the two dueling concepts of God’s transcendence and immanence without completely resolving the tension. Navon understands that Jewish perspectives on Genesis cannot simply be viewed as monolithic in nature but allow for an incredible range of interpretations and expressions.

From a literary perspective, Navon writes well. Navon deftly transitions between carefully chosen citations, providing necessary contextual information to his more uninformed readers without bogging down the flow of his presentation for those with a greater breadth of knowledge. Navon occasionally breaks up the otherwise seriously minded narrative with a refreshing homespun comment such as: “A British lord once said rather sarcastically that today’s youth are no worse than the youth of old, for even when there were only two young men in the world, Cain and Abel, one of them was a criminal” (161). At other times he brings in personal anecdotes (150) to illustrate the argumentation.

Since Navon writes in this informal style, includes only a few scattered footnotes, and ends with no bibliography, scholars may mistakenly view his work as lightweight. On the contrary, Navon deftly navigates the reader through difficult conceptual material in Genesis, asking questions not typically addressed in the usual biblical commentaries. For instance, he uses God’s commandment of circumcision to echo Plato’s classic question over whether morality can exist apart from God: “If good and evil exist independently of God, then the *mitzvot* may have reasons. But if good and evil have no independent existence, God’s commandments are arbitrary, having no rhyme or reason. According to this understanding, ‘piety is piety’ solely because ‘it is loved by the gods’” (260). Though Navon writes to a wider audience than just the scholarly community, the breadth of his knowledge and the depth of his analysis, especially on halakic matters, makes this a solid contribution to the world of academia as well.

On the other hand, Navon opens himself up to criticism at a number of junctures. His last chapter on "Prayer" ends with Gen 25:21 as a lemma, eliminating any concepts in the second half of Genesis. This leaves the impression of an unfinished work. Additionally, in his chapter on "Violence," Navon promises "As we will see below, the Christians viewed Abel as an archetype of their Messiah" (166), yet he never takes up again any messianic associations with Abel, Christian or otherwise. Just a few pages later (170) Navon does state "The Christian thinker Augustine also saw in Abel's murder as the archetype of violence," so this might be what he intended all along. Nevertheless, this reinforces the impression of a work still under construction. While this incompleteness can perhaps be attributed to the original format in the classroom, a continuation of the investigation as well as a formal conclusion would correct this deficit.

Despite Navon's stated commitment to respect the wisdom of Gentile thinkers (x, 2-3), he ends his work with an unfortunate polemical tone in his understanding of Christian prayer (361-62). Navon endorses Rabbi Soloveitchik's opinion that Christian prayer advocates an otherworldly view where humanity remains "unconnected to this world" (362). Again, the addition of a conclusion would solve the problem, as the last word would not fall on a critique of Christianity.

Caveats aside, Navon offers his readership fascinating vignettes into the diversity of Jewish thought on selected philosophical trajectories in Genesis. The poet John Keats coined the term "negative capability" to describe a genius like Shakespeare who could remain in a state of "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Without drawing too close a line between Navon and Shakespeare, Navon does show his true genius when he allows Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers alike to speak to one another through the corridors of time about Genesis.