GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

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This week's shiurim are dedicated by Mr Emanuel Abrams
in memory of Rabbi Abba and Eleanor Abrams

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Lecture #1:
Targum Onkelos

A. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In order to understand the world of biblical exegesis (*parshanut*), one must become familiar with the major exegetes (*parshanim*; singular, *parshan*). This is my overarching goal in this series of weekly lectures. We will examine the unique style of each *parshan*individually, from his particular methodology to the influence of the his life experiences on the nature of his commentary. At the same time, we will deal at length with the contribution of each exegete to *parshanut* in general. Naturally, in this framework, we cannot deal with all of the biblical exegetes, or even with most of them; rather, we will focus on those *parshanim* who, in my opinion, have had the most significant impact on the world of biblical commentary. I will try, in each lecture, to bring examples from the Torah portion of that week. In this lecture, we will cite numerous verses from both*Parashat Bereishit* and *Parashat Noach*.

Before we begin our analysis, we must address the following pressing question: when and why did biblical exegesis emerge in Jewish history? It is logical to assume that the generation that received the Torah understood its instructions. Similarly, it is logical to assume that in subsequent generations, parents bequeathed to their children an understanding very close to that of the generation that stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai. However, as the chronological distance from Sinai grew, the meaning of the text became progressively more obscure for those who studied it.

Take, for example, the description of the manna in *Shemot* 16:31: "And it was like a white coriander seed; and the taste of it was like a wafer in honey." This verse is a bit perplexing for the modern mind. What is the taste of "a wafer in honey"? What exactly does a "white coriander seed" look like? Ostensibly, the generation that received the Torah understood these references, just as Shakespeare's plays were understood by his Elizabethan audience. Nevertheless, a modern reader may find it difficult to understand the metaphors and associations that the Bard employs.

Not only do obscure words and abstruse expressions require an explanation; the syntax may be challenging as well. The difficult structure of a given verse or passage may have been much clearer at the time of its writing;

alternatively, the words of the Masoretic authorities may hold the key to its explication. However, in the absence of these elements, there is a pressing need to present an understanding that is reasonable and fitting for comprehending the biblical text.

I have chosen to open this series with Onkelos and his Targum (translation) of the Torah, and we will begin with a few brief words about the general nature of biblical translation.

B. TRANSLATION AS AN EXEGETICAL TOOL

Translation is inherently commentary. When a given word has a number of possible meanings and the translator chooses a specific term from among many options, this translator is explaining the word in a definitive way and excluding all other options. For example, let us take *Bereishit* 4:7, a most difficult verse. God is speaking to Kayin, who is upset that his offering has been rejected while his brother Hevel's has been accepted. God reassures him that there is no reason to despair:

> If you improve, *se'et;*
> And if you do not improve, sin crouches at the door.

It is not clear what the term *se'et*means. Onkelos (and Rashi, who follows in his footsteps) translates the term as "it will be let alone for you" — that is, it will be forgiven.[1]Accordingly, he determines that one should understand and punctuate the verse in this way: "If you improve your actions, you will be forgiven. But if you do not improve, sin crouches at the door." The Malbim, however, explains the term *se'et* as related to the term "*maset*," a gift or tribute;[2] God is thus saying to Kayin that it will not help him whether he improves (i.e., increases) his offering or not; the result will be the same, because "sin crouches at the door" — i.e., acts are more significant than offerings.[3] Thus, the translation of the word *se'et* is determinative not only in terms of the definition of this one word, but in terms of the syntactic structure of the verse as a whole.

No translation is perfect. No translator can ever render the text in a precise manner. Very often, the process of translation causes the text to lose the beauty of the original text; when we speak of the Torah's language in particular, we may even say that it loses some holiness as well; at the end of the day, any translation takes away from the Torah's inherent value as "the words of the living God" (*Yirmiyahu* 23:36).

The problematic nature of translation comes to the fore in a number of ways. One of them is wordplay. Consider, for example,*Bereishit* 2:23: "This shall be called woman (*isha*), because this was taken from man (*ish*)." Onkelos renders: "This shall be called *itteta*, for this was taken from her husband (*balah*)." The verse in the Torah teaches that the etymological root of "*isha*" is "*ish*," but this concept is utterly lost in the Aramaic translation.[4]

An additional sphere in which translation creates difficulties is that of words that express more than one meaning. At the moment when the translator picks a given definition, the reader loses every other potential meaning of the word. An example of this can be found in *Bereishit* 2:25: "And they were both*arummim*, the person and his wife…" Immediately afterward, the next verse (3:1) states: "And the serpent was *arum.*" Naturally,*arum* is rendered "naked" in the first verse, while in the latter it is rendered "clever" or "subtle," but the Torah clearly desires to link the two. As these two terms are unrelated in Aramaic, the translation forfeits the eloquence of the Torah.

The inevitable conclusion is that no translation can possibly maintain the full multiplicity of meanings in the original; the translator is compelled to pick one meaning only — generally, one of the simpler ones — and to abandon the rest. Thus, one must necessarily turn the Torah into a shallow, superficial book, without the unique depth and variegated layers hidden within the original text. This approach is expressed by the Sages in the Talmud:

> R. Yehuda says: Whoever translates a verse as it is written is a fabricator, and whoever adds to it is a blasphemer and an execrator. (*Kiddushin* 49a)

A precisely literal translation of the text cannot encompass the conceptual truth of the verse, and a translation such as this is liable to lose the message of the verse. Conversely, a rendering of the message without the literal translation may succeed in transmitting the idea hidden in the verses, but it ignores the fact that we are talking about a sacred text in which every word carries meaning. This, apparently, is the explanation of a statement in *Megillat Ta'anit* (Addendum):

> And these are the days on which we fast…
>
> On the 8th of Tevet, the Torah was written in Greek in the days of King Ptolemy, and the darkness came to the world for three days.[5]

C. WHEN WAS THE TORAH FIRST TRANSLATED?

Despite the Sages' negative view of the translation of the Torah, as seen in the above source, at some point in history, they realized the contemporary exigency of crafting a faithful rendering of the Torah. When did the need for biblical translation arise?

Aside from the problem of comprehension that we discussed earlier – the chasm of time that may make it difficult to understand *Tanakh* – at the beginning of the period of the Second Temple, an additional impediment to understanding the Torah came into being — a basic lack of familiarity with the language of *Tanakh*, biblical Hebrew. From the time of the Babylonian exile and onwards, the Aramaic language progressively spread among the Jews, as well as among the other peoples of the Ancient Near East. Slowly, the use of Hebrew decreased, until Aramaic became the dominant tongue in the region. This process necessitated a rendering of the Torah in a spoken

tongue, because without such a translation, there was no way of approaching *Tanakh*, except for the scholars who still knew Hebrew.

According to the view of the Sages, the first translations of the Torah arose during the Return to Zion in the beginning of the Second Temple era (5th century BCE). *Nechemia* 8:8 describes Ezra's public Torah reading in the following way:

> They read from the scroll, from the Torah of God, clearly, and they gave the meaning, so that the people understood the reading.

This is how the Sages understand the verse:

> Rav said: What does it mean: "They read from the scroll, from the Torah of God, clearly, and they gave the meaning, so that the people understood the reading"? "They read from the book, from the Torah of God" — this is Scripture; "clearly" — this is translation. (*Megilla*3a)

The Rambam writes:

> From the days of Ezra, the custom was to have a translator translate for the people whatever the reader would read in the Torah, so that they might understand the content of the words. (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 12:2)

Thus, we may point to the period of Ezra as the first step in the development of biblical exegesis.

It may be that the primordial translation described in the Book of Nechemia is not a methodical, systematic rendition of the Torah in its entirety; rather, it appears that the verse describes a translation according to the needs of the audience, picking out difficult expressions and explaining them. Later, apparently in the era of the Mishna, translations of *Tanakh* became an accepted phenomenon throughout Jewish communities. The *mishna* attests to this by enumerating the guidelines of simultaneous translation of the public Torah reading:

> One who reads the Torah… he should not read for the translator more than one verse; but in the Prophets, three. (*Megilla* 4:4)

In light of the Sages' skepticism toward biblical translation, they saw fit to choose one rendition and to grant this *targum* primogeniture, thereby preventing an outbreak of do-it-yourself translation. From among the Aramaic translations of Scripture,[6] the one which most accorded with the Sages' viewpoint – both because of its faithfulness to the text as much as possible and its exclusion of a gross number of independent addenda – was Targum Onkelos. (This choice was as opposed to another famous *targum*, commonly attributed to Yonatan ben Uzziel and known as Pseudo-Jonathan, which weaves in Midrashic elements in almost every verses, as we will see below.) These qualities made Onkelos's *targum* **the Targum**, granting him the

distinguished position of the official translator of the Torah.[7] But who was Onkelos?

D. THE IDENTITY OF ONKELOS AND THE TIME OF THE TARGUM'S COMPOSITION

We have no exact information concerning the identity of Onkelos and the time of the composition of his Targum, and there are different views concerning the matter. Onkelos is mentioned in Tractate *Megilla*:

> Said R. Yirmiya — alternatively, R. Chiya bar Abba: Onkelos the convert recited the Targum of the Torah from the mouths of R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua. (*Megilla* 3a)

However, this declaration is far from self-evident, and it is difficult to conclude based on this that Onkelos lived in the period of the Mishna (as I will shortly explain). It may be that the intent of this aggadic statement is to identify Onkelos as a student of R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua, much like R. Akiva, thereby declaring that Onkelos received his interpretation through the *mesora* and giving the seal of approval to his Targum.

Dr. Israel Drazin, an Onkelos scholar, proves in his analysis that we should apparently date Targum Onkelos around the year 400 of the Common Era.[8] He offers two main proofs of this:

1. Onkelos is not mentioned in sources compiled before this time, such as the Talmud Yerushalmi and Tannaitic*midrashim* (such as the Mekhileta of Rabbi Yishmael, the Mekhileta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the Sifra, and the Sifrei.)

2. Onkelos commonly quotes the abovementioned Tannaitic *midrashim*, which were compiled about the year 400 of the Common Era. Furthermore, he consistently uses the version of the later editions of the Sages' *midrashim*.

On the other hand, we should not date the life of Onkelos much later than this, since he is mentioned in the Talmud Bavli (e.g.,*Megilla* 3a, *Avoda Zara* 11a, *Gittin* 56b).[9]

E. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF TARGUM ONKELOS

What characterizes Targum Onkelos, and what is so unique about his style that earned him such a distinguished standing?

We will enumerate a number of important points:

1. The Targum is a terse, literal translation that aims to explain the verses in a simple way, and it does not add details from the Midrash. This is opposed to the Targum Yerushalmi, et al. For example, the words "And the woman saw that the tree was good for

food" (*Bereishit*3:6), Onkelos translates simply: "And the woman saw that the tree was good to eat," while the Targum Yerushalmi renders it, "And the woman perceived Samael, the Angel of Death."

2. The Targum avoids the anthropomorphization of God. Onkelos, out of respect for the divine, avoids attributing human acts or ascribing human feelings to God. There are a number of examples of this. Consider *Bereishit* 7:16 – after Noach enters the Ark, the verse reports, "And God closed for him." Onkelos translates this, "And God protected him with His word," stressing that God protects Noach with His utterance. Onkelos uses this language in order to refute the possible interpretation that God closes the door of the Ark with His hand. In another example from*Parashat Noach* (*Bereishit* 8:21), we find, "And God smelled the pleasant smell, and God thought to Himself…" In this verse, there are two expressions that express physicality: God smells an odor, and God thinks to Himself (literally, "said to His heart"). Onkelos translates the expression "And God smelled" as "And God accepted with goodwill;" "God thought to himself" is translated: "And God said in His utterance."

3. When the Torah uses a metaphor, Onkelos is exacting in explaining the significance of the metaphor and not translating it literally, as this would be a ludicrous rendering of the Torah. For example, the words "And the Israelites were coming out with a high hand" (*Shemot* 14:8), Onkelos translates, "And the Israelites were coming out with a bare head" — that is, the nation leaves openly, ostentatiously.

4. In translating verses of biblical poetry, Onkelos breaks away from his customary approach; he does not explain the verses according to their simple meaning, but rather according to their prophetic content. For example, Yaakov's blessing of Yehuda, "And to the choice vine, his she-donkey's child" (*Bereishit* 49:11), Onkelos renders, "The nation will build his sanctuary." The "choice vine" is seen as the Jewish people, since they are often compared in*Tanakh* to a grapevine;[10] he reinterprets the word "*beni*" as related not to *ben*, son, but *beneh*, build; and the word "*atono*" is translated as "his sanctuary," based on the Temple's*shaar ha-iton*, "the entrance gate."[11]

5. The Targum attempts to prevent errors that may lead to the desecration of God's name. Sometimes, the Torah uses an identical word for something sacred and profane. Thus, for example, the term *mizbeiach* is used equally for an altar dedicated to God and one designated for pagan worship. Nevertheless, Onkelos translates these words differently. He translates a reference to an altar for God as*madbecha*, cognate to *mizbeiach* – for example, *Bereishit* 8:20 reports, "And Noach built an altar for God," which he translates, "And Noach built a *madbecha* before God." On the other hand, the term he uses for pagan altars is *agora* – for example,*Shemot* 34:13 commands, "For you must demolish their altars," and Onkelos applies this to the pagan*agora*. Even the word *elohim* is ambiguous; in *Tanakh*, this is sometimes a sacred

name and sometimes a term for pagan deities. In the latter case, Onkelos uses the term *dachala*, fear — that is, inherently powerless objects that are invested with powers by those who worship them. This is how he renders, for example, *Shemot* 20:19: "Do not make for yourselves silver gods or golden gods" — "*dachalan* of silver or *dachalan* of gold."

6. The Targum strives to maintain the dignity of the leaders of the Jewish nation, often concealing character defects in the Patriarchs. When the Torah describes an act by using a term with an extremely negative connotation, Onkelos transmutes the negative word to a neutral word. For example, in the story of the theft of the blessings by Yaakov, Yitzchak says to Esav, "Your brother came with guile, and he took your blessing" (*Bereishit* 27:35). Onkelos renders this, "Your brother came with cleverness, and he received your blessing." Thus, Onkelos changes two things: Yaakov is described as "clever" rather than "guileful," and instead of "taking" the blessing, he merely "receives" it. Consequently, a reader of the Targum perceives that Yaakov is not a thief, but a clever man; furthermore, Yaakov is the receptacle for Yitzchak's blessings, not the one who takes them. Similarly, the Torah unequivocally states that "Rachel stole her father's *terafim*" (*Bereishit*31:19), but Onkelos softens this and translates it as "And Rachel took the images."

7. The rendition of the Targum follows the Halakha. Sometimes, Onkelos translates the verse according to the tradition of the Oral Torah, and not according to the simple meaning of the verse. For example, *Bereishit* 9:6 states, "One who spills the blood of a person, by a person shall his blood be spilled," establishing the death penalty for homicide. Onkelos translates this verse in the following way: "One who spills the blood of a person, with witnesses, by the utterance of judges, his blood shall be spilled." In other words, the death penalty requires eyewitness testimony and a judicial verdict. Another example is the rendering of the famous phrase, "Do not cook a kid in its mother's milk" (*Shemot* 23:19, et al.), which Onkelos transforms into "Do not eat meat in milk."

F. THE IMPORTANCE OF TARGUM ONKELOS

There is no doubt that Targum Onkelos succeeded, for over a millennium, in maintaining its honored place in the Jewish community as the authoritative and sanctified translation of the Torah. In every publication of the Torah with commentaries, Targum Onkelos maintains its place of honor, and throughout the Jewish world, the weekly study of the Targum is a halakhic obligation. The formula of "twice Scripture, once Targum" is in fact codified (*Shulchan Arukh*, *Orach Chaim* 285).

In this lecture, we have seen that the words of the Targum were chosen by Onkelos with exactness and precision, based on pedagogical and theological motives; therefore, one who reads Targum Onkelos must delve into it in order to understand it thoroughly. For this purpose, the works of a

large number of commentators and researchers, old and new, are available to use in the study process.

> May we all merit the blessing of the Talmud:
>
> R. Huna bar Yehuda says in the name of R. Ammi: A person should always complete his portions together with the congregation, twice Scripture and once Targum… for if one completes his portions together with the congregation, his days and years are prolonged. (*Berakhot* 8a-b)

(Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch)

[1] Cf. *Bereishit* 50:17, where "*sa*" refers to bearing or pardoning a sin.
[2] Cf. *Bereishit* 43:34. Medieval exegetes offered many and sundry explanations of the term *se'et* (see ibn Ezra, Ramban, Seforno); I have chosen the Malbim's explanation, as this influences the syntactic structure of the verse.
[3] In Malbim's words: "Thus, God revealed to him that He does not desire offerings; rather, 'Behold, listening is better than any fine offering' (I *Shmuel*15:22). The essence is improving one's actions, not improving the *maset* or the offering, as improving the*maset* will not be desirable in His eyes. [God is saying to Kayin:] whether you improve the *maset* or not, it is not desirable in My eyes, as there is no qualitative difference in it."
[4] It may be that Onkelos is formulating an alternative etymology, using the wordplay of *itteta* and the term *nesiva*, "taken," which is synonymous with the word *aitei*, "brought" (used in the previous verse). Indeed, a bride is "brought" or "taken" from her father's house to her husband's house.
[5] This formulation of the Sages may present the inverse of the three days of preparation before the Torah was given at Sinai (*Shemot* 19:10-16).
[6] The limitations of this series do not allow me to analyze the Greek translations of Scripture, but their place of honor remains unquestioned.
[7] See for example, the following ruling of the Rambam, *Hilkhot Ishut* 8:4: "If one says to a woman, 'You are betrothed to me by this on the condition that I am literate,' he must read the Torah and translate it with Targum Onkelos."
[8] I. Drazin, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 50, No. 2 (1999), pp. 246-58.
[9] Many miraculous tales are attributed to Onkelos, the most famous being the passage in *Avoda Zara*, in which the Roman emperor sends three Roman legions, one after another, in order to convince Onkelos to recant his conversion; Onkelos manages to convince them all of the veracity of the Torah, and it is they who convert — to Judaism. (Titus is identified as Onkelos's uncle in the passage in *Gittin.*)
[10] For example, *Yirmiyahu* 2:21.
[11] See *Yechezkel* 40:15.

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Lecture #2:
Saadia Gaon

A. BIOGRAPHY

Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon ben Yosef (882-942)[1] — known by the acronym "Rasag" — is considered one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of the early medieval period. Rasag was well-versed in many disciplines: biblical exegesis, Jewish philosophy, Hebrew language, prayer, and Halakha. He was born in Egypt,[2] but he operated mainly in Babylonia, where he served as the *rosh yeshiva* of the Talmudic academy in Sura (near Al-Hira in modern-day Iraq). Rasag was the first learned Jew to compose a tract of Jewish philosophy, and he was the first Jew to write a comprehensive commentary to the Torah. These compositions of Rasag were designed to address the challenges of the time, and they served as his weapons of war against phenomena that threatened to tear apart the Jewish community, as we will see presently.

During the course of his life, Rasag passed through all of the contemporary Jewish centers of Torah and Arab centers of education. In Egypt, he married and had a number of children, two of whom are known by name: She'erit and R. Dosa Gaon. It was in Egypt that the Rasag started his professional life as well, writing the *Agron*, the first Hebrew-Arabic dictionary. At the age of about thirty, he moved to Israel, apparently to Tiberias, where he lived and operated until 921, when he returned to Babylonia.

Arriving there, he joined the yeshiva of Pumbedita, where he was part of the administration for eight years, and there he received the title of "*Alluf.*" The Exilarch, David ben Zakkai, invited Rasag to become the *rosh yeshiva* of Sura in the year 928, and Rasag accepted this invitation. Throughout all his years of service in the*yeshivot* of Babylonia, Rasag never set down his pen; he was constantly composing halakhic tomes and writing responsa to the questions he received from the far reaches of the Jewish Diaspora.

In the year 930, a sharp dispute broke out between the Exilarch and Rasag, compelling the latter to flee to Baghdad. During his year of his "exile" from Sura, Rasag wrote his most important books in the world of philosophy, including his magnum opus, *Emunot Ve-de'ot*. In the year 937, in the wake of his reconciliation with the Exilarch, Rasag returned to his position as *rosh yeshiva* of Sura, where he remained until his death in 942.

B. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In order to understand the universal importance of Rasag's writings generally, and his commentary to the Torah in particular, we must examine the cultural background of Rasag. One may point to two historical developments that influenced the Rasag's creations, one internal and the other external.

The outside phenomenon was the rise of Islam. As a result of the success of the Muslim conquests of the 7th century, many Jews around the world found themselves under Muslim rule and surrounded by Muslim culture. The aim of the Muslim faith is to strengthen Islam in the world by encouraging the conversion of those living under its rule. Sometimes, this was done by

force, but on the whole, it was accomplished by giving greater rights to those who converted to Islam. The effect of exposing the Jewish community to Muslim religion and culture was ambiguous. On the one hand, Muslim civilization enriched the cultural world of the Jews; on the other hand, this exposure might seduce some to abandon Judaism for Islam.

In parallel, perhaps because of these phenomena, a new development began from within the Jewish community about a century prior to the period of Rasag. In the second half of the 8th century, inspired by the actions of Anan ben David, a sect developed that claimed essentially that Judaism could be based only on *Tanakh*, without relating to any outside information at all.[3] The command of Anan, founder of the sect (in fact, members of the sect were identified as Ananites), was: "Investigate thoroughly the Torah, and do not rely on my words." Anan regarded the *mesora* as an invention of humans, and it therefore could not be binding; only that which had been written in the Torah could be seen as obligatory. Two centuries later, this position solidified into that of the well-known Karaite sect. Practically, the main point of contention was the relationship between biblical law and the tradition of the Oral Torah, whether in terms of principles or in terms of specific laws. Of course, the Gaonim preceding Rasag opposed this phenomenon quite forcefully, but they did not feel threatened by it — perhaps because, in the Gaonic period preceding Rasag, the Karaite sect had not yet solidified. However, in the time of Rasag, the sect had already begun to act in an aggressive way and to influence many Jews.

These two phenomena are the foundations of the Rasag's commentaries on the Torah.

C. RASAG'S COMMENTARIES ON THE TORAH

Characteristics of the *Peirush Ha-katzar*

Rasag's commentary on the Torah is divided into two parts:

A) *Peirush Ha-katzar* (The Short Commentary): This is the translation of *Tanakh* into Arabic (*tafsir* is the term in Arabic for *parshanut*),[4] and it includes some brief explanations — beyond the literal translation — designated for the wider community (Jews and non-Jews).

B) *Peirush Ha-arokh* (The Long Commentary): This is also written in Arabic, but it is designated for educated readers. This commentary includes an analysis of different topics in the disciplines of linguistics, Halakha, and philosophy.

We will first analyze the *Peirush Ha-katzar*. Rasag composed an introduction to his *Peirush Ha-katzar*,[5] in which he describes the impetus for writing the commentary:

> My only motivation for composing this work is the personal request of one of the students, who asked for a book dedicated to the simple

> meaning of the Torah, without integrating any element of linguistic flourishes, metaphors, synonymy, or antonymy. I will cite neither the questions of the heretics nor my answers to them. I will not explore the intellectual *mitzvot*, nor will I delve into the performance of the pragmatic *mitzvot*. Rather, I will translate the simple meaning of the verses of the Torah only. I note that what I have been asked to do has a purpose: that the readers will understand and comprehend the issues of the Torah — the narrative, the command and the reward — in sequence and with concision…
>
> It may be that a reader will afterwards seek to understand the fundamentals of the intellectual*mitzvot* and the commission of the pragmatic ones, as well as how to refute the claims of those who challenge the portions of the Torah; let him satisfy all of these ends in my other book. This brief one may inspire him to this end and lead him to his object.
>
> Bearing all this in mind, I have written this book as a simple translation of the verses of the Torah only, exacting in its logic and following tradition.

According to his own words in this introduction, the main aim of Rasag was to translate the Torah into the spoken Arabic of his world, in order to make it approachable for everyone. Rasag stresses that the *Peirush Ha-katzar* does not deal with the philosophical questions that arise from the Torah, nor is it a comprehensive explanation of the *mitzvot* of the Torah; rather, it is a literal translation. The student interested in deepening his understanding of the Torah is encouraged to turn to the*Peirush Ha-arokh*: “This brief one may inspire him to this end and lead him to his object.” After the student understands the simple meaning (*peshat*) of the verses in the short Torah commentary, the student may proceed to study the *Peirush Ha-arokh*.

Still, we must ask – does Rasag really “translate the simple meaning of the verses of the Torah only”? Analysis of this commentary shows that the Rasag often goes beyond the narrow *peshat* of the verses. First, Rasag adds concise explanations. Since his target audience includes non-Jews as well, who know little or no Hebrew, Rasag wants to make the books of *Tanakh* accessible with a biblical translation and commentary.[6] In addition, Rasag hoped to bolster the faith of all Jews through his translation, bridging the chasms and destroying errant and mistaken beliefs, including the Karaite faith. The language of the translation is meant to be clear, logical and understood by the Arabic-speaking target audience,[7] and this is due to literal precision of the Torah’s text.

Similarly, Rasag intended for text to be understood in an unequivocal way, without the ambiguity of the source language, apparently in light of his debates with the Karaites. In addition, Rasag goes beyond the literal translation in order to transmit different messages and to prevent possible errors in the sphere of faith and philosophy.[8]

More specifically, the *Peirush Ha-katzar* has a number of characteristics (we will cite examples from *Bereishit*):

A) **Avoiding anthropomorphization:** Rasag will avoid translating and explaining in a literal way those verses in which there is an attribution of physical phenomena to God. For example, in 17:22, the verse states, "And God went up," and the Rasag renders, "And the glory of God went up".[9]

B) **Commentative elucidations**: For example, the Torah explains Chava's name by saying (3:20), "For she was the mother of all living things," and the Rasag changes this to, "of all living **speaking** things," since Chava was not the mother of the animals.[10]

C) **The identification of places, nations, objects and animals:** Rasag customarily identifies different nations mentioned in *Tanakh*, as well as locations, various flora and fauna, etc. For example, Rasag identifies the sites mentioned in the first eight verses of chapter 14 by describing the places known to him in his era. Similarly, Rasag uses the names of precious stones known in his time to identify the stones of the breastplate.[11]

D) **Clarifications in the sphere of faith and philosophy**: For example, Malki-Tzedek declares (14:15), "Blessed be Avram to High God," while Rasag translates, "to **the** High God," to eliminate the possibility that the verse refers to numerous gods, of whom Avraham's God is the chief of the pantheon.

E) **Alterations to prevent the desecration of God's name**: For example, the Torah reports (12:17), "And God plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of the matter of Sarai, Avram's wife," but Rasag renders this, "And God informed Pharaoh that he would bring on him and his house great plagues on Sarai's account." This is in order to avoid the claim that God punishes Pharaoh even though Pharaoh does not yet know that Sarai is a married woman.

Characteristics of the *Peirush Ha-arokh*

Unfortunately, we have no complete manuscript of the *Peirush Ha-arokh* of Rasag, only parts of the Book of *Bereishit* and parts of the Book of *Shemot*. This is a true shame. In any case, in his introduction to the *Peirush Ha-arokh*, Rasag explains the methodology of his commentary to his readers:[12]

> It is fitting for every thinking person to always take hold of the Torah according to the simple meaning of the words, what is most common among those who speak his language and the most useful… unless sense or logic contradicts this expression, or if the simple meaning of the expression contradicts a different verse or contradicts the prophetic tradition.

Accordingly, Rasag's modus operandi is to explain the verses according to their simple meaning, unless:

A) The sense (our sensory perception of the world) refutes the *peshat*.
B) The intellect refutes the *peshat*.
C) There are verses which contradict each other.
D) The Sages' tradition refutes the*peshat*.

Due to the brevity of our discussion, we will deal at length only with the last of these caveats: rejecting the *peshat* when it contradicts the Sages' tradition. As we have said above, the commentary of the Rasag is dedicated, among other things, to strengthening the oral tradition in opposition to the Karaite position. Therefore, in a considerable number of halakhic passages, Rasag ignores the *peshat* of the verses. Instead, he explains the verse according to the *mesora*, and he reinterprets the *peshat*of the verses through logical argument, as the Sages' law must be based on logic.

An example of this can be found in*Shemot* 21:24-25:[13]

> An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot. A burn for a burn, an injury for an injury, a bruise for a bruise.

Rasag engaged in a debate with Ben Zuta[14] concerning the question of whether the verse really means that the assailant should lose a limb or merely requires him to compensate his victim monetarily:

> R. Saadia said: We cannot explain the verse as it sounds. For if a man will strike the eye of his fellow, reducing the latter's vision by one-third, how can it be that he will be struck to just such a degree, no more and no less? Perhaps he will be rendered totally blind! The burn, injury and bruise are even more difficult [to reproduce]; if they are in a critical place, [the assailant] may die, and this is ludicrous.
>
> Ben Zuta said to him: But is it not written in another place (*Vayikra*24:20): "As he puts a blemish in a person, so must be put in him"?
>
> The Gaon answered him: The term "in" sometimes mean "upon."[15] It means to say: so must a punishment be put upon him.
>
> Ben Zuta responded to him [with the verse]: "As he has done, so must be done to him" (ibid. v. 19).
>
> The Gaon responded: Did not Shimshon say [of the Philistines] (*Shoftim* 15:11), "As they have done to me, so have I done to them"? Now, Shimshon did not take their wives and give them to others [which the Philistines had done with Shimshon's wife]; he simply meant that he had dealt them a deserved punishment.
>
> Ben Zuta responded: If the assailant is indigent, what shall his punishment be?

> The Gaon responded: If a blind man puts out the eye of a seeing man, what shall be done to him? On the contrary, it is conceivable that the poor man may become wealthy one day and pay, but the blind man will never be able to "pay"!

Another example of his deep involvement in the battle with the Karaites is his commentary on *Shemot* 34:18, concerning the Karaite custom of creating a leap year in order to ensure that Pesach falls in "the month of the fresh ears" — that is, when the barley ripens.

> Whoever defies our ancestors' tradition, along with their practical accustomed as witnessed by all, and instead presumes to reach a view based on his musings alone… I will find fifteen responses to him.

Rasag speaks at length about this point, giving a special mention to Anan, "may his memory be cursed."

In all of his debates with the Karaites, Rasag cites only verses from *Tanakh* and logical argument, not the tradition of the Sages, as the Karaites did not accept the *mesora*.[16]

D. HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF RASAG

If we wish to point to the person who had the most profound and wide-ranging influence upon the development of the Jewish tradition in the early medieval period, it is indisputable that this title belongs to Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon. Rasag was a revolutionary in many spheres. In the discipline of linguistics and halakhic writing, his work marks a turning point and a paradigm shift in the Jewish tradition. In the realm of *parshanut*, he is one of the founding fathers and trailblazers of the Jewish exegesis of *Tanakh*.

However, it appears that his most important achievement was his readiness to respond to the challenges of his age and to fight different sects with different techniques, wielding his commentary to the Torah and his magnum opus *Emunot Ve-de'ot* in an uncompromising way. In so doing, he protected and preserved the tradition of the Jewish People.

[1] The term "Gaon" is a title for the heads of the *yeshivot* in Sura and Pumbedita.

[2] He was born in Faiyum in Upper Egypt – hence his Arabic name, Said al-Fayyumi.

[3] The background for this challenge to rabbinic authority is based, apparently, on the fact that the founder of the sect, Anan ben David, did not receive the position of Exilarch. Anan ben David was a remarkable personality, and his charisma and intelligence, combined with his compelling methodology, led all of the Jews opposed to the Babylonian leadership to coalesce around him. R. Abraham ibn Daud, who lived in 12th-century Spain and composed *Sefer Ha-kabbala*, describes the factors for the development of Karaism in this way:

> And in [R. Yehudai Gaon's] days, there arose Anan and Shaul his son, may the name of the wicked rot. This Anan was from the Davidic dynasty, and he was a Torah scholar at the start, but they could see that there was a blot upon his soul. Because of this, he was not appointed as Gaon, and he received no help from the heavens to

become the Exilarch. Because of the jealousy and pettiness in his heart, he collected a following and began to seduce and lead Israel away from the tradition of the Sages, and he became a rebellious elder… He fabricated out of whole cloth unsound laws and rules by which no man can live. For after the destruction of the Temple, the sectarians had petered out, until Anan came and strengthened them.

[4] Rasag wrote a translation of the entire *Tanakh*, but in the framework of these lectures, I will only address his commentary on the Torah.

[5] Rasag wrote introductions for most of his works.

[6] See the analysis of Y. Blau, "*Al Targum Ha-Torah shel Rav Saadia Gaon*", in M. Bar-Asher (ed.), *Sefer Ha-Yovel Le-Rav Mordechai Breuer,* (Jerusalem, 5752), p. 634:

> There is no doubt that the Rasag's translation was directed toward Jews who did not understand Scripture in its Hebrew original. This may be clearly proven from his commentary (which includes his translation), because the very content of the commentary gives testimony as valid as a hundred witnesses' that it is directed toward the Jews alone; a non-Jew could never hope to understand the halakhic debates in it. The question is: was the translation (aside from the commentary) also directed toward the Jews, or perhaps it was also for those who are not members of the tribe. This is the testimony of ibn Ezra in the famous passage from his comment in *Bereishit* (2:11): "Perhaps he did this" i.e., translating the names of "the families and the countries and the animals and the birds and the rocks" into Arabic — "for God's honor, because he translated it into the Ishmaelite tongue and into their script, so that they could not say that there are words in the Torah which we do not comprehend."

[7] The Rasag's method of translating verses is very similar to the Rambam's definition of proper translation. The Rambam, in his letter to Rabbi Shemuel ibn Tibbon, concerning the translation of *Moreh Ha-nvukhim*, writes this (*Iggerot Ha-Rambam*, Y. Shilat Edition [Maaleh Adummim, 5748], Vol. II, p. 532):

> And I will explain to you everything by mentioning one rule to you, namely: whoever wants to translated from one language to another and intends to exchange one word for one word and keep the order of the grammar and the syntax — he will toil greatly, and his translation will be very dubious and very distorted… and it is not fitting to do so. Rather, one who needs to translate from one language to another must understand the content first, and afterwards he may relate it so that the matter will be understood in the other language. This is impossible without moving one word forward or backward among many words; one must convey many words with one word; one must take away letter and adds letters, until the matter is arranged and understood according to the language into which the text is being translated.

[8] In the Kapach edition of Rasag's commentaries, published by Mosad Harav Kook (as an independent volume, as well as in Mosad Harav Kook's *Torat Chayim* edition of the *Chumash*), R. Kapach renders the translation of Rasag into Hebrew only in the following cases: a) the word, expression or verse is not unequivocal and Rasag chooses one of a kaleidoscope of possibilities; b) Rasag goes beyond the simple literal translation; and c) the translation constitutes a certain commentary. R. Kapach, in his great modesty, expresses the reason for this in his preface (p. 8) to the collection of Rasag's commentaries on the Torah:

> My first work in this case was to collect from our master's translation all of the words and the alterations which have in them some sort of commentary and to turn them into Hebrew, and this selection demanded great attention from two perspectives: one, that I will not translate the translation, making this a superfluous, onerous act for the lone reader, because is not Scripture which lies before us, and what does it avail us to change Scripture — words of the living God in Hebrew, in the style given to Moshe at Sinai — into my inferior Hebrew?

[9] In this, the Rasag follows in the footsteps of Onkelos. In his book *Emunot Ve-de'ot*, Rasag dedicates a chapter to the question of anthropomorphization of God in *Tanakh* (I:9). Among other things, he writes:

> It is a tradition handed down by the great scholars of our nation, who are trustworthy in matters of faith, that in any place in which they discover something which gives rise to doubts, they do not translate it in the language of physicality. Rather, they transform them into that which is fitting.

[10] This is an example brought by the Rasag in his introduction: "If we leave the expression 'all living things' with its simple, widely-understood meaning, we are denying

reality. This would require us to believe that the lion, ox, donkey and other animals are descended from Chava."

[11] As for Rasag's identification of the four rivers coming out of the Garden of Eden, ibn Ezra comments (*Bereishit* 2:11) caustically:

> There is no proof that the Pishon is the Nile… as it has no tradition… Perhaps he saw it in a dream? He already has erred in some of them, as I will explain in the proper place; consequently, we will not rely on his dreams…

[12] These rules are applicable only to the*Peirush Ha-katzar*.

[13] As we have said, we do not have all of the commentaries of Rasag, but ibn Ezra quotes him often; the commentary of Rasag on this verse is taken from ibn Ezra's *Peirush Ha-arokh*to *Shemot* 21:24.

[14] Ben Zuta was a Karaite sage who debated Rasag about the meaning of a number of verses.

[15] In other words, in Biblical Hebrew, the term "in" is ambiguous; thus, the meaning of the verse is "put [a monetary punishment] **upon**him" and not to put a wound or defect in the body of the assailant.

[16] In his famous poem, "*Esa Meshali*,"Rasag mocks the Karaites and proves that the Oral Torah is the essential basis for understanding and maintaining the Written Torah. The reason for this is that the Torah requires explication and specification, which are not found in the verses. Here are a number of stanzas from this long poem:

> Our God's law is swapped as they hop
> To forbid the licit, while prohibitions drop
> Without fear and without hesitation.
>
> How many cubits must my hut measure?
> How long and how wide, for holiday pleasure?
> And what of its height, to plan it straight?
>
> How many grapes for the poor must be saved?
> Is any of these with a chisel engraved?
> Or does Scripture insinuate?
>
> As we affix our fringes to four-cornered things
> How many coils and how many strings?
> Do you know if it is ten or eight…
>
> All of these, and like them so many
> I ask the verse-readers if they can find any
> To lay out for us a fine explanation?
>
> But Mishna and Talmud continue to reach us
> And derive all of these plainly to teach us
> And so many more, beyond enumeration.

[**Translator's note**: The meter has been changed in the translation, but the rhyme scheme has been maintained.]

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

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This week's shiurim are dedicated by Ruchy Yudkowsky
in memory of Yehuda Yudkowsky z"l

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Lecture #03:
R. Yona ibn Janach

A. INTRODUCTION

His Life and His Work

Although R. Yona ibn Janach did not author even one full volume dedicated to biblical commentary, his contributions to*parshanut* have proven momentous. Who was he, and why is his work so crucial to the development of Jewish exegesis?

R. Yona ibn Janach (henceforth, Ribag)[1] lived in Spain in the first half of the 11thcentury,[2] and he was one of the most important Hebrew linguists and grammarians of the early medieval period. For Ribag, as we shall see, biblical exegesis represented both the most fundamental basis and the ultimate application of the study of Hebrew language and grammar. His grammatical innovations lay the foundation for biblical exegetes who came after him, such as R. Avraham ibn Ezra, and these exegetes often cite his explanations throughout *Tanakh*. There is no doubt that one should view Ribag as an important exegete who influenced *parshanut* both in his time and in the following generations. For this reason, we must attempt to understand his approach.

Ribag was one of the first to formulate the rules of Hebrew syntax. Indeed, it may be that he was the first to use the *peh-ayin-lamed*format as the basis for demonstrating and explaining all verbs and conjugations.[3] Using this model, all roots are of three letters, the first of which is referred to as *peh*, the second as*ayin*, and the last as *lamed*. Ribag studied and was very much influenced by the grammatical works of R. Yehuda ben Hayyuj,[4] but he apparently never met him; Ribag mentions R. Yitzchak ibn Gikatilla and the linguist and poet R. Yitzchak ben Shaul as his regular teachers. He made his living in the field of medicine, and apparently wrote a medical text that is not extant. In addition, he studied philosophy and was an expert in Aramaic and Arabic.[5]

Ribag wrote seven books dealing with grammar and language. They were written in Judeo-Arabic, and only some of them were translated into Hebrew, mainly by R. Yehuda ibn Tibbon. Some of his compositions are glosses and addenda to his predecessors' works.[6] In the framework of this series, we will deal with Ribag's magnum opus, *MachberetHa-Dikduk*. (We will use ibn Tibbon's Hebrew titles, as these are most familiar to the modern reader.) *Machberet Ha-Dikduk* (Tract of Investigation) is considered the most important of his creations, in terms both of its scope and its influence on the Hebrew language and biblical exegesis.

Machberet Ha-Dikduk

Machberet Ha-Dikduk is divided into two parts, both translated by ibn Tibbon: the first is known as *Sefer Ha-Rikma* (the Book of Many Colors), while the second is known as *SeferHa-Shorashim* (the Book of Roots).[7]

The focus of *Sefer Ha-Rikma* is linguistic: to examine the biblical text and to formulate rules that are tied to its language and its forms of expression. These rules, as we shall see later, help us understand the language of *Tanakh*. Ribag brings many examples from *Tanakh* to illustrate each linguistic phenomenon, sometimes relying on a halakhic Midrash in which the Sages take a similar approach to that of his own proposal. Ribag was the first grammarian to craft a comprehensive and thorough methodology, encompassing all of the spheres of linguistic expression and including exceptional cases.

In his introduction to *Sefer Ha-Rikma*, Ribag explains his motivations for writing it. Three distinct impetuses may be identified:

1. **Basic understanding of the Hebrew language is an urgent concern**.[8] While the Arabic language is widely studied, he notes, Jews simply chant, mouthing the words without understanding anything about the study of linguistics.
2. **Understanding language is the basis of all knowledge**. All communication is effected by language, and every deficiency of linguistic comprehension will necessarily bring about a deficiency in understanding the content.[9]
3. **One cannot understand the Torah without understanding its language.** In order for us to fulfill the will of God, which is expressed in the Torah, we must understand the science of language.[10]

Sefer Ha-Rikma is divided into forty-six chapters (literally, “gates”), and every chapter deals with another linguistic topic. The issue is explained concisely at the beginning of every chapter, followed by Scriptural examples for illustration.

We will examine a number of issues from *Sefer Ha-Rikma* to see how grammatical analysis influences biblical exegesis.

B. SELECT TOPICS FROM *SEFER HA-RIKMA*

The *Lamed* of Substitution

In Chapter 6, in explaining the concept of prefixes, Ribag notes one of the meanings of the letter *lamed* when it is added to the beginning of the word:

> The *lamed* indicates exchange or substitution, instead of saying “in place of.” For example, the *lamed* as used in the verse, “And the bricks were as stone (*le-aven*) for them, and the asphalt was as mortar (*la-chomer*)” (*Bereishit* 11:3).

In other words, the meaning of the *lamed* at the beginning of a noun may be “for” or “in place of.”

Ribag brings another example from the verse in *Parashat Vayera* in which God orders the Binding of Yitzchak: “And bring him up as a burnt offering (*le-ola*)” (*Bereishit* 22:2):

> A *lamed* used similarly may be found here: “And bring him up as a burnt offering (*le-ola*) on one of the mountains…” For I believe that God, may He be blessed and praised, when He wanted to show to all creation the travails of Avraham, peace be upon him, and the rewards He gave him for his suffering, He spoke to him with a phrasing that encompassed two understandings.[11] One of them is what the masses will understand, and the second is what individuals may understand in it, and this is what “And bring him up as a burnt offering” accomplishes.
> The masses’ understanding is what is connoted by the verse’s simple meaning – that is, to offer him as a sacrifice… However, its individual meaning[12] is the following: bring him up there, on one of the mountains, in place of a burnt offering — that is, God wants Avraham to bring Yitzchak up to the mountain to Him at the time that God will desire that Avraham bring him a sacrifice.
>
> Avraham initially applied the masses’ meaning, and God foresaw that this common meaning was what would initially occur to him, but He wanted to show people his travail and the rewards He gave him for it, and when Avraham achieved the matter that God wanted from him, namely bringing his son up to the mountain, the Blessed One called from the heavens: That will do, Avraham.

Ribag claims that it is never God’s intention for Yitzchak to be slaughtered. He commands, “And bring him up as a burnt offering,” knowing that Avraham will interpret the phrasing of the command in the usual meaning (what the masses would understand). However, the true meaning, God’s true intent in this command, is for Avraham to bring Yitzchak up to the mountain in place of an *ola* – that is, in such a way that he will be considered by God as an *ola*. (Otherwise, it may be that God would have phrased the command without the*lamed.*)

After this, Ribag draws the following conclusion as regards the eternal nature of the Torah:

> This is it, and may the Lord God grant you success in it, for in my mind, it is a pleasing matter, fine and wondrous, though no one else seems to have apprehended it… But this will negate the confusion of one who demands that we accept the Torah’s mutability.

There is no question that Ribag is responding here to a common Muslim claim that the incident of the Binding of Yitzchak proves that God changes His mind; just as God rethinks His command to sacrifice Yitzchak, they argue, so He may rethink the commands of the Torah, exchanging Moshe’s revelation for Muhammad’s. Ribag counters that, in actuality, God does not change His mind over the course of this story; He never commanded

Avraham to kill Yitzchak. This is a good example of a confluence and cooperation between the science of language, biblical exegesis, and the sphere of faith and philosophy.

Derekh Ketzara

An exegetical trait that Ribag deals with at length is *derekh ketzara*, which he defines as, "what is used in a deficient state." This is how he explains the phenomenon in Chapter 25:

> Know that the Hebrews very often subtract and take away from phrases rather than completing them, in truth, for the sole purpose of lightening and shortening them, with the speaker's intent remaining clear…

In this chapter, the Ribag cites all of the types of abbreviations used in biblical Hebrew, but we will note and cite only two examples.

A. Sometimes, Ribag claims, the word "*min*" (from) is missing. For example, in *Shemot* 19:12, the verse literally reads: "Keep yourselves going up the mountain or touching its edge," but the meaning is, "Keep yourselves **from** going up the mountain or touching its edge."[13]
B. At other times, the verse uses parallel clauses, but only specifies a modifier in one. An example of this is found in the verse (*Devarim* 33:6), "May Reuven live and not die; and may his men be numbered." Ribag argues that it should be understood as, "May Reuven live and not die; and may his men **not** be numbered," as "not" in the beginning of the verse is meant to apply to both clauses.

Synecdoche

Chapter 28 of *Sefer Ha-Rikma* deals with metonymy, meaning a word that is written in Scripture when another, related word is meant: "Although this word is stated, the intent is for something else." Ribag notes a number of types of this phenomenon; we will deal with one specifically, synecdoche, in which we find "the general in place of the specific" or the reverse.

> "To a foreign people he has no authority to sell her, as he has betrayed her" (*Shemot* 21:8) — the intent [of the verse] is "to a man" [and should be understood as, "To a foreign man…"]. This is certainly acceptable, because a "people" is certainly a collection of persons. A similar instance of this type is what is stated (*Bereishit* 20:4), "Will you kill even a righteous nation"?[14]

Syntactic Inversion

A final topic that we will deal with is the inversion of syntactic order in *Tanakh*, which is discussed in Chapters 31-32 of *Sefer Ha-Rikma*. This is how Ribag defines this phenomenon:

> Know that the inversion of their words will be in two ways: one of them is grammatical and the second is logical. When no doubt may enter one's mind, it may be written in the standard way or inverted.

In other words, *Tanakh* is free to express itself even in a way that differs from the normal, as long as the content is still understood. Ribag will change the sequence of the verse in cases in which the Scriptural context obligates one to rearrange it. For example, taking the verse, "And all the land came to Egypt to procure to Yosef (*li-shbor el Yosef*)" (*Bereishit* 41:57), Ribag rearranges the sentence and reads it in the following way: "All the land came to Egypt, to Yosef, to procure." In other words, the phrase "to Yosef" is to be seen as the object of the verb "came," not the object of the verb "to procure." The motivation for this rearrangement is that the phrase "*li-shbor le-*" or "*li-shbor el*" can mean selling to a buyer[15] or buying for another,[16] but not buying from a seller.[17] The brothers are not coming to sell to Yosef or to buy something on Yosef's behalf, but to buy from Yosef, so the Scriptural context requires this rearrangement.

One may also rearrange the verse, according to Ribag, when compelled to do so by external considerations of logic that have nothing to do with the context of the verse. For example, the verse describing the fate of the leftover manna, "And it bred worms and it rotted" (*Shemot* 16:20), is rearranged by Ribag to say, "It rotted and it bred worms." He explains why:

> For rotting is born of decay, which is the generator of the worms; [decay occurs] before the worms are generated, because the generator must precede that which is generated.

We will conclude with one final example from the Binding of Yitzchak in *Parashat Vayera*, the difficult verse describing Avraham's actions after God orders him not to harm Yitzchak:

> And Avraham lifted up his eyes and he saw: behold, a ram *achar*, caught in the thicket by its horns. Avraham went and took the ram, and he offered it as a burnt offering instead of his son. (*Bereishit*22:13)

The word "*achar"* literally means "after" or "behind;" some render it, based on context, as "behind him" or "behind it," despite the absence of any pronoun. Ribag, on the other hand, rearranges the verse: "And Avraham lifted up his eyes, and after [he lifted his eyes], he saw: behold, a ram caught in the thicket by its horns."[18]

We have seen a number of examples of Ribag's great contributions in the sphere of understanding biblical grammar and biblical exegesis. Now, we will turn to *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*.

C. SELECT TOPICS FROM *SEFER HA-SHORASHIM*

In his introduction to *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*, Ribag sets before the reader the aim of his book:

> This book, which we have called *SeferHa-Shorashim*, contains most of the Hebrew roots that we find in Scripture, and we will explain their definitions as well as their connotations, as proves necessary.

The book is built in an alphabetical structure; for every root, Ribag cites the different conjugations in which the root appears and the different meanings of every root. If Ribag has already dealt with a certain root in another of his works, he does not go on at length about it in *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*. Ribag does not list every appearance of each root in *Tanakh*, but he does bring a number of examples for every root.

For the purpose of identifying the roots of words in the Torah, Ribag first and foremost turns to Scripture itself, afterwards to the language of the Sages and to Aramaic, and only as a last resort, if it still proves difficult to identifying the root, he refers to Arabic cognates. Ribag seems to sense the reader's hesitation to use Arabic, so he establishes that he stands on the shoulders of giants in doing so:

> In order to explain some of the roots, I will bring proofs from whatever I may find in Scripture, and what I will not find in Scripture for this purpose, I will bring proofs from whatever I may find in the Mishna and the Talmud and the Aramaic language. In this, I follow the Hebrew tradition, in the footsteps of the al-Fayyumi dean [R. Sa'adia Gaon], may his memory be a blessing, who cites evidence concerning the seventy unique words from Scripture,[19] Mishna, and Talmud… However, if it should happen that I can find no evidence from any of the above-mentioned sources, but I then discover evidence in the Arabic language, I will not hold myself back from bringing a proof from that which is revealed through it. (Introduction to *Sefer Ha-Rikma*[20])

Ribag continues to criticize those who avoid using Arabic in order to understand the language of Scripture (ibid.):

> I will have no compunctions about bringing evidence from that which is evident in it, for this is the practice of men of our generation whose minds are weak and whose knowledge is puny.

Similarly, Ribag claims that those who avoid using Arabic for this purpose are in fact sanctimonious:

> This is true all the more so for one who seeks to demonstrate his righteousness and swathe himself in the cloak of saintliness, in his limited understanding.

We will analyze a number of examples from *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*:

I. **The meaning of the word "*ki.*"** Reish Lakish's famous dictum *(Rosh Hashana*3a, et al.) declares that the word "*ki"* has four meanings.

[21] Ribag claims that there is yet another meaning of the word – "although" – and he brings a number of examples of this usage. In *Shemot* 34:9, Moshe asks, "Let God please walk in our midst, *ki* it is a stiff-necked people;"[22]Ribag explains that this should be translated: "Let God please walk in our midst **although** it is a stiff-necked people."[23] Another example which proves this claim is God's declaration after the Flood: "I will no longer curse the ground because of man, *ki* the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (*Bereishit* 8:21). The word *ki* does not fit into any of the four explanations brought in the Talmud, but it works out well according to Ribag's approach: "I will no longer curse the ground because of man, although the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth."

II. **The meaning of the root *peh-lamed-alef*.** In *Bereishit* 18:14, God questions Avraham about Sara's laughter at the idea of her having a child, challenging him: "*Ha-yippaleh*?" The biblical exegetes try to explain this term. Rashi and ibn Ezra, following Onkelos, translate it as "covered," "hidden," yielding the awkward translation: "Is any matter hidden from God?" Based on biblical parallels,[24] Ribag reaches the conclusion that every time the root appears, it means "great." Thus, the meaning of the sentence is: "Is any matter greater than God?"

D. THE FATE OF HIS WORKS

Unfortunately, with all of the importance of *Sefer Ha-Rikma* and *Sefer Ha-Shorashim* in expanding our understanding of the biblical text, these books have been pushed into a lonely corner of the Jewish bookcase.

It appears to me that the time has come to reclaim these books from the dust and to give them their proper place of honor among the other medieval commentaries. Indeed, it is worthwhile to include the Ribag's commentaries in the study of *Tanakh* generally and the study of the weekly Torah portion specifically.

(Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch)

[1] The full name of Ribag, as is written in his own works, is Abu al-Walīd Marwān ibn Janāh. Ibn Ezra referred to him by the Latin name Marinus, and he was the one to give him the first name Yona (dove), as "ibn Janach" literally means "winged."

[2] The years of his birth and death are tentatively put at circa 993 and 1050.

[3] An example of this view may be found in his preface to *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*, ed. Bekher(Jerusalem, 5726), 3:

> Know… that many times I will speak of the *peh*of the verb or the *ayin* of the verb or the *lamed*of the verb. Know that my intent is to fix for each of the verbs its tenses and conjugations and all of its forms… And I will in each case speak of the *peh* of the verb, as this is parallel to the *peh*of *p-a-l* ("work," the standard verb).

[4] Judah ben David Hayyuj (circa 945-1012) was one of the leading Hebrew grammarians and philological exegetes in Spain; his main innovation was that in Hebrew, all roots have three letters.

[5] Aside from autobiographical points scattered in the various works of Ribag and ibn Tibbon's notes, we do not know much about the events of Ribag's life.

[6] For example, in his *Sefer Ha-Hassaga*, Ribag offers his glosses on the words of R. Yehuda ben Hayyuj; in *Iggeret Ha-He'ara*, he defends his positions against R. Yehuda ben Hayyuj's supporters.

[7] Ribag explains the meaning of the names of these works at the end of his introduction to *SeferHa-Rikma*:

> Because of its many topics, I have named it*Sefer Ha-Rikma*, as its chapters may be compared to a series of terraces or structures, in which are planted many and sundry varieties of flowers; in this way it is similar to the embroidering of a garment of many colors. In the second book, we will recount the roots mentioned throughout Scripture, and therefore I have called this second part *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*.

[8] Speaking of the Muslims, Ribag writes:

> And I have seen that the people among whom we live exert themselves to attain the wisdom of their language… but the speakers of our language, in our generation, have already cast this wisdom behind their backs, and they have set this issue outside of their hearing. In fact, they treat it lightly, considering it superfluous and pointless. As a result, they remain bereft of its felicities and empty of its beauty; indeed, they have divested themselves of its ornaments. We have come to a point of individual expression and personal speech, but we do not pay attention to this, and we are not exacting about it, as if language has no order to be restored and no boundary to be demarcated. Instead, they have sought from the language whatever is easy for them to expropriate and expound. They pay no heed to its roots, nor do they care about its branches.

Ribag uses the phrase "divested themselves of its ornaments" in keeping with the verse describing the serious ramifications of the sin of the Golden Calf: "And the Israelites divested themselves of their ornaments from Mount Chorev" (*Shemot* 33:6), which means, "They removed the adornment which they had received at Mount Chorev" — that is, the Torah. Ribag claims that in his time, the Jews have similarly removed from themselves the adornment of being well-versed in biblical Hebrew.

[9] In the words of Ribag:

> Because the work of linguistics is a tool for everything expounded and a preface for everything researched, the effort was to reach its end and to stand on all of its issues, and the desire is to reach the edge and to know what is complete from it and what is not complete, the full and the deficient, and the true language and the language of transfer… As we will find it of the abridged and the deficient, it will be the lack of understanding of the researched and the abridgement of knowledge of that which is sought.

[10] These are his words:

> Because the reward of the Creator, may He be praised, the good in everything the man will acquire for himself in his world, and the honored in everything which is destined for him in his end, and reaching this will not be completed unless one understands what is written in the prophetic books and the fulfillment of their*mitzvot* and their admonitions, and it will not be feasible to understand what is written in these books except by the wisdom of the language, so that the obligation of a man's toil and fixing this wisdom and his strengthening to acquire it and improve it and be precise in its issues and to know the plots of its words is a greater obligation and the need for it very strong according to the quality of the degree of that which is sought and the great value of the researched… All the more so, this valuable, respectable wisdom which causes to understand the words of God, which helps to do his *mitzvot*and brings us closer to His reward and distances us from His punishment.

[11] In other words, it is ambiguous terminology.

[12] In other words, this is the meaning that an individual may assign to it.

[13] Following this rule, Ribag, explains the verse (*Kohelet* 12:12), "More than them, my son, be careful, making many books, endlessly" in the following way: "Be careful **of** making many books."

[14] Accordingly, the term "*goy*" should be rendered "person," rather than "nation," the meaning it appears elsewhere in *Tanakh*, and the reference here is to Avimelekh. This is opposed to Rashi, who writes: "Perhaps this is Your way — to destroy nations for no reason?" In other words, "*goy*" here means "nation," as in the rest of *Tanakh*.
[15] The root is usually used for this purpose in the causative conjugation, but in one place we find it even in the simple conjugation (*Bereishit* 41:56): "And he provided for Egypt."
[16] E.g., *Bereishit* 43:4: "And we will procure food for you."
[17] Buying from a vendor is described as "*lishbor mi-*"; e.g., *Bereishit* 42:3: "To procure provisions from Egypt."
[18] This proposal is already voiced by Targum Onkelos on the Torah.
[19] Here he refers to R. Saadia Gaon's list of unique words in Scripture.
[20] The end of the introduction to *Sefer Ha-Rikma*deals with *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*.
[21] They are: if, perhaps, but, because.
[22] Rashi, the Rashbam, ibn Ezra and the Ramban all struggle to explain this verse.
[23] Ribag adds, "To counteract the criticism of 'a stiff-necked people,' he preempts this by saying, 'Let God please walk in our midst.'"
[24] For example, *Iyov* 5:9 describes God as the one "Who does great, unsearchable things; wonders without number;" similarly, the Psalmist says (*Tehillim* 131:1), "I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wondrous for me." In each case "*nifla*" (wonder, wondrous) is used as a synonym for "great."

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

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This week's shiurim are dedicated by Mr Paul Pollack
in honor of Rabbi Reuven and Sherry Greenberg

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Lecture #4:
Rashi (Part I)[1]

A. INTRODUCTION

The Importance of Rashi's Commentary

> The lamps of the pure candelabrum I set as my light,
> The words of Rabbeinu Shelomo, coronet of beauty, diadem of glorious might.
> His name is his crown – Scripture, Mishna and Talmud, his delight.
> His is the firstborn's rite.
> Of his words I think, in their love I sink, to debate and defend, to examine and excite
> Every definition and derivation
> And every allegorical citation
> Mentioned in his commentation.
>
> (Ramban, Introduction to the Torah)

It is impossible to exaggerate Rashi's importance in shaping the worldview of the Jewish People; it may be said that after *Tanakh* and Talmud, Rashi's commentaries are next in line in terms of their influence. One

expression of this phenomenon is the fact that the first Hebrew book ever printed (Rome, 1469) was the Torah with Rashi's commentary.

Rashi's commentary on the Torah is the point of departure and the foundation of many of the biblical commentators who come after him. Hundreds, if not thousands, of articles and studies have been written about Rashi's commentaries. Rashi's commentary on the Torah has more supercommentaries[2] on it than any other work of biblical interpretation in Jewish history (if we do not view the Talmud itself as a commentary for this purpose). However, before we analyze the influence of Rashi, we must examine the defining characteristics of his historical setting; we may thereby see how the environment influenced Rashi and the nature of his commentary.

The Era of Rashi

Rabbeinu Shlomo Yitzchaki[3] was born in 1040 in Troyes in northern France, and he died there in 1105. One of the characteristic phenomena of 11th century France was the socio-economic link with the Christian community as a result of economic development. An additional phenomenon that defined Rashi's era was the Renaissance of the 12th century, which marked the beginning of the High Middle Ages in Europe. (Although it was in the 12th century that this Renaissance hit its apex, its seeds were planted in the 11th century.[4]) This Renaissance, as two of the scholars of this period define it, was marked by "its restless searching after ancient — and new — authorities, and its audacious criticism of authority; its tireless quest for new knowledge, and its insistence on restructuring knowledge new and old alike."[5]

These two phenomena, economic development and spiritual renewal, were linked to each other. Indeed, as a result of socio-economic development, daily points of contact were formed between the Jewish and the Christian community. Spiritual trends and upheavals that were occurring in one affected the other,[6] and the common involvement with and analysis of *Tanakh*, whether by Jews or by Christians, propagated the study of Holy Writ and challenged its students on both a religious and an intellectual level. The Renaissance of the 12th century in the Christian community was characterized in the spiritual sphere by limiting the allegorical exegesis of Holy Writ and focusing on literal interpretation; indeed, this trend came to characterize the commentary of Rashi as well.

The involvement with and development of biblical exegesis on the part of both Jews and Christians eventually brought about some theological disputations between the two groups, some of them public. Jews contended with Christians, sometimes because they were compelled to and sometimes because they desired to do so in order to protect Judaism from Christian attempts to combat "apostasy" on the part of Jews. While the character of Rashi's *parshanut* on *Tanakh*was oriented towards *peshat*, the simple meaning of the text, it was also influenced by the need to contend with Christian claims, at a time when Christian scholars of that faith were attempting to wrestle with biblical passages on the basis of*peshat*. We may

also find polemical content in Rashi's commentary as he contends with Christian biblical exegesis.

Rashi's Biography

Who was Rashi? We have no information about his parents. As Rashi brings no comments in the name of his father,[7] we may assume that his father was not a Torah scholar. We know nothing of Rashi's wife, but we know that they had three daughters: Yokheved, Miriam, and Rachel. (It is also possible that they had a fourth daughter who died at a young age.)

At the age of eighteen, Rashi went to study in the famous *yeshiva* of Mainz, Germany, founded by Rabbeinu Gershom, "Light of the Exile."[8]Rabbeinu Gershom put great emphasis in his*yeshiva* on the necessity of knowing and understanding *Tanakh* as a prerequisite for studying Talmud. As for studying Talmud, Rabbeinu Gershom invested great efforts in correcting the text of the Talmud, so that the students would have one authoritative version.[9] After putting together a definitive text, the main pursuit of the *rosh yeshiva*and the students was the commentary on the Talmud. Rashi, who was born shortly before Rabbeinu Gershom's death (or a number of years after his death), did not study Torah from him directly, but he benefited from and was greatly influenced by Rabbeinu Gershom's students, primarily from R. Yaakov ben Yakar,[10] from whom Rashi learned both *Tanakh* and Talmud. After a number of years, Rashi relocated to the *yeshiva* in Worms. The *yeshiva* of Worms was known for its revolutionary approaches to the field of Torah study, in which it blazed many new paths.

At the age of thirty, having acquired a thorough knowledge of *Tanakh* and Talmud, Rashi returned to France — to Troyes, the city of his birth. Upon his return, he immediately took a central role in leading the community. In parallel to his communal involvement, Rashi also established a*yeshiva* in his city. The *yeshiva* began with a very limited number of students, but as the years progressed, the number of students gradually increased. The success of the *yeshiva* is demonstrated by the great number of students of Rashi whose works have become indispensable tools in the area of biblical and Talmudic exegesis.[11]

What was the secret of Rashi's success as a teacher?

Professor Avraham Grossman, in his fascinating book on Rashi cites a number of factors,[12] and I will suffice with mentioning his main points:

1. The democratic character of the*yeshiva* encouraged critical and creative thinking. (In this, it greatly differed from the *yeshivot* of Babylonia and was even set apart from those of Mainz and Worms).

2. Rashi based his methodology on textual analysis and his great familiarity with the disciplines of *Tanakh*, Talmud, halakhic writings, aggadic material and poetry.

3. Rashi's hearty and radiant personality, along with his compassion, allowed him to forge a lasting relationship with his students.

Besides his occupations of *rosh yeshiva*, rabbinical court justice, and communal leader, Rashi wrote a commentary on all of the books of *Tanakh*[13] and most of the Babylonian Talmud; in addition, Rashi composed hundreds of responsa.

B. THE TEXT OF THE COMMENTARY

It is quite difficult to determine the original version of Rashi's commentary on the Torah due to the plethora of manuscripts. There are not merely minor variations among these manuscripts, but rather significant distinctions.[14] The theologian and historian Abraham (Adolf) Berliner (1833-1915) published (in 5665/1905)[15] a critical edition of Rashi's commentary on the Torah based on over one hundred manuscripts and printed editions; despite this, it is logical to assume that the result is not a work wholly reflective of what Rashi wrote in his own hand.

It is evident why so many manuscripts of Rashi's commentary on the Torah exist: Rashi's commentary quickly became the most popular commentary throughout all Jewish communities worldwide, both Ashkenazic and Sephardic. But what caused so many versions to abound? It appears that a number of factors conspired:[16] The scholars who studied or taught the commentaries of Rashi sometimes added their notes in the margins of the manuscripts; as time passed, the names of these scholars were elided and these notes were integrated into the body of the commentary.[17] An additional factor is Rashi's extensive reliance on Midrashic sources — sometimes Rashi changes the Sages' language (apparently deliberately) or abbreviates the *midrash*, and a copyist later fixes the text. This phenomenon has great significance when it comes to the study of Rashi's commentary; sometimes, students of Rashi's commentary build mountains upon every jot and tittle of his phrasing, but inspecting the text proves that every one of these theses is based on a certain version of Rashi, which may be inapplicable to other versions. Therefore, before one attempts to craft an approach based on a close reading of Rashi, one must at least consult the Berliner edition and see how reliable a given version is.[18]

C. TARGET AUDIENCE OF THE COMMENTARY

Once we have dealt with the question of text, we must think about the question of who the target audience of the commentary was. This is a matter of some debate among scholars of Rashi. According to Lifschitz,[19] Rashi's commentaries were designed for educated people. He declares:

> He did not compose his commentary so that it might be an open book for the masses and the ignoramuses, but rather for the intelligentsia of his generation who knew the Torah well.

On the other hand, it is quite striking how much is absent from Rashi's commentary: grammatical essays, lengthy discussions of halakhic subjects, complex analyses of philosophy and theology. Therefore, it appears that his commentary was designed for everyone, and anyone can study his commentary on the Torah on his own level: a simple Jew without background can read his words and easily understood them, while a scholar can delve into all of their depth. His commentary was not directed towards Torah scholars alone, and the goal of making the Torah approachable and understandable for all readers is noticeable even today.[20] It appears that this is one of the advantages of Rashi's commentary: his ability to compose a text which is equally engaging to Torah scholars and to schoolchildren. This is a very rare trait for biblical exegetes, and indeed Rashi has had no challenger in this field throughout the generations.

D. "*AGGADA HA-MEYASHEVET*"

Rashi did not compose an introduction or preface to his commentary, but there is a certain declaration of principles in his commentary to the verse, "And they heard the voice of God going in the garden" (*Bereishit* 3:8):

> "And they heard" — there are many aggadic*midrashim* about this, and our Sages have already presented them in their proper arrangement in *Bereishit Rabba* and other Midrashic works. As for me, I have come for no purpose other than the simple meaning of Scripture and the aggadic material which harmonizes the words of Scripture, each word according to its properties. The simple meaning of it is that they heard the voice of the Holy One, Blessed be He, Who was walking about the garden.

Rashi sees himself, above all, as a champion of *peshat*: "I have come for no purpose other than the simple meaning of Scripture." In this, he is a revolutionary in the annals of Ashkenazic Jewry; until his era, Torah was not studied according to its *peshat*. (In Sephardic communities, studying *Tanakh* according to the *peshat* was already widely accepted, following in the footsteps of Shemuel ben Chofni, Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon, and ibn Janach.) A *pashtan*, an exegete who interprets biblical verses according to their simple meaning, must engage in the endeavor of judging verses on their own terms, according to the literal,[21] immediate definition, which complements the context according to the rules of grammar and linguistics.

However, Rashi adds that in his commentary he will integrate certain homiletic material, but only of a specific type: "the aggadic material which harmonizes (*meyashevet*) the words of Scripture, each word according to its properties." At this point,[22] I will suffice with describing the phrase "*aggadaha-meyashevet*" in the following way. Rashi saw a number of *midrashim* on each verse; how did he pick and choose? What was his yardstick for selecting some *midrashim* and rejecting others? Rashi, as a *pashtan*, brings before the reader only those *midrashim* which are harmonious with the syntactic structure of the verse, only if the additional details which are found in the *midrashim* dovetail with the context and sequence of the verses. In

the*midrashim* which Rashi cites, there is supplementary information, beyond what is mentioned in the verse, but this addition must not contradict the *peshat*; it must be harmonious with it.

This is how Dr. Sarah Kamin puts it:

> In his approach to the interpretation of the verses, Rashi keeps upmost in his mind the categories which make the unit whole, in which all of its elements are found — the syntactic and grammatical structure, linguistic meaning and content — the reciprocal relationship among them and between them and the unit in its entirety.

We will demonstrate Rashi's method in his interpretation of *Shemot* 15:22: "Moshe led Israel away from the Reed Sea, and they went out into the desert." Rashi has many *midrashim* to choose from in order to compose his comment on this verse, and we will present two of them:

> "Moshe led Israel away from the Reed Sea" — he led them away against their will, at their displeasure. How so? When Israel left Egypt, Pharaoh came out to pursue them with all of these troops. What did he do? When Pharaoh [decided to] pursue Israel with chariots and cavalry, he arose and adorned all of these horses with precious stones and gems. When they came to the sea and the Holy One, Blessed be He, drowned them, all of those precious stones and gems floated, and they were cast on the seashore. The Israelites would go down each day and take some of them, and they had no desire to leave there. Once Moshe saw this… he arose and led them away, against their will. (*Tanchuma Yashan, Beshalach* 16)

> "Moshe led Israel away from the Reed Sea" – R. Eliezer says: "This tells you the praise of Israel. When Moshe told them to leave, they did not say, "How can we possibly set out for the desert without provisions for the journey?!" Instead, they believed in and followed Moshe. About them, it is stated explicitly in the *kabbala*[23] (*Yirmiyahu* 2:2): 'I recall for you the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal, when you went after Me in the desert, in an unsown land.'" (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Beshalach, Va-yassa* 1)

These two *midrashim* try to explain the phrase "Moshe led Israel away (*va-yassa Moshe et Yisrael*) from the Reed Sea." According to the*Mekhilta*, these words come to indicate the great ease with which Moshe convinced the Israelites to venture into "an unsown land;" according to the*Tanchuma*, these words indicate the great difficulty with which Moshe convinced the Israelites to move, overcoming their reluctance to abandon the plunder of the sea. Despite Rashi's great affection for the Jewish People, which is expressed within his commentaries in other places, Rashi prefers the*midrash* mentioned in *Tanchuma*, which is critical of the behavior of the Israelites, over the *midrash* in the *Mekhilta*, which praises Israel:

> "Moshe led [Israel] away" — he led them away against their will, for the Egyptians had adorned their horses with jewelry of gold, silver, and precious stones, and the Israelites were finding them in the sea… Therefore, he had to lead them away against their will.

Rashi's motivation for choosing this *midrash* is exegetical; the *midrash* as cited in the *Tanchuma* is chosen by Rashi because this *midrash* is appropriate for the context of the unit. In this very verse, we find: "And they came to Mara, and they could not drink the water of Mara," followed in the next verse with a formal complaint: "And the people complained to Moshe, saying 'What will we drink?'" (vv. 22-23). Lauding the Israelites who "believed and followed Moshe" (in the language of the*Mekhilta*) does not match the context of the words.

Moreover, the *midrash* in the *Tanchuma*complements not only the situation described in the verses, but also the language of *Tanakh*. According to the Masoretic punctuation of the text, the word is conjugated in the causative (*va-yassa*), so that the verse must be rendered "And Moshe made Israel journey;" however, according to the *Mekhilta,* it should be conjugated in the intensive (*va-yissa*), so that the verse may be rendered "And Moshe journeyed with Israel." (The word "*et*" can mean "with" or merely indicate a direct object, so it is the punctuation of the first word that tells us whether the Israelites are being moved by Moshe or he is moving with them.) Rashi selects the appropriate*midrash*, whether in terms of the context of the verses and the grammatical viewpoint.

The conclusion drawn from here is that Rashi's method is to cite Midrashic sources that dovetail with the *peshat* of the verses. In this, we have determined his way of choosing among different *midrashim*.

Next week, God willing, we will continue to discuss the question of the impetus to cite a*midrash* in the first place. When does Rashi turn to the *midrash*, and when does he satisfy himself with the *peshat*?

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

[1] Due to the importance of the topic and the wealth of material dealing with it, we will discuss Rashi's commentary over the course of four lessons.

[2] These are scholars who write about the commentaries of others.

[3] His full name should have been R. Shlomo ben Yitzchak; it may be that in order to avoid possibility of confusing him with the Tanna R. Shimon bar Yochai, known as the Rashbi, the letter "*bet*" was dropped from the acronym.

[4] We will deal more expansively with the influence of the 12th-century Renaissance on biblical exegesis when we examine the biblical commentaries of Rashi's students.

[5] Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable (eds.),*Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, p. XXIX.

[6] There is a dispute among the scholars of 11th-12thcentury biblical exegesis about the question of who exerted influence upon whom — Christian exegetes upon Jewish exegetes or vice versa.

[7] There is one exception (*Avoda Zara* 75a): "This is the language of my honored father, may he repose in honor."

[8] The title "Light of the Exile" was given to Rabbeinu Gershom by Rashi, and all who came after him used this title for Rabbeinu Gershom. See, for example, Rashi's commentary to *Yeshayahu* 46:1 and *Beitza* 24b.

[9] As the Jews reached Germany, different versions of the Talmud abounded.

[10] Rashi mentions him in his commentary to *Pesachim* 48b and *Sanhedrin* 92b.

[11] Professor A. Grossman (*Rashi* [Merkaz Zalman Shazar], p. 64) lists the creative spheres in which Rashi's students were active, and he points out that we are talking about a partial list only, since much of their work was unfortunately lost.

[12] *Rashi*, pp. 59-60.

[13] However, the commentaries attributed to Rashi in the printed versions of *Ezra, Nechemia, Divrei Ha-yamim* and part of the book of *Iyov* were apparently not written by him.

[14] For example, full Midrashic passages have been omitted or added.

[15] 2nd edition.

[16] See Grossman, loc. cit., pp. 78-80.

[17] This is true of other works published before the invention of the printing press as well.

[18] The *Mikraot Gedolot Ha-keter* edition, published by Bar-Ilan University, is based on a great number of manuscripts, not on a lone, trustworthy manuscript, which does not exist.

[19] E. M. Lifschitz, *Rashi* (Mosad Harav Kook), p. 174.

[20] In cases in which he is worried that his Hebrew will not be understood, Rashi does not hesitate to translate the word into French (as spoken in his time).

[21] Sarah Kamin (*Peshuto Shel Mikra U-midrasho shel Mikra*[Jerusalem, 5740]) defines well the concept of *peshat*: "*Peshat* is not the narrow, literal explanation of some element or another or of a given expression, but an explanation which takes into account all the linguistic foundations, in their permutations, and gives to each of them a meaning, according to the rules."

[22] We will later learn of other possibilities explaining Rashi's terminology of "*aggada ha-meyashevet*".

[23] This is a Talmudic term for the books of the Prophets.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

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This week's shiurim are dedicated by Abe Mezrich

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Lecture #05:
Rashi, Part II

A. INTRODUCTION: WHEN DOES RASHI USE *MIDRASHIM*?

Rashi's commentary is composed, for the most part, of adapted *midrashim*. In the last lecture, we stressed the great ability of Rashi as a Midrashic filter; he selects those*midrashim* which are most appropriate in

terms of fitting in to the continuity of the verses. We have dealt with the criterion of Rashi for choosing *midrashim*, but not with the impetus to turn to Midrash in the first place. In the current lesson, we will try to answer the following question as well: What requires Rashi to turn to*midrashim* that apparently do not explicate the*peshat*?

We may indeed find a number of types of motives for Rashi to turn to *midrashim*.

B. A DIFFICULTY IN THE VERSES

First of all, Rashi turns to *midrashim*when he has a difficulty in the verse and finds no way to reconcile it using *peshat*.[1]

We will bring two examples of this:

I) When Yosef is sent by Yaakov to find his brothers and arrives in Dotan, the verse says, "And a man found him when he was lost in the field" (*Bereishit* 37:15). Rashi (ad loc.) cites the following*midrash*:[2] "This is Gavriel, as it says, 'And the man Gavriel' (*Daniel* 9:21)."

It appears that Rashi is motivated to bring this *midrash* in order to solve a twofold problem.

1) The terminology "And a man found him" (rather than: And a man saw him) indicates that the man was looking for him (because one finds that which one is looking for).
2) Yosef asks the man, "Please tell me where they are pasturing" (37:16), indicating that it is clear to Yosef that the man standing opposite him knows where his brothers are (as he does not ask the man **if** he knows where they are).

If we assume that "the man" is an angel and that Yosef knows this, the problems are solved: the angel looks for Yosef in order to help him, and it is obvious to Yosef that he knows where they are.

II) In *Shemot* 2:23, the Torah says, "And the king of Egypt died, and the Israelites groaned due to the work." Rashi (ad loc.) cites a*midrash*: [3]"He was afflicted with leprosy,[4] so he would slaughter infants and bathe in their blood."

Obviously, the words of the *midrash* add to the *peshat* in a striking way, but Rashi appears to be motivated by a difficulty in understanding the verse: if the king dies, why do the Israelites groan? Should they not be rejoicing that their subjugator is dead? The*midrash* explains that we are not talking about true death, but rather leprosy, which is akin to death (a concept mentioned by the Sages a number of times); this so-called death was the reason for groaning, since the leprosy causes him to bathe in the blood of children. In

other words, the Midrashic explanation manages to connect, from a logical point of view, the death of Pharaoh with the Israelites' groans.

C. THE TORAH DOES NOT SPEAK IN THE HUMAN VERNACULAR

The rule that "The Torah does not speak in the human vernacular" (which we will explain presently) is the factor that motivates Rashi to explain verses according to the Midrash in dozens of cases, despite the absence of any difficulty in these verses. We will bring a number of examples of this:

I. In *Parashat Chayei Sara* (*Bereishit* 24:10), the Torah says: "And the servant took ten camels of his master's camels." Rashi cites a *midrash*[5] in his commentary on this verse:

> They were distinguished from other camels, because they were muzzled to prevent pilfering, so that they would not graze in others' fields.[6]

Rashi's words are beautiful and hold an important message for all of us – the importance of taking responsibility not only for the damage we do ourselves, but even for damage which is caused as a result of our property. But what was the impetus for Rashi's commentary? At first glance, the simple meaning of the verse poses no problem — there is not even one word that is not understood, and the context is clear and obvious. Is there a certain difficulty that forces Rashi to cite the *midrash*?

In order to respond to this question, we will expand the scope a bit by explaining two approaches to biblical exegesis. There is a basic argument between two schools of *parshanut* regarding expounding the language of *Tanakh*: the academy of R. Yishmael versus the academy of R. Akiva.

R. Akiva believes that the Torah is divine, and it therefore cannot contain any superfluous phrase, word, or even letter in it; God intends that every element have meaning. Therefore, R. Akiva would derive "mounds of laws from every jot and tittle" (*Menachot* 29b). On the other hand, R. Yishmael, who of course agrees with the basic assumption of the Torah's divine origin, counters that God nevertheless has written the Torah for human beings, and it is therefore expressed in the style that people use when speaking or writing — "The Torah speaks in the human vernacular." Therefore, if there is any redundancy or superfluity in the biblical terminology, the extraneous elements do not teach us anything, because this is how people talk.

The argument between R. Akiva and R. Yishmael appears in many places, and, *inter alia*, in *Sanhedrin* 64b. There, they argue about the use of three similar terms in two consecutive verses (*Bamidbar* 15:30-31) ***"…ve-nikhreta** ha-nefesh ha-hi… **hikkaret tikkaret** ha-nefesh ha-hi"* — "that soul shall be cut off."

"*Hikkaret tikkaret*": "*Hikkaret"* in this world; "*tikkaret"* in the next — this is R. Akiva's view.
R. Yishmael said: But the previous verse has stated *"ve-nikhreta"* — are there then three worlds? Rather, *"ve-nikhreta"* in this world: "*hikkaret"* in the next; "*tikkaret"* — that is because the Torah speaks in the human vernacular.

There is no doubt that Rashi adopts R. Akiva's approach, according to which every word has meaning and significance. Therefore, one should be precise with biblical language, and even when the reader has no difficulty understanding the verses, one may derive information from some extraneous element in the text. We shall see that Rashi indeed sees himself as a *pashtan*, but according to him,*peshat* has a wider definition, including giving significance to every additional detail. A method such as this is very demanding, as it requires the exegete to justify every word and even every letter, which the strict *pashtan* usually dismisses as "human vernacular." Indeed, Rashi does not always find in the framework of*peshat* a satisfying explanation for the superfluous language in the text, and he therefore must consult the Midrash in many circumstances. However, in every case, he employs Midrash as part of his overall purpose – to explain the *peshat* of the verses.

At this time, we may return to the example that we cited above: "And the servant took ten camels of his master's camels." It is clear to the reader that the camels are "of his master's camels" — it would not occur to us that the servant took his own private camels! If so, why do we need the phrase "of his master's camels"? The Midrash responds that there is some unique quality in these camels, and it even specifies what it is – the camels would always go out muzzled.[7]

Thus, Rashi uses the *midrash* not only in cases of redundant language, but even in cases in which the verse mentions superfluous details. An additional example of a *midrash* that appears in Rashi because of superfluous details may be found later in the same tale:

II. Twelve verses after the servant sets out with the camels, he takes out gifts for the girl who has watered them (*Bereishit* 24:22): "And it was, when the camels had finished drinking, that the man took a golden nose ring, weighing a half-shekel, and two bracelets for her hands, weighing ten of gold." Rashi cites the *midrash*,[8]which attaches significance to the weights and features of the jewelry.

"A half-shekel" — this alludes to the shekels of Israel, "a half-shekel per head" (*Shemot* 38:26).
"And two bracelets" — this alludes to the two Tablets paired together.
"Weighing ten of gold" — this alludes to the Ten Commandments on them.

Naturally, this particular information in the Sages' allegory has no basis in the *peshat*of the verse, but the motivation for this commentary is the superfluity within the *peshat*. Why is it so important for us to know the exact weight and quantity of the jewelry that Rivka receives? The response of this *midrash* is that these details have great significance, and it searches for other instances in *Tanakh* where these numbers are mentioned.[9]

D. MAINTAINING THE INTERNAL LOGIC AND SEQUENCE OF THE TEXT BY FILLING IN LACUNAE

In addition to the above-mentioned examples, Rashi is accustomed to cite Midrashic material when he is interested in the chronological or thematic sequence of the Torah, in order to fill in gaps and to create — using *midrashim* — a logical narrative sequence. Filling in the gaps sometimes is accomplished by the reconstruction of a particular event, as we shall see in the first two examples below, or through a dialogue (sometimes a monologue), as we shall see in the third example.

I. In *Bereishit* 37:29, the Torah states, "And Reuven returned to the pit, and behold, Yosef was not in the pit; so he tore his garments." Why is Reuven so shocked to find Yosef gone? Was he not present when the brothers sold him? Where else could he have been? Rashi explains:

When [Yosef] was sold, [Reuven] was not there, for it was his day to go and serve his father (*Bereishit Rabba* 84:15).
Alternatively, he was busy with his sackcloth and his fasting for disturbing his father's bed (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*25).

II. After Yaakov serves Lavan for seven years, a wedding feast is held, but Lavan tricks Yaakov and gives him Leah instead of Rachel (*Bereishit*29:14-28). The Torah states (29:25): "And it was in the morning, and behold she was Leah…" How could it be that Yaakov did not notice this earlier? The Midrash (*Megilla* 13b) cited by Rashi responds that Rachel was also in on the ruse:

"And it was in the morning, and behold she was Leah" — but at night, she was not Leah,[10] because Jacob had given signs to Rachel, but when she saw that they were bringing Leah, she said, "Now, my sister will be put to shame." So she readily transmitted those signs to her.

III. In the passage of the Binding of Yitzchak, the Torah begins (*Bereishit*22:1) by saying: "And it was after these things (*devarim*) …" Rashi cites two *midrashim* to explain this reference, taking the word *devarim*(things) in its literal sense, "words." The reference cannot be to the events of the previous narrative (the treaty with Avimelekh), as this would have been the reader's assumption without any such introduction. Apparently, "these words" have a greater significance, and Rashi understands that a difficult trial such

as the Binding must have a precipitating event, specifically a precipitating proclamation:

> Some of our Sages say (*Sanhedrin* 89b) that this was after the words of Satan, who was accusing and saying, "Of every feast that Avraham made, he did not sacrifice before You one bull or one ram!" [God] said to him, "Does he do anything but for his son? Yet, if I were to say to him, 'Sacrifice him before Me,' he would not hold back."
> Others say that it was after the words of Yishmael, who was boasting to Yitzchak that he was circumcised at the age of thirteen and he did not protest. Yitzchak said to him, "With one part you intimidate me? If the Holy One, Blessed be He, were to say to me, 'Sacrifice yourself before Me,' I would not hold back." [11]

An additional manifestation of Rashi's tendency to fill in gaps is his inclination to identify anonymous characters in *Tanakh*. If people are mentioned, they must be important, and as a *pashtan,* he is compelled to find out who those people are. Thus, for example, after Moshe has slain the Egyptian overseer, the Torah reports (*Shemot* 2:13): "He went out on the second day, and behold, two Hebrew men were quarreling, and he said to the evil one (*rasha*), 'Why should you strike your fellow?'"Rashi (ad loc.) identifies this pair as "Datan and Aviram; they were also the ones who saved some of the manna (ibid. 16:19, 20)."

We have here a twofold identification: the two men (*anashim*) here are the same*anashim* who save the manna overnight, in direct defiance of God's command via Moshe, and those people were Datan and Aviram. This identification continually recurs in Rashi's commentary: in *Shemot* 4:19, God tells Moshe that he may return to Egypt "for all the *anashim*who seek your life have died," and Rashi ad loc., following the Midrash, identifies these*anashim* as Datan and Aviram (and describes their death as metaphorical, referring to their financial situation). The impetus for this identification is clear: the term "*anashim*" appears in each verse, and this is the term that Moshe uses to warn the people to keep their distance from Datan and Aviram as the earth is about to open its mouth (*Bamidbar* 16:25-26):

> Moshe arose and went to Datan and Aviram… He spoke to the congregation, saying, "Get away, please, from the tents of these evil men (*ha-anashim ha-reshaim*), and do not touch anything of theirs, lest you perish because of all their sins!

An additional linguistic connection is what the quarreling Hebrews say to Moshe: "Who made you a lord and a judge over us?"(*Shemot* 2:14). Similarly, Datan and Aviram say to Moshe (*Bamidbar* 16:13): "Will you now lord it over us?" There is also a conceptual link: in both instances, the speakers are challenging Moshe's authority. Thus, the identification is logical.

E. RASHI AS AN EDUCATOR

In all of the examples which we have cited so far, we have seen that Rashi is motivated to cite Midrashic material in light of the difficulties in the text; whether these were linguistic or other issues, what motivates his commentaries is solving problems in understanding *Tanakh* (with all of the caveats mentioned above).[12] But does Rashi cite Midrashic material only because of difficulties in the verses, with the aim of resolving those difficulties? Alternatively, does Rashi at times cite *midrashim* even without having found any difficulty in the biblical text, merely because he believes that these *midrashim* have a significant message for his audience?

I had the privilege of studying with Professor Nechama Leibowitz of blessed memory. She was of the opinion[13] that Rashi is a pure *parshan*, and his aim is solely exegetical:

> Rashi enlists *midrashim* only when they respond to a question which arises from the text of the verse, when they resolve a difficulty, solve a problem or fill in a gap — i.e., when they help the reader to understand the text written. He does not cite *midrashim* in order to decorate the words of the Torah with pearls of rabbinic wisdom, nor does he bring them for a mere sermon, a moral lesson or anything of that sort.[14]

The famous question posed by Professor Leibowitz, recurring in her lessons and writings, is, “What is bothering Rashi?” This is the crystallization of her methodology. According to her, Rashi relates to a verse only in a case in which he is troubled by its simple understanding.

This position is not universally accepted. Some supercommentaries[15] and modern scholars challenge this view; they believe that despite the fact that Rashi essentially aims to explain the verses and cites Midrashic material when it explicates the *peshat*, he does sometimes deviate from this course. When the verse and its *midrash* constitute excellent opportunities to transmit a spiritual or ethical message, Rashi cites the *midrash* even though there is no exegetical need for it. This is the opinion of, for example, Professor A. Grossman:

> The basic assumption of Rashi is that since the aim of the Torah is to educate one to believe in God and keep His commandments, the commentator must embrace this purpose and not suffice with commentary alone. In many cases, one may accomplish this purpose — to educate towards faith and to strengthen weak knees — by using *midrashim*which dovetail with the language of the verses, thus accomplishing two aims: to explain and to educate simultaneously. However, in cases in which the homily seems crucial from an educational point of view, one must cite it, despite the fact that the connection between it and the language of the verse is very shaky. The famous question which was so beloved by Nechama, “What is bothering Rashi?” is appropriate for many of his comments, but not all of them. [16]

I am inclined to accept the approach of Professor Grossman. Rashi indeed cites Midrashic material in order to explicate the verses, but he brings a significant number of *midrashim* which are not only not conducive to the *peshat*, but are in fact not needed at all for the purposes of understanding the *peshat*. This is because of Rashi's view of his obligations in the public interest and his strong will to encourage and to educate the audience of readers.

God willing, our next lecture will be dedicated to Rashi's educational and ethical methodology, as expressed in his comments on the Torah.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

[1] In the previous lesson, we noted that the definition of the concept of *peshat* is beyond the scope of this framework, so we will suffice with Sarah Kamin's definition (*Peshuto Shel Mikra U-Midrasho shel Mikra*[Jerusalem, 5740]): "*Peshat* is not the narrow, literal explanation of some element or another or of a given expression, but an explanation which takes into account all the linguistic foundations, in their permutations, and gives to each of them a meaning, according to the rules."

[2] *Midrash Tanchuma, Vayeshev* 2.

[3] Based on *Shemot Rabba* 5:34.

[4] **Translator's note**: For convenience's sake, we use the term "leprosy" for *tzaraat*, despite the fact that in *Tanakh*, *tzaraat* is a physical manifestation of spiritual infirmity, not Hansen's disease, which is bacterial in nature.

[5] *Bereishit Rabba* ad loc. (with some minor changes).

[6] Indeed, the concept of the importance of avoiding stealing and any hint of larceny appears many times in Rashi's comments. See Rashi's commentary on *Bereishit* 13:7; 27:3, 5, 6-9; *Shemot* 29:36; Leviticus 1:2, 16; etc.

[7] How does the Midrash derive that this is what makes the camels unique? It appears that it derives this from another detail in the continuation of the story of the servant in Lavan's house, which also appears superfluous: "And he loosed the camels" (ibid. v. 32). What does this detail add to the narrative? It appears that the text here indicates that until this point, the camels were muzzled. Indeed, there as well, Rashi explains consistently: "He unfastened their muzzles [which he had put on them] so that they would not graze in others' fields."

[8] *Bereishit Rabba* ad loc.

[9] One may delve into the words of the *midrash* and claim that the deeper meaning of the Sages' words here is that through Rivka's act of kindness, she merits to be the ancestress of the nation of Israel, which will ultimately receive the Torah and build the Tabernacle. Alternatively, one may say that Rivka's actions are as "weighty" as the Tablets and the Tabernacle.

[10] In other words, she did not act like Leah, but rather like Rachel.

[11] The distinction between these two *midrashim* is in the question of who initiates the test and what the aim of the test is. According to the first *midrash*, God is the initiator, and the point of the test is to demonstrate and publicize Avraham's behavior. According to the second *midrash*, the initiator is Yitzchak, and the aim of the test is to demonstrate and publicize his behavior. It is clear that the second *midrash* is very distant from the *peshat*, and as we shall see in a future lecture, this *midrash* has polemical religious echoes.

[12] Rashi sometimes uses the phrase: "This verse demands to be expounded" — literally: "This verse says, 'Expound me!'"

[13] In this, she followed in the footsteps of the supercommentaries R. Abraham Lévy-Bacrat in *Sefer Ha-Zikkaron* and R. David Prado in *Maskil Le-David*.

[14] Nechama Leibowitz and Moshe Ahrend, *Peirushei Rashi La-Torah: Iyunim Be-shitato,* Vol. II (Tel Aviv 5750), p. 460.

[15] See R. Eliyahu Mizrachi and R. Yitzchak Yaakov Horowitz in his *Be'er Yitzchak*.

[16] *"Pulmos Dati U-Megamma Chinukhit Be-Feirushei Rashi La-Torah," Pirkei Nechama — Sefer Zikkaron Li-Nechama Leibowitz*, pp. 187-205.

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This shiur is dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky zt"l,
whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev.
May the world-wide dissemination of Torah through the VBM
be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements
exemplified the love of Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.

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Lecture #6b:
Rashi, Part III —
The Moral and Educational Philosophy of Rashi (cont.)

C. SENSITIVITY TO THE DISADVANTAGED

In his commentaries, Rashi displays great sensitivity towards the people in society who are indigent or powerless, who have no defenders. [1] This compassion for the disadvantaged is expressed in numerous ways. We will focus on his commentary on *Vayikra*.

At the end of the first chapter, Rashi declares that the economic situation of the pauper does not decrease his or her value in God's eyes. In explaining the phrase "a fire-offering of a pleasing fragrance," he writes:

> Now, regarding birds, it says here, "A pleasing fragrance," and regarding animals (v. 9), it says, "A pleasing fragrance" as well. Thus, we may see that whether the offering is a large animal or a small bird, the fragrance is pleasing to God. This teaches us that it makes no difference whether one offers much or little, provided that one directs the heart heavenward. (Rashi, *Vayikra* 1:17)

A similar idea is cited by Rashi in the next verse, "And if a person [literally, soul] offers" (ibid. 2:1):

> Regarding all the sacrifices which are donated voluntarily, the only instance where Scripture uses the word "soul" is in the case of the meal-offering. Now, who usually donates a meal-offering? Only the poorest of people do so. Nevertheless, the Holy One, blessed be He, says: In my eyes, it is as he has offered his very soul!

Returning to the bird-offering (1:17), Rashi uses a technical detail to stress that the Torah worries about the rights and dignity of the weak. The Torah commands that when offering a bird, the priest "shall cleave it by its wings, but not sever it; then he shall burn it on the altar… a pleasing fragrance to God." Rashi (ad loc.) explains:

> “By its wings” — with its wings. There is no need to pluck the feathers of its wings.
>
> “By its wings” — the actual feathers. But surely even the most unsophisticated person finds the smell of burnt feathers repulsive! Why then does Scripture command, “Then he shall burn it”? So that the altar should appear content and enhanced by the offering of a pauper.

In other words, offering the wing feathers on the altar is designed to create the image of a satisfied altar; a featherless or wingless bird appears to be a very small offering, while the wings add a bit of volume and beauty. Thus, the pauper, who is bringing something of the small amount that he or she owns, feels good about the offering.

Later in the book, this concept is extended to interpersonal laws. The Torah states (ibid. 25:35), “If your brother becomes destitute and his hand falters beside you, you shall support him, alien or resident, so that he may live with you.” Rashi directs our attention to the fact that in charity, timing is everything:

> “You shall support him” — do not allow him to fall down and collapse altogether, making it difficult to pick him up again. Rather, “support him” when his hand falters. To what can this be compared? To a load on a donkey — as long as it is still on the donkey, one person can grab hold of it and keep it in place. Once it falls to the ground, however, even five people cannot pick it up.

Throughout the Torah, Rashi is wont to cite the halakhic *midrashim* which emphasize the severity of the prohibitions of taking advantage of the weak, whether in terms of the sin or in terms of the punishment.

The prohibition of defrauding is mentioned twice in Scripture. In *Vayikra* (19:13), we read, “Do not defraud your fellow;” in *Devarim* (24:14), we read, “Do not defraud your poor or destitute hiree, from among your brethren or from among your aliens.” According to Rashi, the Torah views the offense as more serious when it is committed against a pauper; indeed, one who transgresses and takes advantage of the indigent violates two prohibitions simultaneously:

> “Do not defraud your [poor or destitute] hiree” — But has this not already been written? Indeed it has, but this makes the transgressor liable for two negative commandments for a poor person: 1) “Do not defraud your poor or destitute hiree” of his wages; 2) “Do not defraud your fellow,” which proscribes doing so [even] to a rich person. (Rashi, *Devarim* 24:14)

A few verses later (24:17), Rashi applies the same logic to the justice system that he does to labor relations:

> "Do not pervert the judgment of an alien or an orphan" — The Torah has already proscribed doing so even to a rich person: "Do not pervert justice" (ibid. 16:19). However, the Torah repeats it here in reference to the poor person in order to make the transgressor liable for two negative commandments. Since it is easier to pervert the judgment of a poor person[2] than that of a rich person, the Torah proscribes once and then repeats.

In other places in Rashi's commentary, we see that God Himself serves as a guardian of the weak. For example, in *Shemot* 22:25, the Torah states: "If you take your fellow's garment as security, return it to him until sunset." Rashi comments:

> "If you take… as security" [literally, "If you take a security, you shall take a security"] — The Torah employs duplicative language, indicating that one may end up taking the security many times.
>
> The Holy One, blessed be He, says: How greatly are you in My debt! For your soul ascends to Me every night, gives an account and tally, and is found wanting before Me, but I return it to you nevertheless. You as well must take and return, take and return. [3]

This *midrash* implies that the creditor must return to the pauper his collateral daily, since this is how God acts with every person when He returns his soul to Him; in other words, God, as it were, represents the poor, and the bounty which God bestows upon us must therefore be shared with the pauper.

A similar idea is expressed in the previous verse (22:24): "If you lend money to My people, the pauper among you…" Rashi comments:

> "To My people" — do not act towards [the borrower] in a demeaning manner when you lend to him, for he is with Me.

Rashi is suggesting a homiletic reading: instead of vowelizing the word "*ammi*" (My people), it may be understood as "*immi*" (with Me). Thus, the pauper deserves respect, since God is in his corner, and disrespect for the pauper is thus disrespect for God.

Rashi reiterates this idea in his comment to*Devarim* 16:11. The verse describes the joy of the festival of Shavuot:

> And you shall rejoice before Lord your God, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your servant, and your maidservant, and the Levite in your gates, and the alien, and the orphan, and the widow in your midst…

Rashi explains:

> "The Levite… and the alien, and the orphan, and the widow" — [God says:] These are My four, corresponding to your four – "Your son and your daughter and your servant and your maidservant." If you will gladden Mine, I will gladden yours.

If a person gladdens the Levite, alien, orphan, and widow, "My four," then God will gladden "your four" — son, daughter, servant, and maidservant.

Rashi even teaches us that empathy for the pauper can lead us to sympathy. Returning to the verse in *Shemot* 22:24, Rashi examines the phrase "the pauper among you:"

> "The pauper among you" — Look at yourself as if you were the pauper.

Rashi writes similar things about the welfare of the aliens, the strangers or converts. In the next chapter, the Torah states: "You know the soul of the alien" (23:9), and Rashi explains:

> "The soul of the alien" — [You know] how hard it is for him when people oppress him.

The Jewish people know how difficult it is for the aliens when they are oppressed, because the Israelites were aliens in Egypt, and they were also oppressed, "And we cried out to God… and He saw our suffering… and our oppression" (*Devarim* 26:7).

D. AFFECTION FOR FOREBEARS OF ISRAEL

Rashi expresses great affection for the forebears of Israel, the Patriarchs, the Matriarchs, and the Twelve Tribes. This regard is expressed in two areas. The first is an attempt to minimize — to the level of obscuring the very progression of the biblical text — the negative traits or acts which are attributed in Scripture to Israel's forebears and its role models. The second is the glorification of acts that seem to be insignificant. There are a number of examples of Rashi's forgiving attitude towards the ancestors of the Jewish People, and we will cite a number of them from the Book of *Bereishit*:

1. Avraham asks God about the future provision of the Holy Land (15:8): "By what shall I know that I will inherit it?" Rashi stresses that Avraham does not actually doubt God's ability to fulfill the blessing, but he needs to know how his descendants will merit to receive the land and hold on to it: "He said to Him: 'Let me know — by what right will they endure in it?'"
2. In Yitzchak's words to Esav, he describes Yaakov's trickery in the following way: "Your brother came with guile (*be-mirma*), and he took your blessing" (27:35). Rashi follows in the footsteps of Onkelos, rendering "*be-mirma*" as "with cleverness (*be-chokhma*)." When Yaakov's sons hatch a scheme to kill the men of Shekhem, the Torah notes, "And Yaakov's sons answered

Shekhem and Chamor with *mirma*" (34:13); Rashi translates the word *mirma* as*chokhma*.[4]

3. When the Torah states (30:1), "And Rachel saw that she had not borne a child to Yaakov, and Rachel was envious of her sister," Rashi explains that Rachel is not jealous, but rather "envious of her good deeds," by which she had merited giving birth to so many sons.
4. The verse reports (35:22), "And Reuven went, and he slept with Bilha, his father's concubine;" Rashi explains that "he disarranged his bed."
5. When the brothers' hatred of Yosef becomes overpowering, so that "they could not speak peaceably with him" (37:4), Rashi points out that this redounds to the brothers' credit; they did not act in a duplicitous manner, pretending to like him.[5]

Conversely, as we have said, when it comes to the forebears of Israel, Rashi also glorifies actions which seem meaningless. Interpreting the words of the verse (30:14), "And Reuven went in the days of the wheat harvest," Rashi explains:

> This tells you how the tribes were praiseworthy, that it was the time of harvest, but [Reuven] did not stretch out his hand in thievery to steal wheat or barley, but an ownerless thing, which no one cares about.

Another example is Rashi's interpretation of the verse (22:1), "And Avraham said, 'Here I am,'" when God tests him:

> "Here I am" — This is the reply of the pious. It is an expression of humility and an expression of readiness.[6]

Next week, we will complete our analysis of Rashi as an educator and moral authority.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

[1] The Torah declares, "Do not oppress any widow or orphan" (*Shemot* 22:21), and Rashi explains this: "The same applies to all people, but the Scripture speaks of the usual situation, since [the widows and orphans] are weak and they are often mistreated."

[2] Note that Rashi uses the term "poor person" to describe an oppressed person (in this case, an alien or orphan), not specifically one who is financially disadvantaged.

[3] This is a payment which is taken from a borrower who does not have the cash to pay a debt. When the creditor takes the collateral garment of the pauper in this case, he must return it to that individual every morning, so that the pauper will have something to wear throughout the day, and at sunset the lender takes the garment once again, until the next morning, and so on and so forth (until the pauper pays his debt).

[4] In the case of Shekhem, the alteration from the *peshat* of the verse is more significant, since the guile is also mentioned by the objective biblical narrator, who calls it *mirma*, while Rashi explains that the reference is to *chokhma*. On the other hand, in the case of Yitzchak, *mirma* is mentioned only by Yitzchak himself; one may understand that even though Yitzchak himself evaluates it as*mirma*, in fact, Yaakov's actions are not so deplorable, and they are in the category of *chokhma*, not *mirma*. As we shall see below, Rashi is not overly

concerned with setting aside the literal meaning of the words employed by the objective biblical narrator in order to convey a moral message.
When Yaakov describes what Lavan has done to him in swapping Leah for Rachel, he uses the identical term: "And why have you beguiled me?" (*Bereishit* 29:25). Rashi does not explain that the meaning of the word *mirma* there is *chokhma*, but rather leaves it without explanation, with the understanding that the reader will interpret it according to the usual meaning – that Lavan has tricked, misled, or defrauded Yaakov.
[5] This explanation of Rashi teaches us the importance of honesty in his worldview.
[6] A similar idea is applied to Yosef's use of the term when his father addresses him; see *Bereishit* 37:13.

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Lecture #6C:
Rashi (Part III) —
The Moral and Educational Philosophy of Rashi (Conclusion)

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This week's shiurim are dedicated by Drs. Irving and Roberta Strauchler
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E. PRAISE AND AFFECTION FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Rashi has a great affection not only for the ancestors of the Jewish people, but for Israel as a nation as well, and he succeeds in finding points in their favor even when their sins are spelled out in the verse.

One example is in the passage of the blasphemer (*Vayikra* 23:10-12). Rashi praises the nation of Israel, deducing that if the verse finds it worthwhile to mention the name of his mother — "And his mother's name was Shelomit, daughter of Divri, of the tribe of Dan" (ibid. v. 11) — it must be that she was unusual:

> "His mother's name was Shelomit the daughter of Divri" — this is to praise Israel. The verse publicizes this one to let us know that she alone was involved in sexual immorality.

An additional example may be found in*Devarim* 32:43, where the Torah states, "Nations, sing out praise for His people." Rashi explains:

> At that time, the nations will praise Israel, saying: You see, now, what the praise of this nation is. For they clung to the Holy One, Blessed be He, through all the sufferings that befell them, and they did not forsake Him! They knew His goodness and His praise. [1]

It is difficult not to see in this approbation of the nation of Israel, who "clung to the Holy One, Blessed be He, through all the sufferings that befell them," a reassuring comment which comes to bolster his contemporaries. Rashi lived in a period in which the Church pointed to the

success and power of Christendom, on the one hand, and the low situation of the Jews, on the other hand, as a divine sign of the rightness of the Christian viewpoint. Through his commentary, Rashi strengthens his coreligionists, who are overwhelmed and beleaguered by their current situation, reassuring them that, in the future, the nations of the world will praise the nation of Israel because they have not been seduced into apostasy.

F. LOVE OF THE LAND OF ISRAEL

This lesson would be incomplete without noting Rashi's great affection for the Land of Israel. Rashi attributes many great qualities to the Land of Israel, whether physical or spiritual, and sometimes they even dovetail with each other.

The terms *aliya* (ascent) and *yerida*(descent) have become the common terms for, respectively, immigration to and emigration from the land of Israel. It is logical to assume that this use of the term *aliya*, instead of defining mere upward motion, became rooted in the Hebrew language because of Rashi's many comments describing Israel as "above" all other lands, which should be seen as a physical and spiritual description combined. Below are a number of examples.

After Yosef identifies himself to his brothers, he says (*Bereishit* 45:9), "Hurry and**go up** to my father." Rashi explains: "The Land of Israel is higher than all other lands." In*Shemot* 33:1, God says to Moshe, "Go, **go up**from this, you and the people which you brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land which I swore…" Rashi explains: "The Land of Israel is higher than all other lands; this is why He said, 'Go up.'"

The same applies in the reverse; leaving the land of Israel is described to this very day with the term *yerida*. This also follows in Rashi's footsteps. On the verse, "And they will bring down to us" (*Devarim* 1:25), Rashi explains: "This tells us that the Land of Israel is higher than all other lands."

Rashi believes that the Land of Israel has higher spiritual standards than other lands. In *Vayikra* 18:28, the verse says that the Land will vomit out those who defile it, and Rashi explains: "The Land of Israel does not suffer sinners." The Land itself, as it were, is not capable of containing evildoers, and consequently, it vomits them out. Similarly, because of the high spiritual level of the Land of Israel, Rashi determines that one who lives outside of Israel is likened to an idol worshipper, while one who lives in the Land of Israel makes the God of Israel his. In *Vayikra*25:38, the verse states: "I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be a God to you." Rashi explains: "For I am a God to anyone who lives in the Land of Israel, but anyone who leaves it is like one who worships idols."

Rashi emphasizes the physical advantages of the Land of Israel as well. In his commentary to *Bamidbar* 13:22, "Now Chevron had been built seven years before Tzoan of Egypt," Rashi argues that the simple meaning of

the verse is untenable, since the Egyptians are an older people than the Canaanites. Instead, he explains that even the most inferior part of the Land of Israel, Chevron, is seven times as good as the finest part of Egypt:

> This is meant to teach you the excellence of the Land of Israel, for there is no place in the Land of Israel rockier than Chevron, which is why it was designated for a burial ground. On the other hand, there is no country in the world as superb as Egypt, as it says, "It was like God's garden, like the land of Egypt" (*Bereishit* 13: 10). Furthermore, Tzoan is the best part of Egypt, for the residence of the kings is situated there, as it says, "For his princes were in Tzoan" (*Yeshayahu* 30:4). Yet Chevron was superior to it seven times over.

Similarly, Rashi comments on the words of the verse in *Devarim* (11:10) stating that the land of Israel "is not like the land of Egypt," noting: "Rather, it is better than it."

Rashi emphasizes that these superior qualities of the Land of Israel are known not only to the Jewish People, but even to the nations of the world. This is what he writes earlier in *Devarim* (3:9), where the Torah notes that other nations have their own name for Mount Hermon: "The Sidonians call Hermon Sirion, while the Amorites call it Senir."

> "The Sidonians call Hermon…" — but in another passage, it states, "Until Mount Sion, which is Hermon" (*Devarim* 4:48). So we see that it had four names [Hermon, Sirion, Senir, and Sion]. Why was it necessary for all of them to be written? To express the praise of the Land of Israel, that there were four kingdoms taking pride in it — one saying, "It shall be called by my name," and another saying, "It shall be called by my name."

A similar concept arises one more time in *Devarim*, towards the end (33:17). There, Moshe is blessing the tribe of Yosef: "The firstborn of his ox is his glory, and the horns of the aurochs are his horns; with them he will gore together the ends of the earth." According to Rashi, the verse constitutes a prophecy describing the impending conquest of the land of Israel by Yehoshua. Once again, Rashi finds the opportunity here to weave the message of the superiority of the Land of Israel into his commentary, despite the fact that there is no difficulty in the verse that requires the introduction of aggadic material:

> "The ends of the earth" — that is, the thirty-one kings. [2] Is it possible that these kings were all from the Land of Israel? Rather, there was not one king or ruler who did not acquire for himself a palace and a holding in the land of Israel. This is because the Land of Israel was considered distinguished by all of them, as it is said, "The finest inheritance of the hosts of nations" (*Yirmeyahu*3:19).

In other words, every king throughout the world ("the ends of the earth") wanted to own real estate in the Land of Israel because of its universal importance.

G. APPENDIX — RASHI'S DICTA

Having reached the end of this part, I wish to list a number of expressions and maxims which have become a treasured part of the Hebrew language because of Rashi's commentary. Here as well, I will stress that Rashi did not compose these expressions, but the fact that Rashi uses these aphorisms has made them extremely popular. I bring here only a small sample of these dicta:

- Say part of one's praise in his presence, all of it outside of his presence (*Bereishit* 7:1).
- Woe to a villain, woe to his neighbor (*Bamidbar* 3:29)
- A cloak all of blue wool (*Bamidbar*16:1). [3]
- What does the sabbatical year have to do with Mt. Sinai? (*Vayikra* 25:1).[4]
- For Rachel, your younger daughter (following Rashi, *Bereishit* 29:18). [5]
- Two kings cannot share the same crown (*Bereishit* 1:16).
- One in the mouth and one in the heart (*Bereishit* 37:4).[6]
- Each word according to its properties (Rashi, *Bereishit* 3:8, based on *Mishlei*25:11).[7]
- Do not criticize your fellow for a blemish that you have (*Shemot* 22:20)
- When you see something like this, sanctify it (*Shemot* 12:2). [8]
- The grandfather of all impurity (*Bamidbar* 19:22).

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

[1] It is worth adding the innovation of Rav Mordechai Breuer (*Megadim* 28 (5758), pp. 45-72) concerning Rashi's method in his introductory comments to each volume of the Pentateuch:

> It appears that Rashi has a clear methodology here. Rashi introduces his commentary to each volume of the Pentateuch by singing the praises of Israel: proving their righteousness (*Bereishit*), revealing how beloved they are (*Shemot*,*Vayikra*, *Bamidbar*) or defending their honor (*Devarim*). There is a great significance to this method of Rashi throughout his commentary. After all, the Holy One, Blessed be He, Israel, and His Torah are one. Thus, one who seeks to interpret the Torah must always have Israel uppermost in his mind. Only Israel received and fulfilled the Torah, and they still fulfill it until to this very day. Israel is the sole subject of the Torah, and they alone are what it deals with, from the beginning to the end.

[2] Chapter 12 of the Book of *Yehoshua* lists thirty-one Canaanite kings whom he defeated in order to conquer the Land of Israel.

[3] Korach, whose rebellion is described in *Bamidbar* 16 (immediately following the commandment to the Israelites to make fringes, containing a thread of blue, on the edges of their garments) uses the following tactic:

> He dressed them with cloaks made entirely of blue wool. They came and stood before Moses and asked him, "Does a cloak made entirely of blue wool require fringes, or is it exempt?" He replied, "It does require fringes." They began laughing at

him. "Can it be that one string of blue wool fulfills the obligation for a cloak made of any other color, while this one, which is made entirely of blue wool, cannot exempt itself?"

[4] This is a phrase which describes a non-sequitur in the biblical text. In this case, it is the introduction to *Vayikra* 25, which deals with the sabbatical and jubilee years. It opens with, "And God spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai, saying," instead of the usual, "And God spoke to Moshe, saying."

[5] This is a phrase which describes the apparently redundant, legalistic terminology of contracts and the like. In this verse, Yaakov strikes a deal with Lavan: "I will work for you for seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter." Ostensibly, he could have merely said "for Rachel." Rashi explains:

> "For Rachel, your younger daughter" — Why were all these signs necessary? Since Yaakov knew that Lavan was a deceiver, he said to him, "I will work for you for Rachel;" lest you substitute some other Rachel from the street, it states explicitly: "Your daughter;" lest you say, "I will change her name to Leah, and I will change Leah's name to Rachel," it states explicitly: "Your younger [daughter]."

[6] This is an expression of hypocrisy or duplicity.

[7] In other words, a word must be defined on its own terms, literally rather than homiletically.

[8] This expression refers to an unequivocal, unquestionable teaching. The first commandment given to Israel in Egypt is: "This new moon shall mark for you the beginning of the months." Rashi is troubled by the word "this," and he explains:

> Moshe had some difficulty understanding the crescent of the new moon, at what size it must appear before it is fit for sanctification. So He showed him with His finger the moon in the sky and said to him, "When you see something like this, sanctify it."

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
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This week's shiurim are dedicated by Carole S. Daman of Scarsdale in memory of Tzvi Hersh ben David Arye z"l – Harlan Daman

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Lecture #6a:
Rashi, Part III —
The Moral and Educational Philosophy of Rashi

A. RASHI AS AN EDUCATOR

In our previous lesson, we discussed the question of what motivates Rashi to expound a verse. Does Rashi explicate the verses only when he finds some difficulty in them, with the sole motive of clarifying the text? This is what Professor Nechama Leibowitz argues, in the footsteps of a number of Rashi's supercommentaries. Or does Rashi see himself as obligated not only to explain the verses, but even to educate the community and to transmit messages by way of *parshanut* when these opportunities happen to fall into his lap? Indeed, a not insignificant number of modern scholars of Rashi maintain that the latter is true.

We have noted that the first approach compels the student to find the difficulty that Rashi tries to resolve for each and every verse which Rashi expounds. Nevertheless, there are times that there is no escape from saying that Rashi does not always have a difficulty in the verse; at least in some

circumstances, his desire is to educate and to shape the viewpoint and life practices of the members of his generation, and this is what motivates him to expound the verse.

Regardless of the position we maintain regarding Rashi's motivations, there is no doubt that Rashi — whether intentionally or unintentionally — has becomes one of the great developers of Jewish education throughout all generations.

We may say that Rashi is directly responsible for shaping a significant part of the ethical and educational tradition of the Jewish nation. We might even go far enough to say that in this sphere, his success may be even greater than in the exegetical sphere. Parents and other educational figures construct the values and the outlook of the Jewish child upon the rock-solid foundations of Rashi's commentaries on*Tanakh*; these words serve as their guiding light.

Every Jewish child who is about to hit his classmate or playmate immediately hears the resounding voice of the kindergarten teacher quoting: "Whoever raises a hand against his fellow is called a *rasha* (evil one)" (Rashi, *Shemot* 2:13, based on *Sanhedrin*58b).[1]

We all remember that it is better to say a little and do a lot; this is, after all, Avraham's behavior, while Efron (who is, of course, a non-Jew) acts in the opposite way (Rashi, *Bereishit* 23:16, based on *BavaMetzia* 87a).

The seriousness of publicly shaming another was emphasized in our youth when we learnt of Tamar: "Better that one leap into a fiery furnace than shame one's fellow in public" (Rashi, *Bereishit* 38:25, based on*Berakhot* 43b).

The importance of prayer is derived from Rashi's commentary as well. On the verse, "And God took account of Sara…" (*Bereishit* 21:1), Rashi explains, "This section[2] was juxtaposed to the other to teach you that whoever asks for God's compassion for another, when he needs the same thing, he is answered first" (based on*Bava Kamma* 92a).

The authority of the official leadership, which we must respect even if we do not like it, is recalled with Rashi's phrase: "Yiftach in his generation is like Shemuel in his generation" (Rashi, *Devarim* 19:17, as cited from *Rosh Hashana* 25b). And who does not remember Rashi's famous example of the difference between taking revenge and bearing a grudge (based on the *Sifra ad loc.*and *Yoma* 23a):

> X says to Y, "Lend me your sickle," and Y replies, "No!" The next day, Y says to X "Lend me your ax." If X says to Y, "I will not lend it to you, just as you did not lend to me!" — this constitutes revenge.
>
> Now what constitutes bearing a grudge? X says to Y, "Lend me your ax," and Y replies, "No!" The next day, Y says to X, "Lend me your sickle." If X says to Y, "Here it is for you; I am not like you, who did not

lend me!" — this constitutes bearing a grudge, for X keeps the hatred in his heart, even though he does not take revenge.

Of course, the source of all of these statements is the Talmud and Midrash, but most of us first encountered and came to know them from Rashi's words.

In this lecture and the next, I have gathered a number of examples of educational topics that are very close to Rashi's heart, so much so that at every opportunity he interweaves them into his commentary. By way of these examples, we may build a model of the ethical and educational philosophy of the greatest of all teachers: Rashi.[3]

B *LASHON HA-RA*

To Rashi, speaking ill of others —*lashon ha-ra*, here used as a term including slander, gossip, defamation and the like — is anathema. He notes how serious this sin is in a number of places; according to him (as we shall see presently), the sin is so serious that it is the cause of exile.

When Moshe encounters two quarreling Hebrew men and rebukes the assailant, he is shocked to learn that his killing of the Egyptian slave-driver the previous day has become public knowledge: "And Moshe was afraid" (*Shemot* 2:14). After explaining this reaction literally, Rashi (*ad loc.*) continues:

> Midrashically, it is interpreted to mean that he was worried because he saw that were delators[4] among Israel. He said: If this is the case, perhaps they do not deserve to be redeemed![5]

Explaining the next phrase, "And he said, 'Indeed, the matter is known,'" Rashi continues to develop this approach:

> Its Midrashic interpretation, however, is this: The matter I was wondering about, why the Israelites are considered more sinful than all the seventy nations that they deserve to be subjugated in cruel servitude, has become known to me. I see that they do indeed deserve it.

It is not only the Jewish nation that is punished by the privations of exile due to the sin of *lashon ha-ra*; this is true of the individual as well. For example, Yosef informs on his brothers, as the verse notes (*Bereishit* 37:2): "Yosef brought their evil report to their father." Rashi (*ad loc.*) describes at length both the slander and the punishment of Yosef for bringing *lashon ha-ra* to his father. In fact, he writes, all of the troubles which befall Yosef are a punishment for his *lashon ha-ra* concerning his brothers:

> "Their evil report" — any evil he saw in his brothers, the sons of Leah, he would tell his father: 1) That they ate limbs from living animals, 2)

that they demeaned the sons of the maidservants by calling them slaves, and 3) that they were suspected of illicit sexual relationships.

For these three, he was punished:

For the tale of limbs from living animals, "they slaughtered a kid goat" (*Bereishit* 37:31) when they sold him, but they did not eat it alive.

For the report that he told about them that they called their brothers slaves, "Joseph was sold as a slave" (*Tehillim*105:17).

For the tale of illicit sexual relationships that he told about them, "his master's wife lifted her eyes…" (*Bereishit* 39:7).

According to Rashi, Moshe Rabbeinu's experiences described in chapter 4 of *Shemot* demonstrate that even leaders and great men such as he must be careful to avoid *lashon ha-ra*; indeed, they are forced to pay for this sin if they stumble in this severe crime.[6]

When Moshe Rabbeinu is sent to redeem the Israelites from Egypt, he doubts whether they will trust in his account that God has indeed revealed Himself to him: "But they will not believe me" (v. 1). God's response to Moshe is to give him two signs (vv. 2-8); at first glance, their aim appears to be to convince the Jewish People of the trustworthiness of Moshe Rabbeinu. However, according to Rashi, the two signs that Moshe performs allude to his own sin – slandering the Jewish people with the statement "But they will not believe me."

The first sign is changing the staff into a serpent, and Rashi finds in this two allusions to Moshe's sin. The first allusion precedes the sign itself, when God asks Moshe (v. 2), "*Ma-zeh be-yadekha*?", "What is this in your hand?" On the basis of the Midrash,[7] Rashi directs our attention to the strange compound word "*ma-zeh,*" composed of "*ma*" (what) and "*zeh*" (this).

This is why it is written as one word: so that it may be expounded: "*Mi-zeh,*" "from this" in your hand you deserve to be stricken, for you have suspected the innocent.

In addition, the sign itself, turning the staff into a serpent, is seen by Rashi (v. 3) as an allusion to Moshe's sin:

He alluded to him that he told *lashon ha-ra* about Israel, seizing the occupation of the Serpent.[8]

The second sign is Moshe's hand becoming covered with leprosy[9] (v. 6), and Rashi brings the *midrash* which connects this sign to the sin of *lashon ha-ra*:

> This is an allusion to the *lashon ha-ra*that he had told by saying, “They will not believe me;” therefore, he was stricken with *tzaraat*, just as Miriam was stricken because of *lashon ha-ra*.

God then declares: “If they will not believe you, and they will not hearken to the call of the first sign, then they will believe the call of the latter sign” (v. 8). Rashi explains that the second sign (the leprous hand) is more convincing than the first sign (the ophidian staff), because with the second sign Moshe is punished:

> “Once you tell them, ‘I was stricken because of you, because I told *lashon ha-ra* about you,’ they will believe you.” [10]

According to the *gemara*, *lashon ha-ra*is one of the seven sins punished by *tzara’at*:

> R. Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R. Yochanan: Plagues are caused by seven things: by *lashon ha-ra*, by bloodshed, by vain oath-taking, by sexual immorality, by arrogance, by robbery and by greed. (*Arakhin* 16a)

From among these seven possibilities, Rashi chooses the sin of *lashon ha-ra* as the exclusive offense that causes the punishment of *tzaraat*; ever since the publication of Rashi’s commentary on the Torah, the punishment of *tzara’at* (by itself!) is known throughout Jewish communities as the fitting punishment for the sin of *lashon ha-ra*! Rashi even justifies the idea of tit-for-tat inherent in the punishment of *tzara’at*when he explains the verse, “He shall reside alone; outside the camp must his residence be” (*Vayikra* 13:46), the rule governing the*metzora*:

> “He shall reside alone” — even other impure people must avoid him.
>
> Our Sages said (*Arakhin* 16b): Why is he different from other impure people, that he must remain isolated? Since, with his slander, he caused a separation between a man and his wife or between a man and his fellow, he too, shall be separated!

I do not know why this topic of *lashon ha-ra* is so imperative for Rashi. It may be that Rashi, as a communal leader and rabbinic judge, saw up close the extremely harmful results that the sin of *lashon ha-ra*can cause. In any case, it is clear to me that it is Rashi who succeeded in inculcating the severity of the sin of *lashon ha-ra* in the consciousness of the Jewish People, long before R. Yisrael Meir Kagan wrote his magnum opus on the topic, *Chafetz Chayim*.[11]

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

[1] Usually, this threat is voiced without mentioning the term *rasha*, following another of Rashi's dicta: "It threatens, but it does not delineate the punishment" (*Shemot* 22:22; a similar expression appears in*Bereishit* 4:15).
[2] In 20:17, Avraham prays for Avimelekh and his household.
[3] As we have noted above, the source of all of these points is ultimately the words of the Sages. Nevertheless, we will attribute the resultant educational philosophy to Rashi, because he selects certain *midrashim* and cites them, while ignoring others.
[4] This is a term for informers from the Latin that has found its way into both Hebrew and English. How does Moshe know that it is Hebrews, not Egyptians, who have informed on him? Before he kills the Egyptian, "he turned this way and that, and he saw that no man was there" (*Shemot* 2:12); therefore, the only person who could have told the tale was the Hebrew whom Moshe had saved from his Egyptian attacker.
[5] It may be that the impetus for adding this*midrash* is the question of how a person at Moshe's spiritual level would be in fear of mere humans. According to this *midrash*, this is not the fear of personal peril, but rather a concern for the fate of the Jewish people; perhaps, God forbid, they do not deserve redemption due to their perfidy.
[6] It is noteworthy that while Rashi generally tries to justify the acts of the Patriarchs and other role models (see more on this topic later in this series), in regard to the sin of *lashon ha-ra*, he does not mince words.
[7] *Midrash Tanchuma, Shemot* 23.
[8] The association of snakes with the sin of*lashon ha-ra* also appears in Rashi's comments to the following verse: "God sent against the people the venomous snakes, and they bit the people, and many people of Israel died" (*Bamidbar* 21:6). Rashi writes: "'And they bit the people' — let the snake, which was stricken for speaking evil, come and punish those who spread slander."
[9] **Translator's note**: For convenience's sake, we use the terms "leprosy" and "leper" for *tzara'at* and*metzora* respectively, despite the fact that in *Tanakh*,*tzara'at* is a physical manifestation of spiritual infirmity, not Hansen's disease, which is bacterial in nature.
[10] It appears that what motivates Rashi's interpretation of these signs is the fact that Moshe is required to perform the signs while he is still standing by the Burning Bush, before he arrives in Egypt at all, without even one person around to witness these phenomena. The aim of performing these signs afterwards, before the Israelites, is quite clear - Moshe needs to convince them that God did indeed speak to him - but what is the point of performing them at the Burning Bush? According to the comments of Rashi, the answer is profound; they serve as a rebuke and punishment for Moshe.
[11] The sin of *lashon ha-ra* appears in Rashi's commentaries in the following places as well: *Vayikra*14:4, 19:16; *Bamidbar* 33:18; *Devarim* 22:14, 27:24, etc.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

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Dedicated in memory of Yehuda Chaim ben Aharon Safier z"l
by Rafe and Roberta Safier

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Lecture #7a:
Rashi, Part IV —
Rashi and Christianity

A. INTRODUCTION

Perfect Torah/ Of two millennia prior,
Beseech now the face of God/ For the unblemished dove.
Implore in supplication/ He Who dwells above
To show compassion to those who probe your depths/ At every moment and time…

Approach in supplication/ The face of the ancient succor.
Garb yourself in black/ Like a woman widowed.
Avenge the oppression of your saints/ And the spilled blood of your scholars
From the hands of the harlot's children/ They who cut off your servants. ("*Torah Temima," Piyutei Rashi*). [1]

In the previous lectures, we have seen that by way of Rashi's commentary to the Torah, we may understand his character, values, and educational philosophy. In this lecture, we will deal with the comments and *midrashim* that Rashi brings not because of any interpretative need, nor because of their educational or moral significance, but rather because of their exigency for his generation, a generation living beneath the shield and the sword of the Christian faith. Rashi, as a communal leader and public figure, could not ignore the growing Christian propaganda emerging from Ashkenazic lands. As we have seen, sometimes Rashi is inclined to stray from the *peshat* in order to transmit a moral message which is important to him. Similarly, as we shall see in this lesson, Rashi sometimes strays from the *peshat*of the verses because of the need to contend with Christian claims against the Jews, out of his desire to strengthen the spirit of his nation.

The position which reads Rashi's explanations against the background of Jewish-Christian polemics was developed by a number of critics, led by the historian Y. Baer.[2]

In Rashi's time, literary polemics between Judaism and Christianity began, growing in parallel to the general development of Christian theology and scholasticism. Only in the middle of the 12th century did these polemics reach their climax; the beginning of this revolution belongs to the last chapter of Rashi's life. With this spiritual background, we may understand and explain a number of things that Rashi wrote in the last years of his life.

B. INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that Rashi, in his commentary to *Shir Ha-shirim*, is responding to the First Crusade (1096), also known as the "Decrees of Tatnu" (after the acronym for the Jewish year, 4856).[3] Similarly, in his commentaries to a number of psalms[4] and the Book of *Yeshayahu*, Rashi relates to the cruelty of the Christians, [5] their claims against the nation of Israel, and the punishment that God is destined to bring upon them. For example, this is what Rashi writes in his introduction to *Shir Ha-shirim*:

I say that Shlomo foresaw with divine intuition that Israel was destined to suffer a series of exiles and would lament, nostalgically recalling her former status as God's chosen beloved. She would say, "I will return to my first husband, for it was better with me then than it is now" (*Hoshea* 2:9).
The children of Israel will recall His beneficence and the trespasses which they trespassed (*Vayikra* 26:40). Moreover, they would recall the goodness which He promised for the End of Days.

> The prophets frequently liken the relationship between God and Israel to that of a loving husband angered by a straying wife, who has betrayed him. Shlomo composed *Shir Ha-shirim* in the form of that same allegory. It is a passionate dialogue between the husband, God, who still loves his exiled wife, Israel, and the veritable widow of a living husband (*Shemuel II* 20:3), [6] who longs for her husband and seeks to endear herself to him once more, as she recalls her youthful love for him and admits her guilt. God too, is "afflicted by her affliction" (*Yeshayahu* 63:9), and He recalls the kindness of her youth, her beauty and her skillful deeds for which he loved her so. He proclaims that he has "not affiliated her capriciously" (*Eikha* 3:33), nor has she cast away permanently. For she is still His wife and He her husband, and He will yet return to her.

In other places in his commentary to *Shir Ha-shirim*, Rashi stresses the relevance for his time, and we will see a number of examples of this (noting in particular his use of the word "today").

> Draw me, we will run after you; the king brought me to his chambers. We will rejoice and be glad in you. We will recall your love more fragrant than wine; they have loved you sincerely. (*Shir Ha-shirim* 1:4)

Rashi explains:

> "The king brought me to his chambers" — And even today, to this very day, I still have joy and happiness that I clung to you.
> "We will recall your love" — Even today, in living widowhood, I recall your early love more than any banquet of pleasure and joy.

Let us explain the words of Rashi. The verse begins with the past tense and switches into future tense. The congregation of Israel says that it has clung to God in the past ("the king brought me to his chambers") and even "today" (namely, in Rashi's time); despite the difficulties and sufferings of exile, it does not regret its relationship with God, but it is still happy to have chosen to cling to God. In the continuation, Rashi says that "even today, to this very day," when the nation of Israel is found in a situation of living widowhood, it recalls God's love.

In Rashi's commentary to *Shir Ha-shirim*, one may also find a direct reference to the dedication of the nation of Israel.

> Behold, you are fair, my beloved; behold, you are fair; your eyes are doves, from within your scarf; your hair is like a flock of goats that stream down from Mount Gilead. (4:1)

Rashi explains:

> "Your eyes are doves" — Your hues and your appearance and your characteristics are like those of a dove, which clings to its mate, and

> when they slaughter it, it does not struggle but stretches forth its neck; so have you offered your shoulder to bear My yoke and My fear.[7]

This appears to be Rashi's personal testimony about the dedication of his acquaintances, perhaps even his colleagues and classmates from the*yeshivot* of Worms and Mainz.

An additional element in Rashi's commentary to *Shir Ha-shirim* is confronting the Christian claim that the low position of the Jews testifies to their rejection by God. Rashi claims that God remains with the nation of Israel in their exile:

> "With me from Lebanon shall you come" (4:8)— And when you return from the exile, I will return with you, and also all the days of the exile, I will share your troubles. Therefore, he writes, "With Me from Lebanon you shall come." When you are exiled from this Lebanon, you shall come with Me. It does not state: With Me **to** Lebanon you shall come, denoting that from the time of your departure from here until the time of your arrival here, I am with you wherever you go and wherever you come.

In his commentary to many verses in *Shir Ha-shirim*, we find direct references to the troubles of Rashi's generation. In his commentary to *Shir Ha-shirim* 5:9, when the daughters of Jerusalem ask the female, "What is your beloved more than another beloved?" (in other words: what makes your beloved so unique, so precious that you still look for him), Rashi explains:

> "What is your beloved more than another beloved?" — This is what the nations were asking Israel, "What is it about your God more than all the other gods, that you allow yourselves to be burned and hanged because of Him?"

In a number of places in the Book of*Yeshayahu*, one may find in Rashi's commentaries direct references to the events of his era. The most distinct example is in Rashi's commentary to chapters 42-43. Similar to his comments to *Shir Ha-shirim*, we may find here evidence of Rashi's struggling with the events of his time. For example, Rashi appears to give chilling testimony regarding those killed to sanctify God's name in explaining verse 53:9: "And he gave his grave to the wicked and to the wealthy with his kinds of death."

> "And he gave his grave to the wicked" — He subjected himself to be buried according to anything the wicked of the nations would decree upon him, for they would penalize him with death and the burial of donkeys in the intestines of the dogs.
>
> "To the wicked" — according to the will of the wicked, he was willing to be buried, and he would not deny the living God.[8]

Up to this point, we have seen a relationship to Christianity in Rashi's commentary to *Nevi'im* and*Ketuvim*. Can we find a similar trend in Rashi's comments on the Torah?

C. ANTI-CHRISTIAN TRENDS IN RASHI'S COMMENTARY ON THE TORAH[9]

Overt and Covert Debates with Christianity

It is unclear whether Rashi composed his commentary to the Torah before or after the Decrees of Tatnu, but even if the composition of Rashi's commentary to the Torah preceded the Crusade, we may still claim that there is occasion to find in his interpretations a Jewish response to Christian claims.[10] Sometimes, Rashi does this in an overt, obvious way, as for example when he uses the term *minim*, sectarians. (This term precedes Rashi, and it appears in the literature of the Sages in describing the heretics of their time; Rashi, however, uses this term to describe the claims of the Christians of his time.) However, sometimes the reference is not explicit, and it is important to stress that when Rashi does not explicitly address Christian claims, it is hard to prove that we are indeed talking about a polemical position. At the same time, the use of certain arguments, the absence of the interpretative need for choosing a certain *midrash* from among a number of possible*midrashim*, as well as the particular working of a*midrash* can certainly support our approach.

Monotheism

A. In *Bereishit* 1:26, discussing the creation of man, the Torah states, "And God said, 'Let us make man.'" The plural language "us" is used by the Christians to prove their Doctrine of the Trinity. Therefore, Rashi cites the words of the *midrash*:

> "Let us make man" — Even though [the angels] did not assist Him in His creation, and there is an opportunity for the sectarians to rebel,[11] Scripture did not hesitate to teach proper conduct and the trait of humility, that the greater person should consult with and receive permission from the lesser. Had it been written, "I shall make man," we would not have learned that He was speaking with His tribunal, but to Himself. And the response to the sectarians is written alongside it (v. 27): "And God created;" it does not say: And they created.

One of the bases of the Christian faith is belief in the Trinity, that God is composed of three entities: God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Ghost). Here, Rashi sets out explicitly against the Doctrine of the Trinity, and he adds that even though this could be misconstrued, God still chooses a potentially misleading term in order to transmit an important message: "That the greater person should consult with and receive permission from the lesser."

B. The verse which literally reads, "Hear, Israel: Lord our God, Lord one" (*Devarim* 6:4) may be most simply explained in the following way: "Hear,

Israel: Lord, Who is our God, He is one." Indeed, this is R. Saadia Gaon's interpretation. This oneness can be explained as meaning that He alone is our God (and thus He alone should be worshipped), as the Rashbam and ibn Ezra explain.[12] However, Rashi reworks the *Sifrei* to craft the following interpretation:

> "The Lord is our God; the Lord is one" — God, who is now our God and not the God of the other nations, will be [declared] in the future "the one God," as it is said: "For then I will convert the peoples to a pure language, that all of them call in the name of God [and to serve him as one]" (*Tzefanya* 3:9), and it is [also] said: "On that day will God be one and His name one" (*Zekharya* 14:9).

Now, let us examine the original in the *Sifrei*(32), and let us note the alterations that Rashi introduces:

> "Lord is our God" in this world; "Lord is one" in the World to Come. Thus it is written: "God will be king over the entire land; on that day will God be one and His name one."

It appears that the simple meaning of the terminology of the *Sifrei* is that "Lord is one" comes to include the World to Come; the oneness of God is equated to this world, for the oneness of God is immutable in both.

Rashi, on the other hand, stresses that that there is a universal unity that is lacking in this world, as the nations of the earth fail to recognize and embrace God's kingship and oneness in this world, in his time. In order to support the idea of the people of the world coming to recognize God's kingship and oneness, Rashi enlists the verse from *Tzefanya*.

An additional change that Rashi makes in relation to the *Sifrei* is that instead of speaking of "this world," Rashi talks about "**now**," a term that stresses the relevance of the reading for his era, his audience, his readers. It is clear that this interpretation does not arise from the *peshat*, as there is nothing to indicate that "Lord is one" is meant to be in the future. Therefore, we may definitely see this comment as a tendentious interpretation, which comes to strengthen the members of his generation with the determination that in the future, even the nations of the word will recognize God's oneness and accept the yoke of His kingship.

Translated by R. Yoseif Bloch

[1] See note 3.
[2] Y. Baer, *"Rashi Ve-Hametziut Ha-Historit shel Zemano," Tarbitz* 20 (5709), pp. 320-332.
[3] On November 27, 1095, in the Hebrew year 4856, Pope Urban II made a speech calling on the faithful to launch a Crusade to the Holy Land and reclaim it from the heretics (Muslims). This speech resounded throughout Europe and led to a mass movement eastward. In order to provide basic equipment and provisions for themselves, the Crusaders

pillaged the lands they passed through; when they happened to encounter Jewish communities along the way, they raided and murdered them. Sometimes, the Jews were offered the opportunity to convert and thereby save their lives, but many Jews preferred to be killed to sanctify God's name, and there were even suicides among Jews during this period. On the basis of the events of Tatnu, a number of dirges were composed, dealing mostly with the slaughter of Jewish communities and the loss of *yeshivot* and Torah scholars. In the poem *"Torah Temima,"* part of which was quoted at the beginning of the lesson, Rashi bemoans the loss of Torah scholars in his time during the Crusades.

[4] See A. Grossman, "*Peirush Rashi Li-Tehillim Ve-Ha-Pulmos Ha-Yehudi-Notzri*," in D. Rafel (ed.), *Mechkarim Ba-Mikra U-Va-Chinukh Mugashim Le-Professor Moshe Ahrend* (Jerusalem, 5756), pp. 59-74.

[5] In a number of places, Rashi identifies Esav and Edom with Rome (that is, the Romans). The Jews of Europe in the Middle Ages would identify Rome with Christianity and the (Roman) Catholic Church; therefore, prophecies in the Bible which speak about Esav and Edom were understood by them as relating to Christianity, as were the references of the Sages to Esav, Edom, or Rome. See G.D. Cohen, "Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought," Alexander Altmann (ed.), *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (Cambridge, 1967). See also the course offered by the Open University of Israel, *"Bein Yehudim Le-Notzerim: Yehudim Ve-Notzerim Be-Ma'arav Europa ad Reishit Ha-Et Ha-Chadasha,"* Prof. Ora Limor (1993-1997), Vol. I, pp. 9-15 in particular.

[6] This expression appears a number of times in Rashi's commentary on *Shir Ha-shirim*. This refers to an *aguna*, a woman whose husband is missing, who sits and waits for him to return and cannot marry anyone else. She is like a widow, because her husband is not with her, but he is still alive somewhere; thus, she is a widow not to the dead, but to the living. This is the position of the Jewish nation in exile — it still waits, like a living widow, for God to return to His people.

[7] A description of the nation of Israel like a dove appears also in Rashi's dirge, cited at the beginning of this lecture.

[8] Additional examples will be cited below.

[9] A. Grossman, "*Pulmos Dati U-Megamma Chinukhit Be-Feirushei Rashi La-Torah,"* in *Pirkei Nechama — Sefer Zikkaron Li-Nechama Leibowitz* (Jerusalem, 5761), pp. 187-205, brings a number of examples of anti-Christian tendencies in Rashi's commentary on the Torah. We will also bring a number of examples of this, and some of them overlap with Grossman's examples.

[10] For the most part, we deal in these lectures with Rashi's commentary on the Torah, but in the framework of this chapter, which deals with the debate with Christianity, we must note the words of Rashi to *Yeshayahu* 53:4: "Indeed, he bore our illnesses; and our pains, he carried them. Y*et we accounted him* stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted." According to the claim of Christianity, this verse is a prophecy about Jesus, about his suffering and dying for the sins of Israel. Rashi, in his commentary to this verse, explains this in the exactly opposite way:

> "Indeed, he bore our illnesses" — …But now we see that this came to him not because of his low state, but that he was chastised with pains so that all the nations be atoned for with Israel's suffering. The illness that should rightfully have come upon us, he bore.
>
> "Yet we accounted him" — We thought that he was hated by the Omnipresent, but it was not so; he was pained because of our transgressions and crushed because of our iniquities.

In other words, the low status of the nation of Israel is not testimony to the fact that he is hated by God; rather, he is low because he suffers the sins of the nations of the world. Rashi continues this idea in the next verse as well: *"But he was pierced for our transgressions,* he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him:"

> "The punishment that brought us peace was upon him" — The punishment, which was for the sake of the peace enjoyed, came upon him, for he was punished so that there would be peace for the entire world.

Thus, Rashi devises an innovative interpretation of this verse, and he maintains the opposite of the claims of the Christians. Jesus did not bear suffering because of the sins of Israel; it is rather the nation of Israel which bears suffering because of the sins of the nations of the world. There is no doubt that this is one of the places most remarkable for tendentious anti-Christian exegesis in Rashi's commentaries on the Torah.

[11] That is, to defeat Israel in a debate (see *Midrash Sekhel Tov, Vayikra* 1:2).
[12] Naturally, Rashi never saw these commentaries, but these interpretations arise from the *peshat* of the verses.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
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Lecture #7b:
Rashi, Part IV —
Rashi and Christianity (conclusion)

The Selection of the Jewish Nation

According to Christianity, the Jewish People were once indeed the Chosen Nation, but they were eventually rejected for their sins and replaced with the Christians – "Israel in spirit" in place of Israel in flesh. In order to combat this claim, Rashi stresses in many places in his commentaries that even if the Jews sin, they remain God's treasured people. Similarly, Rashi seeks in his writings to encourage the nation and prevent them from giving up on redemption out of feeling that they do not deserve it. Rashi relates to this in numerous places, and we will analyze a few examples:

A) Genesis 6:6 states: "And God reconsidered (*va-yinnachem*) that He had made man in the earth, and He was saddened to His heart." This verse could serve as ammunition for the Christian claim; if God could reconsider and regret the creation of man as a whole, they might argue, it is certainly feasible that God might regret His selection of the Jewish People. Therefore, Rashi explains the word "*va-yinnachem*" in the following manner:

> "And God reconsidered that He had made" — it was a consolation (*nechama*) to Him that He had created him [man] of the lower beings, for had he been one of the upper beings, he would have caused them to rebel.

According to this explanation, the word "*va-yinnachem*" does not mean "And He regretted," but "And He was comforted" or "And He consoled Himself."

The source for this *midrash* is *Bereishit Rabba*, Ch. 27:

> "And God reconsidered that He had made" - R. Yehuda said: "It is regrettable for Me that I created him below, for if I had made him of the elements of heaven, he would never have rebelled against me."
> R. Nechemia said: "I take comfort in the fact that I created him below, for if I had created him above, just as he caused the lower beings [humans] to rebel against Me, so he would have caused the upper beings [angels and the heavenly host] to rebel against Me."
> R. Aibu said: "It is regrettable for Me that I created in him the impulse to do evil, for if I had not created the impulse to do evil in him, he would never have rebelled against me."
> Said R. Levi: "I take comfort in the fact that I made him from the earth."

In this midrash, four different opinions appear to explain the verse. According to the first and third ones, the term "*va-yinnachem*" indicates regret (and Rashi therefore does not cite these interpretations), while according to the second and fourth views, the word indicates consolation. (Rashi ultimately chooses the second view over the fourth because it fits better with the language of the verse, "that He had made man in the earth.") [1]

B) In *Devarim* 29:12, we find the phrase, "And He will be to you as a God." Rashi explains:

> "And He will be to you as a God" — Since God has given you His word and sworn to your forefathers not to exchange their offspring for another nation, He therefore binds you through these oaths, so as not to provoke Him to anger, **because He cannot separate Himself from you**.

C) In *Vayikra* 26:44, the verse says (at the end of the Reproof):

> But despite all this, while they are in the land of their enemies, I will not despise them nor will I reject them to annihilate them, thereby breaking My covenant that is with them, for I am the Lord their God.

Rashi explains:

> "But despite all this" — Moreover, even though I will mete out this retribution upon them which I have described when they are in the land of their enemies, nevertheless, **I will not despise them… to annihilate them, thereby breaking My covenant that is with them**.

In other words, it is not merely that the Holy One, Blessed be He, forms His covenant with the Jewish People initially; even the punishment of exile cannot be seen as God's abandonment of his nation. Even this harsh

retribution is only temporary, because God is present with them in exile, and with them He will return from exile.

D) In the passage of repentance (*Devarim* 30:3), it says, "The Lord your God will bring you back from captivity." Rashi explains:

> "The Lord your God will bring you back from captivity" — It should have been written in the causative, but it is written in the simple [literally, "God will come back"]. Our Rabbis derived from this that the Divine Presence appears to reside with Israel in the distress of their exile; when they are redeemed, He has written, redemption will be His, for He will return with them.[2]

E) Rashi also stresses that the sins of the nation of Israel do not take away from God's love for His nation. In *Devarim* 10:12 (after describing the Sin of the Golden Calf), commenting on the words, "And now, Israel," Rashi explains: "Even though you have done all of this, He still has compassion and affection for you."

The Jewish Nation as a Moral People

Christianity indicts the Jews for theft, exploitation, and fraud.[3] Rashi, in dozens of places in his commentary, identifies the great caution of the nation of Israel from theft. Aside from many other instances, the idea of punctilious honesty appears in the context of each one of the Patriarchs in Rashi's commentary to *Bereishit*:

A) Concerning Avraham, the Torah records, "And there was a quarrel between the herdsmen of Abram's cattle and between the herdsmen of Lot's cattle" (*Bereishit* 13:7). Rashi (*ad loc.*) famously explains:

> "And there was a quarrel" — Since Lot's herdsmen were wicked and they pastured their animals in fields belonging to others, Abram's herdsmen rebuked them for committing robbery…[4]

There is no doubt that Rashi's commentary here is tendentious, because the previous verse says exactly what the quarrel was about: "And the land did not bear them to dwell together, for their possessions were many, and they could not dwell together" (v. 6). In other words, there was not enough pastureland for both Avraham and Lot to share.

B) Concerning Yitzchak, when Yitzchak requests that Esav will catch him some game, "And hunt for me" (*Bereishit* 27:3), Rashi explains: "From that which is ownerless, and not from that which is stolen."

C) Concerning Yaakov, Rivka says that Yaakov should bring her two kid goats so that she may prepare them for Yitzchak. Rashi adds to Rivka's words (27:9):

> "And take for me" — They are mine; they are not stolen – for Yitzchak had written this for her in her marriage contract to take two kid goats every day.

One might wonder how Rivka had a right to take the goats, as "what a woman acquires, her husband acquires" (*Nazir* 24b); therefore, Rivka reassures Yaakov and explains that she is asserting a monetary right.

In addition, according to Rashi, the mandrakes picked by Reuven are ownerless (Rashi, *Bereishit* 30:14), and Moshe leads his sheep into the wilderness in order to avoid theft (Rashi, *Shemot* 3:1).

D. Esav's Character in Rashi's Commentary
The Demonization of Esav in Rashi's Commentary

In many places in Rashi's commentary, there is strong, piercing criticism of Esav. It is not only that Rashi never has a positive word for Esav; [5] even apparently neutral acts of Esav are judged in a negative light by Rashi. He makes sure to blacken the face of Esav even when the things are not required at all to explain the *peshat* of the verses.[6] What is the meaning of this hatred of Esav?

As we have noted previously, many view Esav as a symbol of Christianity. The relationship between Yaakov and Esav recalls, to a great extent, the struggle between the nation of Israel and another people or faith which hopes to inherit the place of Israel incarnate. When the nation of Israel must contend with an enemy threatening its very existence, the question of who is chosen and who is rejected once again arises in its full strength. Esav is the "designated enemy" — sometimes as Edom, sometimes as Rome, and sometimes as Christianity.[7] The hatred of Esav is actually hatred for the Christians, who claim that they are the chosen people and that the nation of Israel incarnate is rejected.

We will now analyze Rashi's references to Esav in a number of domains.

A) ***Esav is a villain in utero*****:** In*Bereishit* 25:22, it is said of the pregnant Rivka, "And the boys struggled inside her." Rashi explains:

> Our Rabbis interpreted it as an expression of running. When she passed by the entrances of the study halls of Shem and Ever, Yaakov would run and struggle to come out; when she passed the entrance of an idolatrous temple, Esav would run and struggle to come out.

B) ***Esav (not Yaakov) is a cheater and a thief*****:** Just as Rashi describes the Patriarchs as scrupulous in avoiding theft, he sees Esav as having no compunctions about this. When Yitzchak requests of Esav to hunt on his behalf, he needs to stress that Esav should not steal any animals (*Bereishit* 27:3, as we have noted above: "And hunt for me," which Rashi explains, "From that which is ownerless, and not from that which is stolen").

Yitzchak is scrupulous about avoiding theft, but Esav is not. Rivka also believes that Esav is a thief; concerning Rivka's words (quoting Yitzchak), "to hunt for game to bring" (*ibid*. v. 5), Rashi says: "What does it mean 'to bring'? If he would not find game, he would bring from that which is stolen."[8]

The verse describes Esav as "knowing hunting" (*Bereishit* 25:27), and Rashi explains what the intent is:

> He knew how to trap and to deceive his father with his mouth and ask him, "Father, how do we tithe salt and straw?" His father therefore thought that he was scrupulous in his observance of the commandments.[9]

This is opposed to Yaakov, described in the verse as "an innocent man". Rashi explains:

> "An innocent man" — He was not an expert in all these matters. Like his heart, so was his mouth. A person who is not astute at deceiving is called innocent.

At the time that the Christians accuse the Jews of being inveterate thieves and cheats, Rashi undertakes to prove Yaakov's innocence on the one hand and to present Esav as a cheater and thief on the other.[10] This idea runs through his entire commentary to *Bereishit*27.[11]

C) *Esav is a murderer, adulterer and idolater*:

a) Esav is a murderer: In*Bereishit* 25:25, Esav is identified as "ruddy," and Rashi explains: "This is a sign that he will be a person who sheds blood." Furthermore, when Esav comes in from the field and finds Yaakov making stew, he is described as "faint", and Rashi explains: "And he was faint — from committing murder, as it is said (*Yirmeyahu*4:31): 'For my soul is faint before the murderers.'" Similarly, when Yaakov rebukes Shimon and Levi at the end of his life, Rashi explains Yaakov's words, "Their weapons are stolen instruments," in the following way:

> "Stolen instruments" — This craft of murder is in their hands wrongfully, for it is Esav's blessing. It is his craft, and you [Shimon and Levi] have stolen it from him.

b) Esav is an adulterer: On*Bereishit* 26:34, "And Esav was forty years old, and he married…," Rashi explains:

> "Forty years old" — Esav is comparable to a swine, as it is said (*Tehillim* 80:14): "The boar from the forest gnaws at it." This swine, when it lies down, stretches out its hooves, as if to say, "See, I am a kosher animal." **So, they rob and they plunder and then pretend to be honorable.** During the entire forty years, Esav kidnapped wives from their husbands and violated them. When he was forty years old, he said: "My father married at forty; I, too, will do the same."

The words I have emphasized in Rashi's comments clearly have a broader purpose - not only to explain why we are told that Esav was forty years old when he got married, but to express an idea that Rashi wished to transmit to his contemporaries about the Esav of his time. I have no doubt that these words are, in fact, a reference to the Christians, who represent themselves as saints, but in fact are evil.

c) Esav serves idols: In 25:27, the Torah says, "And the youths grew up, and Esav was…" Rashi points out:

> "And the youths grew up, and Esav was" — As long as they were small, they were not recognizable through their deeds, and no one scrutinized them to determine their characters. As soon as they became thirteen years old, this one parted to the study hall and that one parted to idol worship.

D) *Yaakov's Deserved Birthright and Blessing*:

a) Esav is born first, and the birthright should apparently be his. Rashi therefore explains that the birthright reaches Yaakov justly:

> "And afterwards, his brother emerged," etc. — I heard an aggadic *midrash* which interprets the verse according to its simple meaning: He [Yaakov] held onto him lawfully, to restrain him. Yaakov was formed from the first drop and Esav from the second. You may observe this in a tube that has a narrow opening. Insert two pebbles into it, one after the other. The one that entered first will emerge last, and the one that entered last will emerge first. The result is that Esav, who was formed last, emerged first, and Yaakov, who was formed first, emerged last. Thus, Yaakov came to restrain him so that he [Yaakov] should be the first to be born, as he was the first to be formed, and he would open her womb and take the birthright by law. (Rashi, *Bereishit* 25:26)

The source for this is *Bereishit* Rabba, Ch. 63:

> A matron asked R. Yosei ben Chalafta: "Why did Esav issue first?"
> "Because the first drop was Yaakov's," he answered her. "For consider: if you place two diamonds in a tube, does not the one put in first come out last? So too, the first drop was that which formed Yaakov.

Rashi quotes the *midrash*, but we must nevertheless pay attention to how he quotes it and what he adds. The essential addition is the final line in Rashi's commentary: "And Yaakov came to restrain him so that he should be the first to be born, as he was the first to be formed, and he would open her womb and take the birthright by law." The significance of this point is that Yaakov is not trying to take by strength that which does not belong to him, but rather to "take the birthright by law." Therefore, the accusation that Esav hurls at Yaakov, "He has tricked me twice," (27:36) is not correct.

b) Rashi believes that God Himself wanted Yaakov to receive the birthright. On *Bereishit* 27:1, Rashi justifies Yitzchak's blindness: "In order that Yaakov would take the blessings"!

c) Not only is God interested in Yaakov's success in receiving the blessings, even Yitzchak is on his side. After Yaakov receives the blessing by cunning, [12]Yitzchak concedes that the blessings deserve to go to Yaakov and not to Esav:

> The Midrash Tanchuma asks: Why did Yitzchak shudder? He said, "Perhaps I am guilty of an iniquity, for I have blessed the younger son before the older one, and thus altered the order of the relationship." Thereupon, Esav started crying, "He has tricked me twice!" His father said to him, "What did he do to you?" He replied, "He took my birthright." Yitzchak said, "That is why I was troubled and shuddered, for I was afraid that perhaps I had transgressed the line of strict justice, but now that I know that I actually blessed the firstborn, 'He too shall be blessed.'" (Rashi, *ibid*. v. 36)

E. "Know What to Respond"

These tendentious interpretations of Rashi cannot be seen only as encouraging the Jewish community at a time of persecution; it appears to me that Rashi's aim is to teach his generation how to answer theological challenges - in Mishnaic terms, "Know what to respond to the heretic" (*Avot* 2:14). We may find echoes of this in Rashi's interpretation of *Shir Ha-shirim* 7:9-10:

> I said: Let me climb up the palm tree, let me grasp its boughs, and let your breasts be now like clusters of the vine and the fragrance of your countenance like apples.
> And your palate is like the best wine, that glides down smoothly to my beloved, making the lips of the sleeping speak.

Rashi explains:

> "I said: Let me climb up the palm tree" — I boast of you among the heavenly hosts, that I should be exalted and hallowed through you in the lower realms, for you will hallow My name among the nations.
> "Let me grasp its boughs" — and I will grasp and cling to you…
> "And let your breasts be now" — and now, cause my words to be realized, that you will not be seduced to follow the nations, and may the good and wise among you be steadfast in their faith, to retort to those who seduce them, so that the small ones among you will learn from them.
> "And your palate is like the best wine" — be careful with your answers that they should be like the best wine.

The community of Israel responds:

> "That glides down smoothly to my beloved" — I am careful to answer them, so that I will remain steadfast in my faith.

***

This lecture concludes our series on Rashi's commentary. As we pointed out in our first lecture, Rashi's writings certainly deserve extensive and deep study.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

[1] A similar idea is found in the story of the Binding of Yitzchak, in which God seems to change His mind as well. First, he asks Avraham to bring Yitzchak up as a burnt-offering, and afterwards he reverses himself. Rashi explains God's command, "And bring him up as a burnt-offering" (*Bereishit* 22:2):

> "And bring him up" — He did not say, "Slaughter him," because the Holy One, Blessed be He, did not want him to slaughter him, but rather to bring him to the mountain to prepare him as a burnt-offering; once he brought him up, He told him to take him down.

[2] A similar idea appears in Rashi's commentary to *Shemot* 3:14: "'I will be as I will be' — I will be with them in this trouble, as I will be with them in the subjugation of other kingdoms."

[3] John Chrysostom, who became archbishop of Constantinople in 398, wrote eight homilies against those joining the Jewish faith, *Adversus Judaeos*. The Jews, according to Chrysostom, are thieves, cheaters and exploiters. See: http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/chrysostom-jews6.html#HOMILY_I, #6.

[4] See also Rashi's commentary to *Bereishit* 24:10.

[5] This is as opposed to the view of Esau in a number of *midrashim*, in which the Sages praise him for honoring his father.

[6] See Grossman's book, *Rashi*, pp. 104-6.

[7] What is unique about these enemies as opposed to other enemies, such as Egypt or Babylonia, is that these try to seize the status or place of the Jewish nation.

[8] See also Rashi's comments to *Bereishit* 26:34, which is analyzed at greater length below.

[9] See also Rashi's comment to *Bereishit* 25:28: "'For hunting was in his mouth'— …and its *midrash* is: in the mouth of Esav who would hunt him and trick him with his words."

[10] This tendency is very prominent when one takes into account the *peshat* of *Bereishit* 27, according to which Yitzchak wants to bless Esav, but Yaakov acquires the blessings through "guile" (as Yitzchak himself puts it in v. 35).

[11] See Rashi's comments to the following verses in *Bereishit* 27: 19, 24, 35.

[12] Rashi stresses that Yaakov did not trick Yitzchak, but rather acted with wisdom or cunning; see Rashi, *Bereishit* 27:35.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

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In memory of our grandparents, whose yahrzeits fall this week:

Shmuel Nachamu ben Shlomo Moshe HaKohen Fredman (10 Tevet)
Chaya bat Yitzchak David Fredman (15 Tevet)
Shimon ben Moshe Rosenthal (16 Tevet)
By their grandchildren and great-grandchildren,
Aaron and Tzipora Ross and family
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Lecture #08: Rav Yosef Kara

A. Introduction

R. Yosef Kara (1060-1130), known as Mahari Kara, earned his surname because of his occupation as an exegete of the Bible (*Mikra*); he thus earned this title of respect for one who studies *Tanakh*. Mahari Kara lived most of his life in France, in Rashi's city of Troyes, and for a certain period, he lived in Worms, Germany.

Mahari Kara was very close to Rashi, and apparently was his student. He transcribes Rashi's commentaries, and Rashi mentions him in his commentary a number of times (e.g., *Mishlei* 18:22). Rashi's grandson, the Rashbam, also mentions Mahari Kara in his commentaries (see *Bereishit*37:12), and apparently the Rashbam was influenced by Mahari Kara's exegetical approach.[1]

It is not clear if Mahari Kara wrote a continuous commentary on the Torah itself; it may be that he wrote only interpretations of dozens of individual verses. Even these comments have not survived in a complete manuscript, but rather have reached us by way of other people's citations.[2] It may be that what prevented Mahari Kara from writing a complete commentary on the Torah was Rashi's primogeniture. In any case, as a transcriber of Rashi's commentaries, it may be that our current version of Rashi contains many interpolations originating with Mahari Kara's pen.

Mahari Kara composed a commentary to most of the books of *Nevi'im*. [3] His commentaries to *Nevi'imRishonim* are considered some of the most significant and creative in medieval exegesis, and he is a commentator known for independent and critical thinking.[4] Among the books of *Ketuvim*, we have Mahari Kara's commentaries on *Iyov* and the five*Megillot*.

Although Mahari Kara has not received the exposure he deserves for his great comments, there is no doubt that his interpretive approach influenced the exegetes of his time, including Ri Bekhor Shor, the Rashbam, Radak, and Ralbag. Thanks to Bar-Ilan University's Haketer project, there has been a resurgence in the popularity of his commentary on the books of *Nevi'im*.

I have decided to dedicate a lesson to the exegetical approach of Mahari Kara, despite the fact that we have only very few of his commentaries on the Torah, due to the great importance of his interpretive approach. This significance is expressed in three points:

A. Mahari Kara sticks to the *peshat*, much more so than Rashi, and he feels no obligation to cite any *derash* at all. In this, his commentary may be considered trailblazing.

B. Mahari Kara displays a great sensitivity to literary technique and style.

C. Mahari Kara delineates exegetical principles that may be applied elsewhere in *Tanakh*.

We will now elaborate on each of these points.

B. Mahari Kara: A Pioneer of *Peshat*

Rashi famously make a declaration of intent in his commentary on *Bereishit* (3:8):[5]

> As for me, I have come for no purpose other than the simple meaning of Scripture and the aggadic material which harmonizes the words of Scripture, each word according to its properties.

Nevertheless, we have seen that Rashi, for various reasons, veers from this path.

Without a doubt, the very idea of Rashi to write a biblical commentary not chained to Midrashic material was certainly an innovation in the lands of France and Germany; still, in practice, his remarks are based, to a great extent, on the corpus of *midrashim*. Mahari Kara actually applies Rashi's intent, virtually never citing the words of the Sages. He is aware that his approach is innovative, and it may very well be that his commentaries received a great deal of criticism from the scholars of his generation because of this. Indeed, there may be evidence to this in the fact that that there is only one extant manuscript of his commentary, as opposed to the hundreds of manuscripts of Rashi's commentary on the Torah, which testify to its wide circulation. An additional expression of the criticism directed toward his commentaries may be seen in his remarks to I *Shmuel* 1:20:

> I know very well that all of the aggadic and Talmudic masters will gloat[6] over this explanation, for they will never set aside the explanation of our rabbis… But the wise will understand… to see the truth of the matter.

Mahari Kara makes a number of basic assumptions about *peshat* and *derash*:

A. Even the Sages, who wrote the *midrashim*, believed that *peshat* is the essence. The aim of *derash* is only for ethical purposes, "to make the law great and glorious" (*Yeshayahu* 42:21), and not to provide an explanation missing in *Tanakh*.

B. *Tanakh* does not require external facts in order to explain it; it cannot be that the verse speaks ambiguously and relies on aggadic material in order to be understood.

The first assumption can be found, among other places, in Mahari Kara's commentary on *Yeshayahu* 5:9:

> Incline your ear and bend your back to the verse, because each and every verse which the Rabbis expounded… though they express the *midrash* about it, they are the ones who ultimately say of it, "No verse loses its simple meaning." Thus, there is no better attribute in the verse than its simple meaning.[7]

The second assumption may be seen, for example, in his commentary to *Shoftim* 4:5:

> It is not the way of the prophet, in any of the twenty-four books, to leave his words ambiguous, requiring one to derive them from aggadic sources.

In a sharper way, in his commentary to *I Shmuel* 1:17, Mahari Kara claims that the inclination of exegetes to explain the verses according to the *derash* springs from their ignorance inability to understand appropriately the *peshat* of the verses:

> Know, when a prophecy is written, it is written *in toto*, with its explanation and everything that is needed, so that the coming generations will not stumble due to it. Its context is not deficient, and one need not bring evidence from another place, nor a Midrashic interpretation, for the Torah is transmitted perfectly, written perfectly, with nothing missing in it. The Midrashic interpretations of our Sages serve [only] "to make the law great and glorious." However, anyone **who does not know the simple meaning of the verse** is inclined after the Midrashic interpretation of the matter, similar to one swept away by the surging river, whom the depths of the ocean cover — he grabs anything which may come into his reach in order to save himself! **Nevertheless, if he were to set his heart to God's word,** he would search out the meaning of the matter in its simple sense, and he would be capable of fulfilling what is said (*Mishlei* 2:4-5): "And if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of God and find the knowledge of God."

C. Mahari Kara's Sensitivity to Literary Technique and Style

In Mahari Kara's comments, we see a certain literary sensitivity; he pays attention to formal structures in *Tanakh*, tying them to the meaning of the verse and relating to different stylistic phenomena in *Tanakh*. The following are a number of examples:

A. Mahari Kara often notes *lashon nofel al lashon,*[8] alliteration and paronomasia. Take the following example from *Yeshayahu* 10:30-31:

> Cry out, daughter of Gallim! Listen, Laisha! Poor (*aniya*) Anatot!
> Madmena flees (*nadeda*); the people of Gevim take cover!

Mahari Kara explains:

> This is based on the *lashon nofel al lashon* of Anatot and *aniya*, as it says in the adjacent verse, "*nadeda Madmena*" – that is, the city is called Madmena because they fled from before it. Similarly, we find "Ekron will be uprooted (*tei'aker*)" (*Tzefanya* 2:4), and "For the waters of Dimon have been filled with blood (*dam*)" (*Yeshayahu* 15:9).[9]

In other words, according to Mahari Kara, when the prophet wished to describe the destruction of the cities mentioned in the verse, he chose the term "*aniya*" because of the phonetic similarity to Anatot, and he chose "*nadeda"* because of the similarity to Madmena.

B. Mahari Kara pays close attention to rhythm and meter.[10] Sometimes, he argues that a verse repeats a phrase exactly in order to maintain the balance and the rhythm of the text — or in Mahari Kara's words, "to complete the meter."[11] It appears that what he refers to with the phrase "to complete the meter" is to maintain the same length in each of a verse's two clauses (apparently the number of syllables). For the same reason, Mahari Kara claims, the verse may also be abbreviated. For example, the verse states (*Yeshayahu* 43:6):

> I will say to the north, "Give them up!" and to the south, "Do not hold them back." Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth.

Mahari Kara explains:

> "To the nations in the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons and my daughters from afar and from the ends of the earth…" This is true of many verses: the measure of the meter will shorten it by one word.

In the continuation of his commentary to this verse, Mahari Kara writes:

> Sometimes, the verse expresses the word with another sound, because of the weight of the meter… All of this is determined by the meter.

C. The literary structure of prophecies: Mahari Kara explores the connections between different prophecies and different narratives that come one after the other, and he finds associative connections between them. Mahari Kara expresses an essential rule in terms of the structure of the prophecies in his remarks on *Yeshayahu* 4:6:

> Indeed, from the beginning of the subject until here, I have seen all of the verses attached one to its fellow like the clasps in the loops, and if I would have come to give the *derash* between them, I would separate between each verse and its fellow…

One may find an example of a literary reading in his commentary to *Yeshayahu* 3:16: "God says: The women of Zion are haughty, walking along with outstretched necks…:"

> Above [in previous prophecies], it says of this issue, "The arrogance of man will be brought low and the pride of people humbled" (2:17), because until this point it has been talking about human arrogance and pride, so it continues with the prophecy of the arrogance of the women of Zion.

An additional example is Mahari Kara's explanation of the connection between the story of Delila and Shimshon and the story of Mikha's idol, which appears immediately afterward in the book of*Shoftim*:

> The passages are adjacent because of the amount of filthy lucre in each, here one thousand and one hundred of Delila (16:5) and there one thousand and one hundred of Mikha's idol (17:2-3), both of which are money for sinful purposes.

In the passage of Shimshon and Delila, the Philistines offer a bribe in this amount to Delila to compensate her for her assistance in binding Shimshon; in the passage of Mikha's idol, Mikha's mother dedicates this amount to idolatry. Mahari Kara notes that the associative link is expressed not only with similar words, "one thousand and one hundred of silver," but also in the similar context: in both cases, the silver is designated for a negative aim, "money for sinful purposes."

D. Rules Crafted by Mahari Kara

Mahari Kara was the first exegete in France and Germany who formulated the rules for interpretive methods that may be applied in additional places.[12]Thus, despite the fact that Mahari Kara did not compose a full commentary on the Torah, his commentary on *Nevi'im* should be seen as a tool for understanding the simple meaning of the Torah; in his commentaries on *Nevi'im*, Mahari Kara formulates interpretive principles which hold true in the Torah as well.

We will demonstrate a number of examples:

E. Pre-Emption.

Sometimes, there appear in *Tanakh* verses that seem to be superfluous or misplaced. Mahari Kara explains these verses on the basis of

the assumption that the verse mentions information which will be important later on in the text.[13] We may see an example of Mahari Kara's application of this rule in *Shemot* 16:35, which reads, "And the Israelites ate the manna for forty years, until they came to a settled land." It is not clear why in the middle of the story of how the Israelites first receive the manna, the Torah must describe how long it continued to fall. Mahari Kara explains this in the following way:

> There is a great need for the verse to state this, so that one will not be perplexed[14] by the words "Who will feed us meat?" (*Bamidbar* 11:4) – did the quail not come up every evening and cover the camp? Why should they cry for meat of craving? Therefore, it pre-empts and teaches you that the quail were temporary.

In *Shemot* 16, there are two foods that God grants the Jewish people, the manna and the quail (vv. 12-13), while in *Bamidbar*, the Torah describes how, about one year later, the Israelites complain about not having meat. The reader may wonder: what happened to the quail? For this reason, Mahari Kara explains, the Torah pre-emptively tells the reader that the Israelites continued to eat the manna for forty years – implying that the quail were a special, limited-time offer. Thus, the point of this verse is to pre-empt the future question that the reader would have asked without this indication.[15]

Let us examine an additional example in which Mahari Kara applies this rule in order to explain biblical details that appear totally superfluous in context. When David flees before Shaul to Nov (*I Shmuel* 21:2-10) and is assisted by the priest Achimelekh, the following verse appears in the middle of the conversation between David and the priest (ibid. v. 8): "And there was a man from the servants of Shaul servants… and his name was Doeg." Immediately after this verse, the narrator returns to the conversation between David and Achimelekh. Mahari Kara explains:

> This is so that one will not be perplexed when reaching the verse, "And Doeg the Edomite answered… 'I have the seen the son of Yishai come to Nov'" (ibid. v. 9), saying, where did Doeg come from?

F. Parallelism

When a verse concludes with two clauses, the verse sometimes duplicates the subject at the opening of the verse.[16] One example of this is the verse (*Yeshayahu* 43:25): "I, I am the one Who wipes away your transgressions for My sake, and I will not recall your sins." Mahari Kara views the double opening as paralleling the two clauses that follow in the verse: **I** am the one Who wipes away your transgressions for My sake; and **I** am the one Who will not recall your sins.

Another example is the puzzling structure of *Yehoshua* 22:22:

> "Lord God of gods, Lord God of gods, He knows, and Israel, it shall know; if it is in rebellion or if in trespass against God, do not save us this day."
>
> Mahari Kara explains:
> Why is "Lord God of gods" repeated?… God knows that it is not in rebellion, and God knows that it is not in trespass.

Since the verse concludes by speaking of knowing that the eastern tribes are innocent of two counts – rebellion and trespass – the verse opens by referring twice to "Lord God of gods."

It appears that one may apply this rule to other places in *Tanakh* as well. For example, God's double address, "Avraham, Avraham" (*Bereishit* 22:11), may be explained according to the view of Mahari Kara using the succeeding verse: "Do not send your hand towards the youth, and do not do anything to him" (ibid. v. 12). One should accordingly read the verses in the following way: Avraham, do not send your hand towards the youth; Avraham, do not do anything to him.[17]

G. Rashi's Influence on Mahari Kara

Despite the great independence of Mahari Kara, we find that he often relies on Rashi's commentaries. In order to demonstrate this, we will compare the commentaries of Rashi and Mahari Kara on *I Shmuel* 15:1-9 (the *Haftara* reading for *ShabbatZakhor*). First, let us see the verses themselves:

> **1)** And Shmuel said to Shaul, "God sent me to anoint you to be king over His people, over Israel; and now listen to the sound of the words of God. **2)** So said God of Hosts, 'I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how they laid for them on the way, when they came up out of Egypt. **3)** Now, go, and you shall strike Amalek, and you shall utterly destroy all that is his, and you shall not have pity on him; and you shall slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'" **4)** And Shaul called the people together, and he counted them with lambs, two hundred thousand footmen, and ten thousand, the men of Judah. **5)** And Shaul came as far as the city of Amalek, and he fought in the valley. **6)** And Shaul said to the Kenites, "Turn away and go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them, for you did kindness with all the Israelites, when they went up out of Egypt." And the Kenites turned away from amidst Amalek. **7)**And Shaul struck Amalek, from Chavila until you come to Shur, which is before Egypt. **8)** And he seized Agag, the king of Amalek, alive; and he completely destroyed all the people by the edge of the sword. **9)** And Shaul and the people had pity on Agag, and on the best of the sheep and the cattle, and the fatlings, and on the fattened sheep, and on all that was good; and they did not want to destroy them; but everything which was vile and feeble, that they utterly destroyed.

The following chart illustrates the commentaries of Rashi and Mahari Kara on these verses:

	Text	**Rashi**	**Mahari Kara**
	And now, listen to the voice of the words of God.	Once you acted foolishly. Now, take heed.	In other words: if you did not listen at first, when you did not keep your promise, for I said, “Wait for me seven days, until I come to you” (*I Shmuel*10:8), now listen, so that you will not violate God’s command.
	How they laid for them on the way, when they came up out of Egypt.		How they laid an ambush for them on the way… Many verses require that we add a word.
	Ox and sheep	For they were sorcerers, and they would assume the shapes of animals.	So that they may not say: “This ox is of Amalek;” “This sheep is of Amalek;” the same is true of a camel or a donkey, for were it not so, it would not be wiping out the memory of Amalek.
	And he counted them with lambs.	He told everyone to take a lamb from the king’s flocks, and afterwards he counted the lambs.	He took a lamb to put in the hands of each and every one, and afterwards he counted the lambs.
	Vile	*Nemivza* is like *nivzeh*(despised),	

		and the*mem* is superfluous.	

This comparison yields a number of observations:

1) Rashi's explanations are the basis for the commentary of Mahari Kara. Therefore, if Mahari Kara agrees with Rashi's words and sees no reason to clarify them further, Mahari Kara will not make any notes. Mahari Kara logically thought that the word "*nemivza*" in verse 9 demanded explanation, but because Rashi had explained it sufficiently, Mahari Kara does not add anything.[18]

2) Sometimes, it appears that Mahari Kara is reiterating Rashi's words without introducing anything new. However, a precise reading of Mahari Kara's words shows that Mahari Kara is not repeating Rashi's words verbatim, but is rather sharpening and explaining his words. So, for example, in the explanation of v. 1, "And now listen," Rashi claims that Shmuel is asking Shaul to rectify his mistake, listening to God's word instead of ignoring it, as the king had done previously. Mahari Kara adopts this explanation, but adds the information required by the reader who is not familiar with the verses. [19] In v. 4 as well, "And he counted them with lambs," Mahari Kara expresses Rashi's words in a clearer way.

3) When Mahari Kara opposes Rashi's interpretation, he explains the text in a very different way than Rashi. This is what we find in the explanation in v. 3: Mahari Kara opposes the Midrashic explanation cited in Rashi's commentary concerning the need to exterminate the animals (due to the reasons mentioned above – Mahari Kara tries not to bring commentaries which do not arise from the simple meaning of the verses). He therefore explains in his remarks that exterminating the animals is the fulfillment of the *mitzva* to wipe out the memory of Amalek.[20]

4) When Rashi does not explain something in the verse that requires an explanation, Mahari Kara fills in the gap. For example, in v. 2, "How they laid for them on the way," there is some difficulty, as the verse omits what precisely Amalek laid for Israel; Mahari Kara explains that the intent is "how they laid an ambush for them on the way." The use of such abbreviated language is a common phenomenon in *Tanakh*.

Rashi's influence on Mahari Kara may be seen not only in the latter's exegesis, but also in Rashi's educational approach, which is expressed a great deal in Rashi's commentaries.[21] One example his explanation of the verse (*I Shmuel* 2:3), "Do not keep talking so proudly, let your mouth speak superiorly, for God is a God who knows, and by Him deeds are weighed." First, Mahari Kara explains the verse as two clauses.

"Do not keep talking so proudly" – You, the creatures, may learn from Me that you should not talk so proudly.

> "[Do not] let[22] your mouth speak superiorly" – its meaning is: do not bring out superior sayings from your mouth, of the same root as "become old, yes, and grow superior in power" (*Iyov* 21:7).

Afterwards, Mahari Kara brings examples of "superior sayings" which it would be better not to say at all:

> Namely, each of you should not abuse his fellow with words. If you see an unfortunate person, do not harass [insult] him with his afflictions; if you see a person with no strength, do not disrespect him; do not mock a childless woman as barren; if you see a luckless person, do not mock him…

[1] We will deal with this point at length when we study the Rashbam's commentary on the Torah.

[2] A. Berliner, *Pleṭath Soferim: Beiträge zur Jüdischen Schriftauslegung im Mittelalter* (Breslau, 1872).

[3] The commentary of Mahari Kara to the book of *Yechezkel* was written by one of his students. This may be derived from a number of places in the commentary, e.g., "This is how my master, R. Yosef son of R. Shimon, explained according to the simple meaning of the text" (14:5), as well as, "And my master R. Yosef explains in another way" (33:27). However, there is no doubt that the style and methodology in the commentary to *Yechezkel* are those of Mahari Kara.

[4] We may see evidence of Mahari Kara's critical thinking in his challenge to the Sages' attribution of the book of *Shmuel* to the prophet of the same name: "Our Rabbis, of blessed memory, say that Shmuel wrote his book, and He Who lights the land 'will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth'" (*I Shmuel* 9:1).

[5] See our first lesson on Rashi.

[6] That is, they will malign them.

[7] See also his comments to *I Shmuel* 1:17, cited below.

[8] *Lashon nofel al lashon* is mentioned in a number of places in Rashi's commentary as well, but Rashi only notes this phenomenon in five places in *Tanakh*, whereas the phenomenon is far more widespread in Mahari Kara's writings. It appears to me that there is good reason to attribute the instances in Rashi's commentary to interpolation of Mahari Kara's commentary.

[9] We should note that Mahari Kara brings numerous examples that commentators such as Ibn Ezra and the Radak ignore, even though they also frequently note the phenomenon of *lashon nofel al lashon.*

[10] One of the domains in which Mahari Kara comments at length is the exegesis of poetry. It appears to me that when he comes to explain the biblical text, he does so under the influence of poetic structures.

[11] See, for example, his commentary to *Yechezkel* 16:6.

[12] The first to compose rules that serve to understand the *peshat* was ibn Janach, but he wrote in Arabic, which was not known by most residents of France and Germany, and his rules were mainly rules of syntax and grammar.

[13] The expression of the rule in the language of Mahari Kara is: "And so is the way of many verses, that it pre-emptively teaches one something without which one might otherwise wonder about later on" (*I Shmuel* 1:3).

[14] Mahari Kara often uses the phrase, "So that one will not be perplexed," when he defines a certain verse as prefatory; see also *Shofetim* 1:16, 4:11, 13:19, etc.

[15] An interesting question relates to whether Rashi was aware of the phenomenon of prefacing or if this was an innovation of Mahari Kara. In *Bereishit* 9:8, the verse tells us, "And Cham, he was the father of Canaan." The location of the verse is problematic, because the story that appears immediately prior is Noach's drunkenness and the passage of the generations of the sons of Noach appears only after this narrative. Rashi explains:

> "And Cham, he was the father of Canaan" – Why is it necessary to say this here? Because the chapter proceeds to deal with Noach's drunkenness, in which Cham sinned, and because of him, Canaan was cursed. Since the generations of Cham had not yet been written, and we would not know that Kenaan was his son, it is necessary to say here, "And Cham, he was the father of Canaan."

It appears that Rashi explains the verse on the basis of the assumption that one verse prefaces another, giving certain information so that what follows will be understood by the reader. Nevertheless, the distinction between Mahari Kara and Rashi sharpens the difference between them: while Rashi is only explaining the local verse, Mahari Kara formulates the rule which may be applied to other places.

In the coming lessons, we will see how the Rashbam, apparently influenced by Mahari Kara, expands this rule and applies it in numerous places.

[16] As Mahari Kara puts it: "When it intends to discuss multiple matters, it multiplies the words before it" (*Yehoshua* 22:22).

[17] We may similarly explain the duplication in God's address, "Moshe, Moshe" (*Shemot* 3:4), on the basis of the two commands in the succeeding verse: "Do not draw nigh; take your shoes off your feet."

[18] See also v. 12, s.v. "*Nichamti;*" v. 16, s.v. "*Heref;*" v. 21, s.v. "*Reishit ha-cherem.*" All of these do not require explanation because the basic assumption of Mahari Kara is that whoever reads his commentary has previously studied Rashi's commentary.

[19] It is possible, in some ways, to view the commentary of Mahari Kara as a supercommentary of Rashi.

[20] This relationship is similar to the relationship of the Tosafists to Rashi's commentary on the Talmud.

[21] See Parts III and IV of our lesson on Rashi.

[22] The word "*al*" (do not) does not appear in the second part of the verse, but according to Mahari Kara, the "*al*" in the first part relates also to the second part.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

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Dedicated in memory of Florence Lipstein, whose yahrzeit is 25 Tevet
by Sidney and Cheryl Lipstein

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Shiur #09: Rashbam, Part I

A. Biography

As is well-known, Rashi did not have any sons, but he did have three daughters. One of his daughters, Yokheved, [1]married R. Meir ben Shmuel, and they had four sons: Yitzchak, Shmuel, Yaakov and Shlomo. These sons grew up to be the first of the Tosafists. R. Yitzchak became known as the Rivam[2] (dying in his father's lifetime); R. Shmuel ben Meir became known as the Rashbam, whom this lecture will discuss; R. Yaakov, known by his

nickname Rabbeinu Tam, was one of the great leaders of 12th-century French Jewry and the first of the Tosafists in this era; R. Shlomo (named after Rashi) dealt mainly with interpreting *Tanakh*, and he may have composed a volume of halakhic rulings as well.

To our dismay, just as with Mahari Kara in our previous lesson, we know very little information about the Rashbam. The Rashbam lived in northern France, in the city of Ramerupt, not far from his grandfather❼s city of Troyes. The years of his birth and death are not conclusively known, although they are generally assumed to be circa 1080 and 1160 respectively. For his livelihood, he sold milk and wool from the sheep he owned. Apparently, the Rashbam wrote a commentary for all twenty-four books of *Tanakh*, but all that survives is a commentary on the Torah,[3] along with part of his commentaries to the books of *Ketuvim*.

The Rashbam studied Torah with his father and with his grandfather, Rashi. Aside from his commentary on the Torah, the Rashbam was one of the great Talmudic commentators; his words were cited a great deal by the Tosafists, and his commentaries to*Pesachim* and *Bava Batra* were printed in the Vilna edition of the Talmud.

The Rashbam debated the Christians of his time, [4]and apparently understood Latin (see his commentary to *Shemot* 20:12). The Rashbam also involved himself with poetry, and expression of his skill can be found in a number of places in his commentaries. For example, on the last verse of the book of *Bereishit*, “And Yosef died at one hundred and ten years old; he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt” (*Bereishit* 50:26), the Rashbam writes:

> To bring him up in the coffin was his fate,
> When His anger and fury would abate;
> Crossing Jordan, they sing and celebrate,
> “I am the Rose of the Sharon,” they state.[5]

B. The Rashbam’s Interpretative Approach

The Methodology of the Rashbam

The Rashbam, like the other 11th and 12th-century French exegetes we have mentioned in previous lessons (Rashi and Mahari Kara), did not write an introduction to his commentary (as opposed to the Spanish exegetes, whom we will study in the future). We may learn of his interpretive approach by way of the declarations woven into his commentary. For this purpose, we will cite his words at two pivotal points in *Bereishit* — the beginning of the book and the opening of its final act, the Yosef narrative:

> The **enlightened** (*ha-maskilim*) will understand that all of the words of our rabbis and their derivations are true and genuine. This is what is stated in Tractate *Shabbat*: “I was eighteen years old, but I did not know that the verse never loses its simple meaning.” [6]The essential

laws and derivations are based on extraneous verses or variations in the syntax; the simple meaning of the text has been written in a language which lends itself it be expounded in this way. For example, "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created (*be-hibaram*)" (*Bereishit*2:4) is understood by the Sages as an anagram, "*be-hibaram*" to be read as "*be-Avraham.*" This is based on the verbosity of the text; the word "*be-hibaram*" is superfluous. Now, I will explain **the commentaries of the early authorities** to this verse, to let people know why I did not explain as they did. (*Bereishit* 1:1)

The lovers of **enlightenment** may understand **and be enlightened** by what the Rabbis have taught us, namely "that no verse loses its simple meaning." This is true even though the essence of the Torah comes to teach us and to edify us with lore, law, and legislation, by way of allusions in the simple meaning and the verbosity of the text, as well as the thirty-two hermeneutical principles of R. Eliezer son of R. Yosei the Galilean and the thirteen principles of R. Yishmael.

The earlier authorities, due to their piety, were inclined to deal with the derivations, which are the essence; because of this, they were unaccustomed to the depth of the simple meaning of the verses. For this reason, the Sages advised that one should not raise his children on biblical recitation (*Berakhot* 28b), and they also said (*Bava Metzia* 33a): "Delving into Scripture is good, but not great… delving into Talmud – there is nothing greater than this." Based on these dicta, they were not well acquainted with the simple meaning of the verses, as it says in Tractate *Shabbat*, "I was eighteen years old, but I did not know that the verse never loses its simple meaning."[7]

Rabbeinu Shlomo, my mother's father, Illuminator of the Exile, who explained *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, and *Ketuvim*, has dedicated himself to explain the simple meaning of the verse, and even I, Shmuel, son of his son-in-law R. Meir, of blessed memory, argued with him, in his presence, and he conceded to me that if he had the opportunity, he would have to write other commentaries according to the simple meanings which arise anew daily (*ha-peshatot ha-mitchaddeshim be-khol yom*). Now, the **enlightened** will see what **the early authorities explained.** (*Bereishit* 37:2)

We may derive the following point from these words of the Rashbam on the nature of his commentary:

A) The target audience of the commentary is the enlightened (*ha-maskilim*); we will discuss below whom this refers to.[8]

B) Aside from the *maskilim*, we also have "the earlier authorities" (*ha-rishonim*). This is a term that is now used to describe the medieval authorities, but obviously the Rashbam does not mean this, but rather the commentators (such as Rashi) who were swayed by Midrashic sources. Perhaps they even thought that they were explaining the verses in accordance with the *peshat*,

but according to the Rashbam, their commentaries do not express the simple meaning of the verse.[9] If so, the enlightened are those who study *Tanakh* without relying on any Midrashic material.

C) Despite the Rashbam's desire to explain the verse according to its simple meaning,[10] it is important for him to emphasize "that all of the words of our Rabbis and their derivations are true and genuine." In other words, the Rashbam's pursuit of pure *peshat* does not take away from his regard for the Sages' traditions; the words of the Sages are reliable and valid, and in fact the *derash* is the essence – the data of these derivations are more important than the data derived from *peshat*.

D) Despite the fact that the *derash* is the essence, even the Sages, the masters of*derash*, have emphasized that *peshat* is an independent stratum: "No verse loses its simple meaning."

E) The distinction between "the simple meaning of the verse" and its Midrashic permutations is not a distinction between a correct interpretation and an incorrect interoperation; both of them are true readings of the Torah that exist alongside each other. The basic meaning of the Torah is *peshat*; the meanings derived from allusions and extraneous and verbose language is *derash*. Indeed, the Rashbam does not reject the interpretation defined as *derash.* Sometimes, he will set out his interpretation alongside the*derash* — not as confrontation, but rather as an alternative based on *peshat*.[11] The Rashbam does contend with a reading that presents itself as *peshat* (like the interpretations of his grandfather Rashi), if it does not respond to the criteria of the Rashbam for *peshat*.

The Rashbam's Definition of *Peshat*

With these methodological rules, the Rashbam identifies the innovation in his commentary as the dogged pursuit of *peshat*. However, we must still understand how the Rashbam explains the concept of the "simple meaning of the verse." To do this, we must look at his final remarks on the Torah: [12]

> If the observers see older commentaries which incline towards another *peshat*based on a different approach, they must take note that **these are not the way of the world** (*derekh eretz*) **according to human wisdom,** or **according to the interpretation of the verse** it is not so. Indeed, I have explained it well**according to the verses** and according to **the way of the world.**

Thus, these are the principles of *peshat*according to the Rashbam:

A. "**The way of the world according to human wisdom"** — thecommentary takes into account common sense, logic and nature.

B. **"According to the interpretation of the verse"** — the commentary cannot be detached from other verses; it must be understood as part of the general context in which it is placed and as being integrated in the sequence of verses in which it is found.

Let us sharpen the distinction between a*pashtan* and a *darshan,* one who uses *peshat*or *derash* respectively in order to interpret the verses, in the

Rashbam's view. While the *pashtan* explains the verse according to "**the way of the world according to human wisdom,** or **according to the interpretation of the verse,"** the *darshan* will seek sources outside of the biblical world and outside of that which is accepted, adopted, and logical. The *darshan* will add incidents into the story and utilize concepts from the historical, ethical, and religious world that do not arise directly from *Tanakh*.

"The Way of the World"

An additional interpretive rule that the Rashbam indicates in his methodological guidelines the interpretation according to "the way of the world" (*derekh eretz*), and this is a very broad concept for the Rashbam. While for the Sages this phrase means pleasant social norms[13] or honest labor,[14] it appears that for the Rashbam, this term denotes that which is widely accepted or practiced. Sometimes, he does not use the phrase *derekh eretz* explicitly, but it is clear that his intent is to refer to that which is widely accepted or practiced. We will see in the following examples how different verses are interpreted by use of explanations that take account of common sense and practice and human nature:

A) In *Bereishit* 38:24, Yehuda condemns his daughter-in-law Tamar to death by burning. The commentators are shocked by the severe punishment. Rashi's explanation, following Midrashic sources, is that Tamar was the daughter of a priest, and the daughter of a priest is burned for adultery (*Vayikra* 21:9).[15] The Rashbam follows the *peshat*: "According to the simple meaning, this was their custom, because she was bound to marry the levir." Rashbam answers the question using an explanation that this was the common custom in that era.

B) Yaakov declares his innocence in his work for Lavan: "These twenty years I have been with you, your ewes and goats have not miscarried, and the rams of your flock I have not eaten" (*Bereishit* 31:38). The question arises: what is the great virtue that Yaakov did not eat the rams of the flock? The Rashbam explains this according to the custom:

> It is the way of shepherds in the wilderness to eat of the male lambs, but Yaakov declined to do so, despite the fact that this was the accepted practice.

C) Explaining the repetition in Esav's words to Yaakov, "Feed me, please, of this red, red stuff" (*Bereishit* 25:30), the Rashbam refers to human nature: "When one is in a hurry to make a request of his fellow, he repeats his words."[16] Here, we are not talking about a social norm, but rather human nature; nevertheless, the principle is similar.

Rashbam's Rules for Understanding the Biblical Lexicon

The Rashbam formulates a number of rules for comprehending the biblical lexicon. We will demonstrate a number of rules in the Rashbam's formulation:

A) "It is the way of the verses to duplicate their words" (*Bereishit* 49:3). "My strength" and "my power" are synonymous, and even though they appear next to each other in this verse, "Reuven, you are my firstborn, my strength and the first of my power," there is no need to find a different meaning to each word, because this is the way of the verses.

B) In his commentary to the verse, "And it was at that time, and Avimelekh and his chief of staff… 'And now swear to me…'" (*Bereishit* 21:22-23), the Rashbam writes the rule: "Similarly, every 'And it was at that time' must be explained based on the event." In other words, when the Torah introduces a passage with "And it was at that time," this does not indicate the simple chronology; rather, it is an expression which comes to tell us that this event is closely tied to the previous event. In this case, the event prior to the treaty with Avimelekh is the miracle done for Sara, who gives birth to Yitzchak in her old age; it is for this reason that Avimelekh is interested in making a treaty with Avraham's family. In a similar way, the Rashbam explains the expression introducing the following passage, the Binding of Yitzchak, "And it was after these things…" (*Bereishit* 22:1), even formulating it as a general rule: "Every place in which it says 'After these things', it is connected to the preceding passage." Thus, "these things" are tied to the previous narrative. Here, the Rashbam explains that the *Akeida* is a punishment for making a treaty with Avimelekh.

C. Comparing the Rashbam and Rashi

In order to evaluate and understand the methodology of the Rashbam, we must compare his commentary to that of his grandfather, Rashi. We should note that the Rashbam displays a great deal of respect towards his grandfather,[17] having learnt a great deal from him, but this does not prevent him from arguing on his views, sometimes in a caustic manner. Here are a number of examples which will sharpen the distinctions between the method of the Rashbam and the method of Rashi:

A) *Bereishit* 1:16 tells us, "And God made the two great luminaries, the great luminary to rule over the day and the small luminary to rule over the night, as well as the stars." The obvious difficulty in the verse is that at its beginning, it states that the "two great luminaries" are created, but at the end of the verse, one is described as great and one as small.

Rashi explains the verse in this way:

> They were created equal, but the moon was diminished because it challenged and said, "It is impossible for two kings to share one crown!"[18]

The method of Rashi is categorically that of a *darshan*; in order to solve the problem, Rashi fills the gap by describing an event that is not mentioned at all in the text. According to the Rashbam, the *peshat* of *Tanakh* should be understood on its own, without consulting any external information; all data

must be either explicit in the text or implicit in human logic or accepted practice. Therefore, this explanation of Rashi, even though it is responding to a legitimate *peshat*-based question, is not defined as *peshat*.[19]

With this in mind, let us look at the Rashbam's brief remark: "'The small one' — of the two great luminaries." With this explanation, the Rashbam deals with the problem[20] without utilizing any outside information. There are two great luminaries (apparently, in comparison to the stars), and of these two, the moon is smaller.

B) In *Bereishit* 21:17, the angel tells Hagar that she should return to the side of her ailing son: "Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the youth as he is there." The difficulty of the verse is the extraneous phrase "as he is there;" it is clear that God has heard him in his present location.

Rashi explains:

> "As he is there" — according to the deeds that he does now he is judged, and not according to what he is destined to do. For the ministering angels were accusing and saying, "Master of the Universe, for one who is destined to kill Your children with thirst, You are bringing up a well?!"
> And He answered them, "What is he now, righteous or wicked?"
> They replied, "Righteous."
> He said to them, "According to his present deeds I judge him." This is the meaning of "as he is there."

In order to solve the problem of the extraneous "as he is there," Rashi explains, in light of *Bereishit Rabba* (53:14), that the word "there" is not a geographical location, but rather a chronological note, and he adds in a complete conversation between the angels and God. The Rashbam supports explaining the verse based on the text itself and not utilizing facts which do not appear in it, and therefore explains it in the following way:

> Because she could not see him, as she had distanced himself from his location, it had to give the location — "as he is there," He gave him the water.

Not only doesn't the Rashbam's remark require the use of elements external to *Tanakh*,the verse is well-explained specifically in the context of the passage. In the previous verse, the Torah tells us that Hagar distanced herself from the youth, and therefore the angel has to explain to her that God has indeed heard her prayer, and the water is available next to Yishmael, in his place.

C) In *Shemot* 2:6, Pharaoh's daughter finds the baby Moshe in his makeshift ark: "And she opened, and she saw him, the boy." The difficulty in the verse is the extraneous language, "and she saw him." "*Va-tireihu*" already includes the direct object (the final "*hu*" is not part of the verb, but rather a pronoun); the addition "the boy" is thus extraneous. Rashi explains:

> Whom did she see? "The boy" — this is the simple meaning…

In other words, according to Rashi, despite the fact that we know that Pharaoh's daughter would naturally see Moshe upon opening the ark, the Torah adds another two words and stresses that she sees the boy there. The Rashbam opposes this forcefully:

> Whoever explains that she saw the boy is in error. Who would fail to understand that when she opens the ark, she would see the boy inside? Rather, this is what it means: she opened the ark and looked at the infant, to see if it was male or female, and she saw that he was a boy — in other words, male, not female. Furthermore, she saw that he was circumcised, and therefore he had been hidden…

In other words, there is no reason to stress that she actually saw the boy, since this is obvious; the verse is emphasizing that Pharaoh's daughter sees that the infant is male, and not just male, but circumcised as well. Thus, Pharaoh's daughter knows that she has found a Hebrew boy hidden because of the decree of "Every son born must be cast into the Nile." [21]

D) Yaakov's blessing to Dan states: "Dan will judge his people [when] the tribes of Israel are as one" (*Bereishit* 49:16). Rashi pinpoints the realization of this prophecy with Shimshon:

> He will exact his people's revenge upon the Philistines… and this prophecy was expressed about Shimshon.

The Rashbam responds strongly to this supposition:

> Whoever applies it to Shimshon does not know the depth of the simple meaning of the verse at all. Is Yaakov coming to prophesy about one man who fell into the hands of the Philistines under bad circumstances? God forbid! He is prophesying about the tribe of Dan, which was "the rear guard of all the camps" (*Bamidbar* 10:25)… This is because throughout all those years, whether in Moshe's time or Yehoshua's time, it went after all of the banner camps, and it had to fight all of the nations that would pursue them… and to exact vengeance from the nations, because they were warriors. Therefore he said, "Dan will judge his people," i.e., he will avenge his people…

Both Rashi and the Rashbam agree that these blessings are prophecies (and this is the simple meaning of the verse). According to Rashi's view, we are talking about a specific prophecy about Shimshon. Rashbam has some difficulty in saying that Yaakov is predicting the career of a problematic person ("who fell into the hands of the Philistines under bad circumstances"[22]), and it is not logical that Yaakov would apply the prophecy of Dan, which sounds very positive, to a character with such a tragic end. Therefore, the Rashbam explains that we are talking about a prophecy about

the entire tribe of Dan, which was very active in combat during the era of Moshe and Yehoshua.

D. Original Interpretations

The Rashbam's commentaries are original and creative; his avoidance of Midrashic material allows him to look at the verse in an innovative, direct way. We will bring a number of examples of this:

A) Arguably the Rashbam's' most innovative interpretation is that of the sale of Yosef (*Bereishit* 37), in which the Rashbam proves, based on the verses, that it is not the brothers who sell Yosef, but rather the Midianite merchants who take him out of the pit.[23] This is how the Rashbam explains it:

> "Midianite men, merchants, passed by" — Because they [the brothers] sat down to break bread, and they were a bit distant from the pit, so as not to eat over blood, and they were waiting for the Ishmaelites whom they had seen. However, before the Ishmaelites arrived, other men, Midianites, passed by that way, saw him in the pit and pulled him out. It is the Midianites who sell him to the Ishmaelites. We should say that the brothers did not even know about this, even though it is written, "that you sold me to Egypt" (*Bereishit* 44:4); we may say that their actions brought it about, so they are accessories to his sale. This is what appears to me based on the deep way of the simple meaning of the verse. Indeed, "Midianite men, merchants, passed by" indicates that this was happenstance, and they sold him to the Ishmaelites… (Rashbam, *Bereishit*37:28)

This commentary of the Rashbam solves a number of problems in the verses. For example, the brothers see an Ishmaelite caravan from far away (v. 25), but immediately afterwards we are told about the Midianite merchants (v. 28), and they are the ones who sell Yosef to the Ishmaelites. Without the commentary of the Rashbam, it is not clear to the reader what role the Midianites play in the narrative.[24] Similarly, in the verse "Midianite men, merchants, passed by, and they pulled and brought Yosef up from the pit," the brothers are not mentioned at all, while the Midianites are; it therefore makes sense that they are the subject of both halves of the sentence — they pass by and they are the ones who pull Yosef out and sell him to the Ishmaelites.

Some other questions resolved by the commentary of the Rashbam are where Reuven returns from ("And Reuven returned to the pit," v. 29) and why Reuven does not know that Yosef has been sold and why his brothers do not tell him that Yosef has been sold when he says (v. 31), "The boy is gone! And I, where can I go?" According to the Rashbam's commentary, neither Reuven nor his brothers know that Yosef has been sold, because while they are sitting and eating their meal; as they are waiting for the Ishmaelite caravan, the Midianites come and remove Yosef from the pit without the brothers' knowledge. When Reuven reaches the pit in order to rescue him, before his brothers can sell him, he sees that Yosef has disappeared, and

then he turns to his brothers with the cry, “The boy is gone!” Thus, the brothers are as perplexed as Reuven by the mysterious disappearance of Yosef.

B) Concerning the Hebrew midwives, the verse (*Shemot* 1:20-21) states:

> God did well by the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very strong. And it was when the midwives feared God, that He made houses for them.

Rashi’s commentary is well known:

> “God did well by the midwives” — what was this benefit?
> “He made houses for them” — the dynasties of the priesthood, the Levitical family, and the royal family, which are called houses…

Rashi explains that the making of houses is the definition of “God did well by the midwives,” but this interpretation is not a good fit in the context of the verses because between “God did well by the midwives” and “…He made houses for them” we find a totally different subject: “And the people multiplied and became very strong.” Therefore, the Rashbam explains:

> “That he made houses for them” — to keep watch over them, lest they go to the Hebrew women in labor.

In other words, Pharaoh is the one who makes houses for the midwives, putting them under house arrest, so that they could not go out and assist the Hebrew women giving birth. In this way, there is no need to tie the making of houses to the reward bestowed by God, and the verses may be read in sequence.

C) When Yaakov’s sons tell him that Yosef is alive and a viceroy in Egypt, the Torah says the following about Yaakov: “And his heart skipped, for he did not believe them” (*Bereishit*45:26). The Rashbam, following Rashi, explains the difficult phrase in this way: “‘And his heart skipped’ — his heart changed, to say that this is not the truth.” His intent is to explain that Yaakov has a change of heart – that is, opinion – and he stops believing them.

Afterwards, the Torah states (v. 27):

> And they told him all of Yosef's words that he had said to them, and he saw the wagons that Yosef had sent to carry him, and the spirit of their father Yaakov was revived.

What convinces Yaakov? The Rashbam explains that in the verse, two factors are mentioned. First, “And they told him all of Yosef's words that he had said to them;” he explains, “that he cried on their necks and they knew for certain that he was their brother” — in other words, there has been a positive identification. The second factor is seeing the wagons, because they are royal

property, and it would be forbidden to take them out of Egypt without special permission.

Yaakov's conviction is described in the verses by the statement, "*Rav*! My son Yosef is still alive" (v. 28), and it is not clear what "*Rav*!" means. (Rashi and ibn Ezra offer unconvincing explanations.) The Rashbam explains that it means "enough:" Enough of my disbelief! From now, on Yaakov believes that "My son Yosef is still alive."

*

In this lesson, we have dealt with the Rashbam's commentary on some biblical narratives; in our next lesson, we will deal with his unique approach to halakhic passages.

[1] Her name is not known definitively.

[2] There is another Tosafists known by the acronym Rivam; his name was Rabbi Yitzchak ben [Rabbi] Mordekhai.

[3] The commentary of the Rashbam on the Torah survived in one single manuscript, and even it was lost in the period of the Holocaust. The manuscript is missing the commentaries from the beginning of the Torah until the eighteenth chapter of *Bereishit*, as well as the final two chapters of *Devarim*. In addition to this manuscript, the commentary of the Rashbam on*Bereishit* 1:1-31 has been discovered; in 1984, Moshe Sokoloff discovered the final sentences of the Rashbam's commentary on the Torah.

[4] See note 21 below.

[5] The Rashbam goes on to write a short poem in honor of the conclusion of *Parashat Vayechi* and *Bereishit* as a whole:

Vaychi has reached surcease.
I will now say my piece,
Before my Pride, my Glory, until decease,
To make my strength increase,
May my exiles return in peace.
And if my splendor is lost to caprice,
Before Whom I am cast from womb cerise
Let my aroma be pleasing as the offering's grease
From the empty pit grant release,
The words to their very end.

[6] This is a statement of R. Kahana, *Shabbat*63a.

[7] We may see in these words of the Rashbam a certain leniency towards those who follow the path of*derash* (as opposed to the combative approach of Mahari Kara). It may be that this thread is a result of opposition to the school of *peshat* that arose in France. Thus, on the one hand, the Rashbam understands the source of the errors of the early authorities, because they were not experts in the work of *peshat*, while on the other hand, he strives to defend himself and his *pashtan*colleagues, who are faithful to the Sages and fulfill the words of the Sages themselves that "no verse loses its simple meaning." See also A. Grossman's *Chokhmei Tzarfat Ha-rishonim* (Jerusalem, 5741), pp. 468-471; E. Touitou, *Ha-Peshatot Ha-Mitchaddeshim Be-Khol Yom: Iyunim Be-Feirusho shel Rashbam La-Torah* (Ramat Gan, 5763), p. 73.

[8] Before we define who exactly the *maskilim* are, it clear that the reader already feels a streak of elitism in Rashbam's commentary. A commentary which opens with the words "Let the *maskilim* understand" is certainly not designated for the simple people, and this stands in opposition to the commentary of Rashi. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that the Rashbam's commentary never gained the popularity which his grandfather Rashi's did. (In our coming lessons, we will raise some other hypotheses as to why this interpretation has not been as popular.)

[9] "…Rabbeinu Shlomo, my mother's father, Illuminator of the Exile, who explained Torah, *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim*, has dedicated himself to explain the simple meaning of the verse."
[10] The French exegetes of the 11th century have an inclination to follow the *peshat*, as established in E. Touitou's "*Ha-Renaissance shel Ha-Mei'a Ha-Shteim Esreh*," in *Ha-Peshatot Ha-Mitchaddeshim Be-Khol Yom*, pp. 11-33.
[11] See, for example, his commentaries to *Bereishit*39:10, 46:8, 49:1.
[12] This is not found in the printed version; it is cited by Touitou, p. 75.
[13] For example, "The way of the world preceded the Torah" (*Tanna de-Vei Eliyahu*, ch. 10).
[14] For example, "Torah study is pleasing with the way of the world" (*Avot* 2:2). This can be understood by what follows in the *mishna*: "Any Torah which has no labor with it will ultimately be nullified and will lead to sin."
[15] In *Gur Aryeh*, one may find an exhaustive analysis of the status of an unmarried priest's daughter, but here is not the place to elaborate.
[16] Perhaps in this way one may explain God's words at the Binding of Yitzchak, "Avraham, Avraham…" (*Bereishit* 22:11) – God hurries to prevent him from performing the slaughter.
[17] When the Rashbam disputes Rashi, he generally does not mention him by name, but rather refers to him as "the Commentator." However, when he agrees with him or praises him, he refers to him as "Rabbeinu Shlomo."
[18] This appears in *Chullin* 60b.
[19] Rashi, who does not classify this explanation as Midrashic, apparently believes that this interpretation can be called *peshat*.
[20] It appears that the Rashbam would not have bothered to explain this verse at all, were it not that he wanted to dispute Rashi's explanation.
[21] Apparently, the Rashbam also adds external information: the fact that Moshe was circumcised. Presumably, the Rashbam believes that it is not enough that Pharaoh's daughter saw the boy in order to know that he was "of the Hebrew boys" (as she herself says at the end of the verse), and it is clear in *Tanakh* that every Jewish male is to be circumcised. Therefore, when it says that Pharaoh's daughter sees a boy, it is clear that she would see that he is circumcised, and so it is understood how she knew that he was "of the Hebrew boys."
[22] The Rashbam poses a rhetorical question: "Is Yaakov coming to prophesy about one man?" This appears to indicate that beyond the problematic fate of Shimshon, "who fell into the hands of the Philistines under bad circumstances," the Rashbam finds it difficult to apply this prophecy to an individual (and not an entire tribe). However, in his commentary on Binyamin's blessing (*Bereishit* 49:27, s.v. "*Binyamin*"), the Rashbam explains that the verse talks about King Shaul; this would indicate that, according to his view, there is no problem for the prophecy to deal with a specific individual.
[23] According to Professor E. Touitou, the Rashbam enumerates his methodological principles specifically at the beginning of the Yosef narrative because of Jewish-Christian polemics. This is what he writes in his book,*Ha-Peshatot Ha-Mitchaddeshim Be-Khol Yom*, p. 100:

> The story of Yosef is understood in the eyes of Christianity as a definitive prefiguration of the experience of their messiah: we have twelve brothers (parallel to the twelve apostles in Christian tradition) and one of them, specifically Yehuda (parallel to Judas Iscariot), sells his brother (as Judas does to Jesus). Yosef is thrown into a pit and saved from it (Jesus dies and is resurrected). The betrayed brother not only fails to take revenge on the betrayer, but saves him from distress and saves his family from famine (Jesus saves humanity). The story of Yosef and its Christian interpretation was very popular in the Christian street in the medieval era… The Rashbam sees appropriately to direct the reader's attention to a simple explanation of the Yosef narrative that refutes the Christian exegesis. The verse that is determinative in this context is verse 28 in chapter 37, which describes pulling Yosef out of the pit and selling him to the Ishmaelites. According to the Rashbam's approach, it is not the brothers who sold Yosef, but rather the Midianites. Thus, the Christian explanation has no foothold at all.

[24] See Rashi and ibn Ezra, who struggle in their commentaries to explain this verse.

Lecture #10:
Rashbam, Part II

A. The Rashbam's Understanding of the Narrative Sections of the Torah

The Principle of Foreshadowing in the Rashbam's Methodology

One of the most important ideas that the Rashbam develops is the principle of foreshadowing. We have seen this in the past, when we discussed the commentary of Mahari Kara, but the Rashbam develops the principle further, giving it a more central place in his methodology. According to this principle, when the Torah notes details that appear to be disconnected, extraneous, or anachronistic, it actually provides them in order to explain an event that comes afterwards.

Let us see an example in the Rashbam's commentary. Describing Yosef's experiences and success in Pharaoh's house, the Torah states:

> And Yosef stored up grain in great abundance, like the sand of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured.
>
> **Before the year of famine came, two sons** were born to Yosef. Osnat, the daughter of Poti Fera, priest of On, bore them to him. (*Bereishit* 41:49-50)

Why is it important for the Torah to note that the two sons born to Yosef in Egypt were born before the year of famine? The Rashbam explains this by applying the principle of foreshadowing:

> **"Before the year of famine came"**— Because Yaakov came at the beginning of the second year of famine, and seventeen years later, he said to Yosef (*ibid.* 48:5-6), "Your two sons, who were born to you… before I came to you… are mine," but "the children that you fathered after them," after I came to you, "shall be yours." Therefore, he explained here that Ephraim and Menasheh were born before the year of famine, before Yaakov came, but afterwards, [Yosef] had sons and grandsons "called by the name of their brothers in their inheritance," as Yaakov said.

Shortly before his death, Yaakov tells Yosef, "Your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in

Egypt, are mine;" however, if Yosef has additional children, they will not be considered Yaakov's children. Therefore, it is important that we know that Ephraim and Menasheh were born before Yaakov came down to Egypt.

As we noted in the previous lecture, the Rashbam formulates exegetical principles that he describes as "the way of the verses," and foreshadowing is one of these techniques. Generally, the Rashbam signals this in his commentary by using the terminology "it prefaced," "the verse prefaced," or "it was necessary to write."

In his introduction to *Bereishit*, the Rashbam explains the concept of foreshadowing at length and demonstrates it:

> This is the essence of the simple meaning according to the way of the verses, which are accustomed to preface and to mention explicitly an item which is superfluous at that point, because of an issue which is mentioned below. As it says, "Shem, Cham, and Yefet" (*Bereishit* 9:18), and it says, "And Cham, he is the father of Canaan" (ibid.);[1] this is because it is written upon [after] it, "Cursed be Canaan" (ibid. v. 25), and if it were not explained who Canaan is, we would not know why Noach cursed him.
>
> "And he slept with Bilha, his father's concubine, and Yisrael heard" (ibid.35:22). Why is it written here, "And Yisrael heard"? Is it written here that Yaakov said anything about Reuven? Nevertheless, at the time of his passing, he says, "Unstable as water, you shall not have preeminence, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it – he went up to my couch!" Therefore, it prefaces, "And Yisrael heard," that you should not be perplexed when you see that he rebuked him about this at the end of his days.

The Creation Narrative Prefaces the Commandments

In all of these cases, the preface or foreshadowing is a verse or a fragment thereof, but from the next words of the Rashbam, we shall see that it is possible to apply the principle of foreshadowing even to larger segments. In the continuation of the Rashbam's introduction to *Bereishit*, he declares that the story of Creation interests us solely because it helps us understand the Ten Commandments:

> In addition, Moshe Rabbeinu[2]prefaced this entire passage of the work of the six days to explain to you what the Holy One said at the time of the Giving of the Torah, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy… For in six days God made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore God blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (*Shemot* 20:8-11). This is why it is written, "And it was evening, and it was morning, **the** sixth day" (*Bereishit* 1:31) – that sixth which is the conclusion of the six days that the Holy One, Blessed be He, mentioned at the Giving of the Torah. Therefore, Moshe told this to the Israelites to inform them that the word of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is truth, and that one might think that this world has always existed as it does today, full of every good thing — but this is not true. Rather, "In the beginning, God created…"

In other words, the story of Creation is written in the Torah in order to confirm that "in six days God made heaven and earth." The Rashbam adds that in the commandment of the mitzva of Shabbat, one may see the verse's reliance on the story of Creation — "This is what is written, 'And it was evening, and it was morning,**the** sixth day'" – this sixth day, after which the Shabbat arrives, which God commands them about at the Convocation at Mount Sinai.[3]

In the continuation of his interpretation of Creation (v. 27), the Rashbam explains why other things created by God are omitted from the narrative, such as the angels, Gehennom, and the Divine Chariot:

> Do not be perplexed by the omission of the creation of the angels, because Moshe did not write here anything about angels, Gehennom, or the Divine Chariot, but these things which we see in the world are mentioned in the Ten Commandments, because for this reason it is said the entire act of the six days, as I explained above.

In other words, in describing Creation, the Torah only mentions those items which are mentioned in the Ten Commandments — that is, that which is visible to the human eye.

An additional prominent example is the Yosef narrative, which the Rashbam (*Bereishit* 37:2) also justifies based on Moshe's rhetorical needs:

> It was necessary for Moshe Rabbeinu to write all of this, because he reproved them with the words (*Devarim* 10:22): "With seventy souls, your ancestors went down to Egypt."

In other words, the aim of describing the story of Yosef and his brothers is to form the background to justify God's demand of the Israelites to keep the *mitzvot*, a demand which appears at a great distance (both chronological and literary) afterwards: "With seventy souls your ancestors went down to Egypt, and now Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars of the heaven," followed immediately by the imperative (ibid. 11:1), "And you shall love Lord your God, and you shall keep His observance and His decrees and His laws and His commandments…"

From these explanations, in particular from the justification of the Creation narrative,[4] it arises that the essence of the Torah is the *mitzvot*, while the narratives are secondary; the stories appear in order to explain the *mitzvot*.[5]

B. Rashbam's Interpretive Approach to *Mitzvot*

In his explanations of the halakhic portion of the Torah, the Rashbam employs the same method which he applies to the narrative portion of the Torah –the explanation of the verses without any reliance on Midrashic literature. This approach, which releases the *pashtan* from the chains of *derash*, is very difficult to apply it to *mitzvot*; at the end of the day, the binding *halakha* is not the simple meaning of the verse, but the interpretation of the verses as the Sages explain it.

It is clear to the Rashbam that one should adopt the views of the Sages for everything that relates to practical Halakha; the interpretation of the *peshat* and the halakhic *midrashim* can live under the same roof. The Rashbam repeatedly stresses that his interpretations are only and solely interpretations according to the way of*peshat*. They are never to be taken as a substitute for the words of the Sages; rather, they stand alongside the Sages' words. The words of the Sages are the essence, and they are binding in terms of practical Halakha. In his introduction to his commentary on *Parashat Mishpatim*(*Shemot* 21:1), the Rashbam clarifies his approach to explaining the halakhic parts of the Torah and his relationship to the Sages' words:

> The knowers of **enlightenment** may understand **and be enlightened,** for I have not come to explain the laws, even though they

> are the essence, as I explained in *Bereishit*. The verbosity of the text teaches us both lore and law, and some of the derivations may be found in the commentaries of Rabbeinu Shelomo, my mother's father, of blessed memory. However, I have come to explain the simple meanings of the verses, and I will explain the rules and laws according to the way of the world. Even so, the laws are the essence, as our Rabbis have said (*Sota* 16a)… [6]

The Rashbam declares here that he is going to explain the verses, but he is not going to use the method of his grandfather Rashi, who explained the verses according to Midrashic sources. Nevertheless, the Rashbam stresses that the Halakha is the essence. His fidelity to the halakhic ruling is more adamantly expressed in the conclusion to his commentary on *Shemot*(40:35):

> Whoever pays attention to the word of our Creator will not budge from or abandon the explications of my grandfather, Rabbeinu Shelomo, because most of the laws and derivations are close to the simple meanings of the verses; from the superfluous or altered language, one may learn all of them. "It is good to grasp the one" that I have explained "and not let go of the other…"

"Whoever pays attention to the word of our Creator" – that is, one who fears the word of God – will study the words of Rashi, a commentator who follows the Halakha, but not the simple meaning of the Torah. The reason for this is that the Halakha is binding, and therefore one is compelled to know it. However, there is also value to studying Scripture on the basis of *peshat*, [7]even though one is not learning practical Halakha. The Rashbam quotes the words of *Kohelet* (7:18), "It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other," advising the reader to embrace the words of Rashi (to grasp the practical Halakha) as well as his own commentary (to understand the simple meaning of the verse).

C. Examples of the Rashbam's Explanations of *Mitzvot*

We will now see a number of examples of the Rashbam's readiness to diverge from the Sages in his hunt for*peshat*.

a. One prominent example is the Rashbam's explanation of the mitzva of*tefillin*:

> And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, so that the law of God may be in your mouth, for with a strong hand God has brought you out of Egypt. (*Shemot* 13:9)

Rashi explains the verses according to the Halakha:

> "As a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes" — You shall write these paragraphs and bind them on the head and the arm.

In contrast, the Rashbam explains the verse according to the *peshat*:

> "As a sign on your hand" — According to the depth of the simple meaning, it should be a constant memorial, as if it were written on your hand, like "Set me as a signet on your heart" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 8:6).
> "Between your eyes" — It is a like an ornament or a golden circlet, which we are accustomed to put on our forehead.[8]

The Rashbam gives this mitzva a metaphorical explanation – to internalize God's word as if it were inscribed on one's arm and the ornament between one's eyes.[9]

This interpretation of the Rashbam may not, perhaps, be the clear *peshat* of the verse, but it exemplifies how the Rashbam, when explaining the verse, feels totally unfettered by the practical Halakha if it seems to contradict the *peshat*.

b. The law of the Hebrew slave who does not want to be freed from his master's home is detailed in *Shemot* 21:6:

> Then his master shall bring him to the judges, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, **and he shall serve him forever**.

The words of Rashi, following the Sages, are well-known:

> "And he shall serve him forever" — That is, until the jubilee year. Or perhaps it means literally forever, as is its apparent meaning? Therefore, the Torah states: "And each man to his family you shall return" (*Vayikra* 25:10). This tells us that fifty years is called "forever"…

In other words, the Sages explain "forever" as only lasting until the jubilee year, since in *Vayikra*, the Torah indicates that all of the Hebrew slaves are to be emancipated in the jubilee year. It cannot be that there is a contradiction between the Book of *Shemot* and the Book of *Vayikra*, and thus the Sages explain that the meaning of the term "forever" in the book of *Shemot* is "until the jubilee year."

However, the Rashbam, inveterate *pashtan* that he is, follows his customary approach:

> "Forever" — According to the simple meaning, all of the days of his life, as it says of Shemuel, "And he will reside there forever" (*I Shemuel* 1:22).

The Rashbam proves from the vow of Channa in the Book of *Shemuel* that Scripture refers to "forever," the intent is for the length of one's life; there is no doubt that Channa intends for her son to remain in the Tabernacle all of the days of his life.

c. Concerning the mitzva of *yibbum* (levirate marriage), the Torah says:

> If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the firstborn whom she bears, he shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. (*Devarim* 25:5-6)

How is this law of "he shall succeed to the name of his dead brother" to be understood? Rashi, following the Sages, explains that the reference is to the laws of inheritance, as affected by *yibbum*:

> The one who marries his wife is to take the share of his deceased brother's inheritance of their father's property.

Rashi explains the verse, "And the firstborn whom she bears…," in a similar manner. The mother referred to here is the mother of the deceased, whose widow is married by her living son, the levir. He is called the firstborn because preference is given to the oldest surviving brother, but any of the surviving brothers can fulfill this role, assuming the role of the firstborn; "he shall succeed to the name of his dead brother," by taking the portion of the dead brother in their father's estate. This is the interpretation cited in the *gemara* (*Yevamot*24a).

The Rashbam explains the verse differently. The mother mentioned in the verse is the widow and the firstborn is the child whom she has with the *levir* – who is to be named after the dead brother. In other words, the child is considered the offspring of the dead uncle, the first husband of his mother, and not of the biological father. This interpretation is rejected by the *gemara* in *Yevamot*.

This interpretation of the Rashbam is indeed appropriate for the simple reading of the passage. According to the *peshat*, there is no doubt that the mother mentioned is the widow, as she is the subject of the previous verse, and this verse continues to describe her situation: "The wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger… And the firstborn whom she bears…" Similarly, the Rashbam explains how the name of the deceased will not be blotted out – the child born from*yibbum* will be considered the child of the deceased.

d. The final example does not appear in a halakhic passage, but it is very significant from a practical point of view. During the Creation of the world, the Torah states (*Bereishit* 1:5): "And it was evening, and it was morning, one day." From this verse, the Sages derive that "the day follows the night" – that is, the 24-hour halakhic day starts at night and continues throughout the following day: [10]

> This is what R. Shimon ben Zoma expounded: It says in the story of Creation, "One day," and it is said by [the prohibition to slaughter] a mother animal and its child [on the same day], "One day"

(*Vayikra*22:28). Just as in the “one day” which is said in the story of Creation, the day goes after the night, so too, in the “one day” which is said by a mother animal and its child, the day goes after the night.” (*Chullin* 83a)

Here we encounter one of the most problematic interpretations of the Rashbam. According to the Rashbam, the *peshat* of the verses of Creation indicates the reverse – that the night follows the day! The creation of the universe starts in the morning, and the first creation is light; at the end of the first night, namely towards morning, the first day is completed and set. The Rashbam states this idea a number of times in his commentary to the first chapter of *Bereishit*:

> “And God separated between the light and the darkness” — That the day would be twelve hours, and afterwards the night would be twelve hours. The light was first and then the darkness, because at the beginning of the creation of the world came the statement (v. 3), “Let there be light.”

In other words, the first thing to be created was light; therefore, we are compelled to say that the creation of the universe started during the day, namely during the morning, and not at night. Thus, he explains v. 5:

> “And the darkness he called night” — Forever light comes first, and afterwards darkness.
>
> "And it was evening and it was morning” – The Torah does not say here: it was night and it was day, but rather “it was evening” – for the first day was coming to an end, the light was setting; “and it was morning” – the end of the night, for the dawn was breaking. And thus the first of the six days, mentioned by God in the Ten Commandments, was completed. And then began the second day… The Torah does not mean to teach us here that evening and morning constitute a day, for we need only understand how there were six days. Daybreak came and the night was finished; hence, one day ended and the second day began.

The Rashbam notes that the verse does not use the formula, “And it was night, and it was day, one day,” but rather, “And it was evening, and it was morning, one day.” The terms “night” and “day” indicate the times respectively between dusk and dawn and between dawn and dusk. Were it to say, “And it was night, and it was day,” this would indicate that nighttime was followed by daytime, completing a 24-hour day, what the Torah refers to as “one day.” However, the Torah says, “And it was evening, and it was morning;” the words “evening” and “morning” do not indicate time periods, but rather a specific point on the timeline, and the meaning of the verses is that evening arrived (daytime ended with dusk) and then the following morning arrived (nighttime ended with dawn). The dawn’s early light signaled that the first 24-hour day had come to a close.

> "And God said, 'Let there be a sky'" — After the first day ended, at its morning, "And God said." (v. 6)
>
> "And it was evening and it was morning, a second day" – The day became evening, and then "it was morning" – of the second day. Thus ended the second of the six days mentioned by God in the Ten Commandments, and now the third day begins in the morning. (v. 8)

The immediate implication of this commentary is that according to the *peshat* of the verses, Shabbat should start on Saturday morning, not Friday night!

This interpretation of the Rashbam aroused harsh criticism. It may be that this is the reason that his commentary proved so unpopular in earlier generations; at the very least, it may be that this is the reason that his commentaries on the early parts of *Bereishit* disappeared. (As we noted in the previous lecture, his commentary on chapter 1 only came to light a few years ago). The most famous criticism is that of R. Avraham ibn Ezra,[11] which may be found in his commentary on the passage of the manna (*Shemot* 16:25):

> Now, pay attention, so that you may understand the foolishness of those who explain "And it was evening, and it was morning" as I mentioned, because the verse says "And God called the light 'day'," and this is from dawn until dusk, "And to the darkness, he called 'night'," from dusk until dawn; and behold the night is the opposite of day, just as the darkness is the opposite of the light. If so, how may we call from evening, which is the sun fading away, "day," when it is in fact night?![12]

Naturally, it is clear that the Rashbam welcomed the Sabbath on Friday evening, not Saturday morning; at the same time, he explains the verses according to their meaning in *peshat*, not their meaning in Halakha.

D. Between *Peshat* and *Derash*

This is the place to relate to the question of what meaning we should attach to the Rashbam's explanations that are not in accordance with Halakha. This is not a question on the Rashbam, but rather a question on *peshat* generally. What worth does *peshat* have when it does not fit with Halakha?

We cannot, in this framework, bring a comprehensive answer to this question, but one possibility to explain it is that the *peshat* reflects the ideal, while the *derash* deals with the real. The best example of this approach is the explication of the law of "eye for eye." There is no doubt that according to the simple meaning of the verse, the implication is that one must remove the eye of the assailant:

> If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done, it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him. (*Vayikra* 24:19-20)

However, Halakha says that the assailant must make monetary compensation (see *Bava Kamma* 83b). If so, why is it written "eye for an eye"? Let us cite the words of Seforno in his commentary to *Shemot* 21:24:

> "Eye for eye" — **It would have been fitting** [to do so] by the truest justice, which is measure for measure. The tradition is that one must make monetary compensation, because of the deficiency of our estimation, lest we make a mistake and punish him more severely than he deserves.[13]

"Eye for an eye" is the punishment rightfully incurred by one who puts out his fellow's eye, but because of other considerations of justice,[14] this punishment is not applied. The idea that the *peshat* embodies the ideal can also be applied to the mitzva of*tefillin*. Indeed, it is appropriate that God's commands constantly be remembered by us, but the reality is that most people cannot live such spiritually intense lives. The Sages therefore expounded the mitzva realistically: one should put on *tefillin* at least once a day.

As we have said, this is only one possibility, and there is still a great deal to say about this issue of the tension between*peshat*-based exegesis and binding halakhic guidelines.

*

We have concluded our study of the Rashbam. God willing, our next lecture will deal with his contemporary, R. Yosef Bekhor Shor.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

[1] The inexplicit question is why the verse says, "Cham is the father of Canaan" out of context.

[2] The Rashbam has a unique approach towards the identity of the author of the Torah. According to him, the narrative parts were written by Moshe (perhaps he even determined the lexicon and the style), while the halakhic parts were determined by God. See, for example, *Bereishit* 1:27, 19:37, etc. See also E. Touitou's analysis in his book,*Ha-Peshatot Ha-Mitchaddeshim Be-Khol Yom: Iyunim Be-Feirusho shel Rashbam La-Torah*(Ramat Gan, 5763), pp. 120-121.

[3] The Rashbam assumes that the Israelites first experienced the Giving of the Torah and only afterwards were told the stories of *Bereishit*, even though the chronological sequence of events is reversed in the text of the Torah. Therefore, when Moshe tells the Israelites the narratives of *Bereishit*, he can refer to the Convocation at Mount Sinai.

[4] See also the Rashbam's commentary to*Bereishit* 5:1.

[5] See Touitou, p. 114, who concludes that according to the view of the Rashbam, it may be that the entire *Parshiot* of *Noach* and *Lekh Lekha*serve only to justify half a line from the recitation upon bringing the first fruits. We cannot prove this definitely, since we do not have in our hands the Rashbam's commentary on these *parshiot*; this hypothesis is based on his explanation of*Devarim* 26:5:

> "My father was a lost Aramean" — My father, Avraham, was Aramean, and he was exiled from Aram, as it says, "Go for yourself from your land" (*Bereishit* 12:1), and as it says, "When God made me wander from my father's house" (ibid.20:13)… In other words, our ancestors came from a foreign land to this one, and God gave it to us.

[6] Touitou explains this well in his book *Ha-Peshatot Ha-Mitchaddeshim Be-Khol Yom*, pp. 72-73:

> Observe that it is in the introduction to his commentary to the halakhic section of the Torah that the Rashbam finds it appropriate to write these words of his. The phrases are parallel both in structure and content. Every one of the phrases is built of two parts: a) a certain determination and b) programmatic declarations about the aim of the commentary, defining an interpretive approach. The declaration of the Rashbam, "Some of them may be found in the commentaries of Rabbeinu Shelomo," parallels and echoes the declaration of Rashi, "These are the aggadic *midrashim*… *Bereishit Rabba* and other Midrashic works." The declaration of the Rashbam about his general aim: "However, I have come to explain the simple meanings of the verses" parallels what Rashi says, "As for me, I have come for no purpose other thanthe simple meaning of Scripture." Finally, the definition of the approach of the Rashbam, "I will explain the rules and laws according to the way of the world," parallels the definition of Rashi's approach, "and theaggadic material which harmonizes thewords of Scripture, each word according to its properties."

[7] At the end of this lecture, we will deal with the question of the value of studying *peshat*.

[8] It is interesting to note that the Rashbam believes that the explanation of the *peshat* of this verse is actually metaphorical, while the literal explanation (taking the words at face value) is an explanation that does not reflect *peshat*. Another example of this may be found when Avraham's servant goes to find a wife for Yitzchak. The Torah reports, "And all his master's goods were in his hand" (*Bereishit* 24:10). The explanation according to the *peshat* defines "in his hand" in a non-literal way, as "in his possession," while the explanation which explains the word "in his hand" literally (at face value) is an explanation which is not *peshat*. Rashi, for one, explains — against the *peshat* — "He put a bill of acquisition in his hand."

[9] Ironically, perhaps the best explanation of the Rashbam's explanation may be found in the ibn Ezra's challenge to it:

> There are those who question our holy ancestors, as it says that is a sign and a memorial, akin to "For a graceful wreath are they to your head and chains to your neck" (*Mishlei* 1:9), as well as "And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand" (*Devarim*6:8), and "Bind them on your heart continually; bind them on your neck" (*Mishlei* 3:3). What is to be a sign and a memorial? You are to regularly mention that "with a strong hand God has brought you out of Egypt."
>
> However, this is not correct, because the book [of *Mishlei*] begins with the title "Shelomo's parables," indicating that everything in it is to be understood as a parable; on the other hand, what is written in the Torah is not to be understood as a parable, God forbid, but rather by its literal meaning. Therefore, we will not abandon its simple meanings, unless doing so contradicts common sense, for example, "And you shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart" (*Devarim* 10:16).

In other words, "unless doing so contradicts common sense," there is no reason to pass over the literal meaning.

[10] In the commentary of Torah Temima to*Bereishit* 1:5 (ch. 34), a number of exceptions to this rule are brought.

[11] It is not clear if R. Avraham ibn Ezra knew the commentary of the Rashbam on the Torah, but it is known certainly that in the years of his wandering in Christian Europe (1140-1164), ibn Ezra was in contact with the Rashbam's brother, Rabbeinu Tam. In ibn

Ezra's commentaries, there are some quotes which are very similar to the Rashbam's language, and it is feasible to see this as evidence that ibn Ezra was familiar with the commentary of the Rashbam. We cannot prove this definitively, however, because their interpretive approaches are similar, and it is logical to assume that they might arrive at similar conclusions.

[12] In *Iggeret Ha-Shabbat*, ibn Ezra takes the Rashbam to task. In this work, Ibn Ezra describes in an allegorical manner an experience which happened to him on the eve of Shabbat: A courier brings him a letter, written by Shabbat itself, and it beseeches ibn Ezra to fight for its honor. In the *Iggeret*, he sets out the interpretation of the Rashbam, that each 24-hour day begins at daybreak (this is the significance of receiving the missive in the middle of the eve of Shabbat, i.e., Friday night), and the ibn Ezra argues that this interpretation is misleading.*Iggeret Ha-Shabbat* was written by ibn Ezra himself, apparently after he saw the commentary of the Rashbam to the first chapter of *Bereishit*(as arises from the content of the missive), and this serves as a preface to his composition dealing with the temporal questions of defining the year, month, and day. An excerpt follows:

> And the emissary of the Shabbat answered and said to me, "It has certainly been told to me that your student brought to your house yesterday books of biblical commentaries, and there it is written to violate Shabbat eve. Now you must gird your loins for the honor of Shabbat, to fight the war of the Torah with the enemies of the Shabbat. Show no favor to any man!"
>
> And I awoke, and my spirit was troubled, and I was very much disturbed. I arose, with my fury burning in me, and I put on my clothes, washed my hands, and brought out the books by the light of the moon, and there it was written an interpretation of "And it was evening, and it was morning." It said that when the morning of the second day came, then one day was complete, because the night follows the day. I almost rent my garments and rent this commentary as well, for I said, "Is it not better to desecrate one Sabbath, so that the Israelites will not desecrate many Sabbaths, should they see this evil commentary? Furthermore, we would become an object of ridicule and derision for the uncircumcised!"
>
> Nevertheless, I held myself back because of the honor of Shabbat, and I made a vow not to let my eye sleep, after the end of the holy day, until I would write a long missive to explain what the beginning of the Torah's day is, to pick up an obstacle and to remove a snare and a trap. For all of the Pharisee Jews, and even all of the Sadducees with them, know that in*Parashat Bereishit*, God's actions are transcribed day-by-day only so that the Torah-observant will know how to keep the Shabbat, that they will rest just as God in His glory did, counting the days of the week. Behold, if the end of the sixth day was the morning of the seventh day, we should observe the night afterwards. Now this is a misleading interpretation for all of Israel, in the East and in the West, the close and the distant, the living and the dead! God will avenge the Shabbat's vengeance from anyone who believes in this difficult interpretation. Whoever reads it in a loud voice, may his tongue adhere to his palate; furthermore, the scribe who writes it among the commentaries of the Torah will surely find that his arm will wither and his right eye will be dimmed.

[13] This is based on what the Rambam says in*Hilkhot Chovel U-Mazzik* 1:3:

> The Torah's statement, "Whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him," should not be interpreted in a literal sense. It does not mean that the person who caused the injury should actually be subjected to a similar physical punishment. Instead, the intent is that he deserves to lose a limb or to be injured in the same manner as his colleague was, and therefore he should make financial restitution to him. This interpretation is supported by the verse (*Bamidbar* 35:31): "Do not accept a ransom for the soul of the murderer." Implied is that no ransom may be paid for a murderer alone, but a ransom may be paid for causing a loss of limb or other injuries.

[14] For example, what would the law be in a case in which a one-eyed man blinded his fellow in one of his eyes? If we remove the eye of the assailant, he will be totally blinded, while he only partially blinded his fellow.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES

By Dr. Avigail Rock

Lecture #11:
R. Yosef Bekhor Shor

A. Introduction

R. Yosef of Orléans, northern France, was a 12th-century *parshan* who has become known through the generation as Ri Bekhor Shor.[1] He was a Tosafist, a student of Rabbeinu Tam,[2] and he was influenced mainly by Rashi's commentary and the commentaries of Mahari Kara and the Rashbam. Nevertheless, Ri Bekhor Shor blazed a trail of his own in biblical exegesis.

We do not know anything about his life story. Apparently, he was born around the year 1140, and his correspondence with Rabbeinu Tam indicates that they had great mutual respect and friendship.

In addition to his biblical and Talmudic commentaries, Ri Bekhor Shor was a liturgical poet, composing elegies and penitential prayers. [3]From the contents of these works, we can learn about the great suffering of the Jewish people in his time. Ri Bekhor Shor's poetry also appears in his commentary on the Torah, which is filled with passion and rich stylistic flourishes. In addition, Ri Bekhor Shor writes a small poem of between four and eight lines at the conclusion of each Torah portion in the books of *Bereishit* and*Shemot*, as well as *Parashat Balak*. The subject of each poem is a topic addressed in the portion or the longing for redemption; in general, every line rhymes with the name of the portion.[4]

Ri Bekhor Shor, like his predecessors Mahari Kara and Rashbam, [5] was a member of the *peshat* school in 12th-century northern France, but in the commentary of Ri Bekhor Shor, we do not find any explicit methodological statements. Nevertheless, it is definitely possible to identify characteristic themes that are prominent in his commentary.

B. Attitude Towards *Derash*

In order to understand the attitude of Ri Bekhor Shor to aggadic material, we must compare his path to that of his predecessors. Recall that Rashi, for different reasons, adopts aggadic material even when it does not dovetail with the*peshat*. Mahari Kara and the Rashbam, however, oppose this unequivocally, and their inclination is to ignore *derash* entirely. It appears that Ri Bekhor Shor forges a path that is a sort of middle way between Rashi and the pursuers of the *peshat*, the Rashbam and Mahari Kara. On the one hand, Ri Bekhor Shor aims to explain the verses without non-biblical information; on the other hand, when the *derash* is appropriate for explaining the *peshat* and for the general context of verses, or when one may explain it as being in keeping with biblical reality, Ri Bekhor Shor will not hesitate to bring a *midrash*. Sometimes, Ri Bekhor Shor will cite *derash* and act as a defender of the Sages, providing reasons why their words have a certain basis

in*peshat*. When the *drash* reflects an accepted tradition among the Sages, Ri Bekhor Shor accepts their words.

Let us demonstrate this phenomenon:

1. During the plague of darkness, the Torah notes: “For all the Israelites, there was light in their residences” (*Shemot*11:23). The Sages famously explain that at the time of the plague of darkness, the Israelites did not suffer, even those who were among the Egyptians. Ri Bekhor Shor first brings his view:

> This was in the land of Goshen, in which they lived; however, the land of Egypt was dark for everyone, even Israelites.

According to Ri Bekhor Shor, the meaning of “in their residences” is the region inhabited by the Israelites, namely Goshen. Thus, the verse indicates that in this place alone, the Israelites had light; those who were in the land of Egypt proper had to deal with the darkness. After he provides his explanation according to the way of *peshat*, Ri Bekhor Shor adds:

> Still, our Rabbis say that there was light for the Israelites even in Egypt, so that they could look in to see what the Egyptians had in their homes. Thus, “in their residences” would mean wherever they resided, even in Egypt.

Thus, Ri Bekhor Shor attempts to explain how the explanation of the Sages fits in with the *peshat*, despite the fact that he himself explains otherwise.

2. In the opening of *Parashat Vayera*(all subsequent citations are *Sefer Bereishit*unless otherwise noted), the Torah says, “And he saw, and behold, three men…” (18:2). Ri Bekhor Shor explains that the verse is referring to actual human beings:

> According to the *peshat*, these were actual men, for we have not found angels eating, drinking, and sleeping in a man’s home as they sleep in Lot’s house…[6]

Nevertheless, there is an accepted tradition of the Sages that these were angels, and therefore Ri Bekhor Shor adds the following sentence:

> But we should not refute the words of our Rabbis, because they too are like prophets who know everything that happens in the land.[7]

However, in many cases, Ri Bekhor Shor does not cite *midrashim*; instead, he explains according to the way of *peshat*alone.

C. The Torah Does Not Provide Extraneous Information

Another principle in Ri Bekhor Shor's exegetical approach is that the Torah does not provide superfluous information. Sometimes, we find in *Tanakh* verses that appear to provide extraneous data about the characters. According to Ri Bekhor Shor, the information is in fact essential; it comes to teach us something about the characters. We will demonstrate this phenomenon:

1. Ri Bekhor Shor explains the fact that Avraham takes all of his property with him to the land of Canaan ("and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Charan;" 12:5) as follows:

> This teaches that he had faith in God's promise, not like a person who says: I will go now and take some of my possessions – if He will do to me as He says, well and good, I will send for the rest of it; and if not, I shall return. Rather, he took everything with him, because he was certain that God would do as He had said.

In other words, the Torah tells us that Avraham took with him all of his possessions in order to teach us about Avraham's true and unshakable confidence in God's promise; he would not leave any possessions in Charan as insurance, should he be compelled to return there.

2. The Torah describes the first encounter of Yaakov and Yosef in Egypt in the following way: "And he came up to greet Yisrael his father, to Goshen; and he appeared to him, and he fell on his neck, and he wept excessively on his neck" (46:29). The words "and he appeared to him" seem extraneous, as it is clear that Yaakov saw his son if he fell and wept upon his neck. Ri Bekhor Shor explains this detail:

> Because it says below (48:10), "And Yisrael's eyes grew heavy from old age; he could not see," it says here, "And he appeared to him," to inform us that he still saw well, and he enjoyed [Yosef's] appearance and visage.

In other words, the verse stresses that despite the fact that Yaakov later went blind, Yaakov still saw well at this time, and therefore relished the appearance Yosef.[8]

D. Explaining Verses in the Stated Context

Ri Bekhor Shor goes to great lengths to explain the verses in their specific context. We will note a number of examples:

1. In the commandment of circumcision, the blessing appears, "And I will multiply you very greatly" (17:5). Why is it specifically keeping this commandment that will allow Avraham to merit this blessing? Ri Bekhor Shor explains:

> So that you will not say: perhaps it will render me impotent; on the contrary, it will not make you impotent, it will make you more virile…

2. At the end of *Parashat Noach*, we first encounter Avraham's family: "And Avram and Nachor took wives. The name of Avram's wife was Sarai… Now Sarai was barren; she had no child" (11:29-30). Ri Bekhor Shor explains this about the verse:

> "Now Sarai was barren; she had no child" — This tells us how beloved Avraham Avinu was, because he left all of his father's inheritance, and everything which he had there, and he went as God commanded. If he had left there a son or a daughter to inherit his portion in his father's house, this would not have been such a great matter, but now he abandoned and left everything, running after God's command.

In other words, the point of mentioning Sara's barrenness is to mark Avraham's greatness in relinquishing his father's estate without leaving a son or a daughter who could receive the inheritance, as he goes to fulfill God's command.

3. In a similar way, Ri Bekhor Shor explains the mention of Avraham's age in 12:4 ("Avram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Charan"):

> It counts Avraham's years, to tell you that his father was still alive, but he did not worry about his father's love, nor any other thing; [he sought] only to run after God's commands.

We should note that regarding this point, Ri Bekhor Shor uses the reverse method of Mahari Kara and the Rashbam. While they explain many verses as introductions to what follows,[9] Ri Bekhor Shor specifically exerts himself to explain the verses in the context in which they are brought, even in cases in which it appears that they are meant to serve as an introduction (see, for example, his commentary to 35:22). We should note that Ri Bekhor Shor does not negate the principle of foreshadowing, and he sometimes does explain according to this principle (e.g., 9:18), but there is a definite tendency to reduce its use and to explain the verses in their context.

E. Characters' Actions and State of Mind

One of Ri Bekhor Shor's most notable innovations is his attempt to explain the verses based on understanding the state of mind of the human actors. There are numerous examples of this:

1. After Yitzchak touches Yaakov and hears his voice, he still suspects that something is up, and therefore requests, "Draw close and kiss me, my son" (27:26). Ri Bekhor Shor explains this in the following way:

> His heart still troubled him, saying:[10] I have two signs for this, one of which is the voice, which is similar to that of Yaakov, and one of which is the hands, which are similar to those of Esav, and I do not know which one to rely on. I must use a third sign: the scent of Esav is the

> scent of the field, and that of Yaakov is not the scent of the field. I will kiss him [and thereby smell him]; if his scent is the scent of the field, this must be Esav, and if not, this must be Yaakov, because I will follow the majority of signs, and therefore he said, "Draw close and kiss me, my son," and he smelled the scent of his clothing. Then he decided that it was Esav, and he blessed him.

2. Another example is his explanation of the fact that Tamar chooses to seduce Yehuda specifically at the time when he is shearing his sheep (38:13):

> At the sheep-shearing time, they were happy and would make big meals… When a person rejoices, his lusts overwhelm him, and therefore she chose for herself sheep-shearing time.

3. The Torah tells us that Yosef's brothers hated him because of his first dream (37:8). Why should Yosef be held guilty for a dream he has? Does he decide what to dream? Ri Bekhor Shor explains this in the following way:

> Because they said, "As you lay in bed came thoughts" (*Daniel* 2:29); this is how you plot to dominate us, because our father loves you, and what you think about during the day, this is what you dream of at night.

F. **Biblical Reality**

Ri Bekhor Shor is accustomed to explain verses according to the reality of the biblical era, at least according to the reality that he recognizes. It is important to note that it is difficult to know whether Ri Bekhor Shor explains the verse according to the reality of his own era (assuming that in the time and region of Scripture, conditions were similar) or if he assumes what the reality was during the biblical era, and explains the verses accordingly. We will see a number of examples of this:

1. When Moshe sees the Burning Bush, God says to him (*Shemot* 3:5), "Take*ne'alekha* off your feet." Ostensibly, if the term *na'al* (here in the second-person possessive) means "sandal" or "shoe," Moshe would understand that God is talking about the coverings on his feet. Thus, "Take your shoes off," "*Shal ne'alekha*," should have sufficed. Therefore, Ri Bekhor Shor explains that there is also a hand covering termed a *na'al* – namely a glove. God is telling Moshes that is only his foot-coverings which he must remove, because only these are dirty:

> "Take your coverings…" – Because the foot-covering treads everywhere, sometimes in dirty places, it is not appropriate to bring it a holy place.
> "Off your feet" – Because even that which is on the hand is simply called a "covering," and this is what Boaz gives to the redeemer (*Ruth* 4:7-8), and it is *gant* in Old French.[11] In fact, we find that the nobility still use their *gant* to transfer property. Therefore, He must say "off your feet," so that he will not think that He is speaking of the one on the hand.

In this case, it is clear that Ri Bekhor Shor explains the verse according to the reality of his own era. In the following examples, it is more difficult to know whether we are talking about the reality of his time or the reality of biblical times.

2. In the commandment of circumcision, God says to Avraham, “And I will put my covenant between me and you” (17:2). Ri Bekhor Shor explains the meaning of the covenant:

> I will put a mark in your flesh, as a sign that you are my servant; so will My covenant be. This is the way of servants, who have a sign on their clothing to show that they are servants and bound to their masters… Here too, God marks our flesh, because we are his servants, in a place that a person cannot shed or cast off of himself.[12]

3. When Yitzchak seeks to bless Esav, he says to him, “Prepare for me delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die” (27:4). Why is there a need for a meal at the time of the blessing? Ri Bekhor Shor explains this in the following way:

> It is the way of the aristocrats to prepare a feast when they receive a noble title.

Ri Bekhor Shor maintains that that biblical reality (presumably similar to his own era) supports this; when a person receives an aristocratic title, a feast is prepared for the event, and Yitzchak requests the feast in order to memorialize Esav’s new title.

4. Why does Rivka love Yaakov (25:28)? Ri Bekhor Shor explains:

> He was a shepherd, dealing with the settling of the world, and it is the way of women to love one who raises lambs and kids.

In other words, while Esav is a hunter of coarse manners, Yaakov is a shepherd with a gentle soul, and therefore Rivka prefers Yaakov.

5. In another insight into pastoral mores, Ri Bekhor Shor manages to justify the absence of Reuven from the sale of Yosef, exploring the meaning of what is told to us about the brothers before his sale: “And they sat down to break bread” (37:25):

> “And they sat down to break bread” — It is the way of shepherds that some of them eat while others stand over the animals, and then the others eat; but their way is not for all of them to eat together. Yehuda and some of his brothers were eating, while Reuven and some of his brothers were watching the sheep; therefore, Reuven did not know about the sale.

G. The Simple and the Logical

Many times, Ri Bekhor Shor provides a simple reading of the verses that is so convincing that after reading his words, one is hard-pressed to understand the text in any other way. For example, Ri Bekhor Shor explains the words of Pharaoh's ministers, "And there is no one to interpret it" (40:8), in the following way:

> This is because we are in the prison, for if we were not in the prison, we would go to the adepts and the sages.
>
> In other words, in prison, there are no interpreters of dreams available.

Another example may be found a few chapters later, when Yosef reveals himself to his brothers, saying to them, "Draw close to me" (45:4). What is the meaning of this request? Rashi's words are well-known: "He summoned them with mild, supplicatory language, and he showed them that he was circumcised." Ri Bekhor Shor, on the other hand, follows the path of the *pashtan* and attacks two difficulties. First, why does Yosef ask his brothers to approach him, instead of approaching them himself? Second, why should they have to approach him when they are all in the same room? This is how he explains it:

> He could not draw close to them, because they were many, and if he came close to one, he would distance himself from another.
>
> This was in order to say quietly, "I am Yosef your brother, whom you sold" — lest a person from outside hear, which they might notice, causing them to be shamed.

H. Attitude towards Miracles

Ri Bekhor Shor believes that God directs the world in a natural way as much as possible, and the use made of miracles is the absolute minimum. We will see a number of examples of this:

1. Addressing the sixth plague in Egypt, that of *shechin*, Ri Bekhor Shor explains why Moshe and Aharon must fill their hands with furnace ashes and throw them heavenward (*Shemot* 9:10):

> "And Moshe will throw it heavenward" — So that it will fall on man and animal and they will be burned by it, causing blisters, for when someone is burnt, blisters arise from the burnt spot. In any case, the verse talks about *shechin*, which implies [being hurt] not directly by fire, but rather its byproducts…
>
> Now, two handfuls of fire could not be enough for all of Egypt, and because of this, the *shechin* comes of itself, not because of the fire.**Nevertheless, God does not want to change the custom of the world, and He acts partially according to the custom of the**

> **world,** and therefore He commanded to cast embers [smoking ashes] upon them. [13]

In other words, the point of throwing ashes in the air is to cause something similar to *shechin* in a natural way; the miraculous element is the quantity — the fact that a few handfuls are sufficient to bring *shechin* over all of Egypt. Ri Bekhor Shor even adds a general determination when it comes to miraculous phenomena: "**So you will find that in most miracles, God does not change the custom of the world."**

2. Ri Bekhor Shor makes clear his approach to miracles in *Shemot* 16:25, analyzing the incident at Mara, in which God sweetens bitter waters by having Moshe throw a piece of wood into them:

> "And God showed him a tree" — If it was the will of God, He could sweeten the water without a tree, but**the way of God is to perform miracles by the way of the world**.We put the sweet types in a bitter substance to sweeten it.

According to Ri Bekhor Shor, the wood is naturally sweet, and Moshe uses the sweetness of the tree in order to temper the bitterness of the water. God performs the miracle using the way of nature, sweetening the wood to the extent that it would suffice for all the water at that location.[14]

3. The widely accepted explanation for the fate of Lot's wife (19:26) is that she is punished and turned suddenly into a pillar of salt because she disobeys the angels' commands. However, Ri Bekhor Shor explains otherwise:

> She was gazing [around her] and delaying [as she was distracted by what was happening], so that she was not walking quickly… until she fell behind him, and the spreading cloud caught her and dropped on her sulfur and salt, because wherever the sulfur would fall, the salt would fall with it.

According to Ri Bekhor Shor, this is not a miraculous punishment, but a natural result of the sulfurous-saline cloud which was raining down destruction on the Jordan Plain (cf. 19:24 and *Devarim* 29:22).

I. The Reasons for the Commandments

Ri Bekhor Shor is not the first exegete to delve into the reasons for*mitzvot*, but we can certainly see in his commentary an expansive and consistent approach to the question of the reasons of*mitzvot*. It is possible that this should be viewed as an element of his polemical bent, as Christianity gives symbolic and allegorical meanings to the *mitzvot*, claiming that the fulfillment of *mitzvot* may be replaced with faith and good works alone. Indeed, Ri Bekhor Shor's definition of *mitzvot* stresses the pragmatic significance of their fulfillment. We may see a number of examples of this:

1. Ri Bekhor Shor (*Shemot* 30:1) explains the (psychological) need for an offering in the following way:

> If a person sees and knows that he has achieved atonement for his sins, realizing that he is now pure, he is more careful to avoid sinning… However, if he does not know that he has achieved atonement, if he sins today and tomorrow thinks, "I am befouled by sins," he no longer guards himself…
> We may use this metaphor: a person who has clean, spotless and fresh garments, as long as his garments are unsullied, he is careful to avoid dirt and filth; once they have been befouled, he is no longer careful… To this Shlomo refers when he says (*Kohelet* 9:8): "At every time, let your garments be white." [15]

In other words, the aim of the offerings is to give a feeling of atonement to a person so that he will avoid sinning in the future, because a person who sees himself as a sinner will not hold himself back from additional sins.

2. Ri Bekhor Shor explains the reason for the prohibition of crossbreeding in the following way (*Vayikra* 19:19):

> If one mates a donkey with a horse… and produces a mule, which I did not create, he has altered Creation.

Later on, Ri Bekhor Shor explains that the reason that these species are infertile is that they were not made by God at Creation, and therefore they do not merit the blessing of "Be fruitful and multiply":

> The blessing does not apply to them. The mule will never bear a child, nor will any other crossbred animal.

According to this explanation, we can also understand the introduction to the prohibition of crossbreeding, "Keep my decrees," as Ri Bekhor Shor writes: "Those decrees, which I issued already during the six days of Creation, must not be altered."[16]

3. Regarding the prohibition of *orla*, the first three years of a tree's fruits, Ri Bekhor Shor (*Vayikra* 19:23) explains:

> One is not to benefit from its fruit, because it is not the way of the world that one should benefit from it until one makes a tribute (*le-hadrin*) [17]from it to the Omnipresent. Now, the beginning of each yield must be brought to the Omnipresent as a tribute, and the first three years it only yields a small amount, which is not worth bringing before the Omnipresent, and one is not permitted to precede me…

In other words, the reason to avoid eating *orla* is that one cannot partake before one brings the first fruits to God, and one cannot bring the first fruits before the end of the years of *orla*, because the yield is too poor in these years.

4. We have already seen that in the view of Ri Bekhor Shor, the reason for the*mitzva* of circumcision is to put a mark of servitude upon God's people. He adds (17:1) that the feminine parallel to the*mitzva* of circumcision are the laws of menstruation:

> The menstrual blood, which the women watch carefully in order to tell their husbands at what times they are permitted — this is their blood of the covenant.

J. *Midrash Halakha*

We have seen that the Rashbam, for the most part, tends to explain the verses only on the basis of *peshat*, without taking into account the halakhic ruling. Ri Bekhor Shor, on the other hand, is much closer to Rashi's approach in the halakhic realm, and he is generally wont to explain the verses following the Sages.

Indeed, in his commentary to*Bamidbar* 12:8, he vociferously opposes the Rashbam's view of the *mitzva* of *tefillin*,[18]according to which the intent in the verses is not to delineate the practical *mitzva* of*tefillin*, but rather to stress the importance of remembering God's words constantly:

> In addition, there are people of our nation who express doubts about*tefillin*, *mezuza*, and covering the blood [of slaughtered birds and beasts]. They say that "And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a frontlets between your eyes" (*Shemot* 13:16) is similar to "Set me as a signet on your heart, as a signet on your arm" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 8:6), which does not refer to an actual sign on one's arm or heart; so too, these are not actually *tefillin* and*mezuza*… Woe is to them who insult the Torah (see *Avot* 6:2), for they too are destined to be judged for this!

However, there are some isolated cases in which Ri Bekhor Shor explains in a way that does not follow the Halakha.[19]For example, when it comes to the Hebrew slave who is supposed to go free in the seventh year, Ri Bekhor Shor (*Shemot*21:1) explains, in opposition to the halakhic ruling, that the verse is referring to the universal sabbatical year (not the seventh year of his personal term of servitude):

> He cannot plow and sow and reap and pick, so he does not need his services so greatly; therefore, he must send him away.[20]

Later in the same chapter (v. 9), Ri Bekhor Shor explains the verse, "The ox shall be stoned, and also its owners shall die," in a way contrary to Halakha:

> According to the simple meaning, sometimes one is liable for another's death: for example, if he sends it to go knowingly, in order that it might kill someone whom he hates, and this in fact happens, then one is

liable for this death, because it is as if he has killed him with his own hands…

In other words, according to Ri Bekhor Shor, since the verse says, "And also its owners shall die," it must be referring to a situation in which the owner of the ox is liable to the death penalty. In his view, we are talking about a situation in which the owners free the ox with the intent that it will kill a certain person. This is opposed to the view of the Sages, who explain "And also its owners shall die" as a death penalty in the heavenly court.[21]

K. Anti-Christian Commentaries

We have seen in previous lessons that there is a certain inclination by biblical exegetes in medieval France to explain verses in terms of Jewish-Christian polemics. This is one of the causes of the development of the school of *peshat* in 12th-century France; the dogged pursuit of*peshat* was motivated, among other reasons, by the need for a response to the phenomenon of Jewish-Christian polemics. One of the main claims of Christianity is that one should explain the *mitzvot* in an allegorical way, so that the commandments do not in fact have any pragmatic meaning. In order to contend with this claim, the methodology of *peshat* was developed, which strips away the meaning of the allegorical interpretations and gives the verses concrete significance. The exegesis of *peshat* is based on the language and context of the verses, and in this way, it counteracts the Christian interpretations of the Torah.

This tendency is prominent particularly in the commentaries of Ri Bekhor Shor S. A. Poznanski writes:

> Note that we see here that Ri Bekhor Shor dedicates a place in his worldview to the matter of anti-Christian polemics. In fact, we find interpretations in his works "as a refutation of the sectarians" more so than all who precede him…
> He responds to almost all of the verses which the Christians cite as the foundations of their religion, particularly those used to prove the Doctrine of the Trinity…
> Thus, he will contend against the making of statues and images… and against Jesus being born without a father. [22]

We will bring a number of examples of this:

1. In his commentary to 19:1, "And the two angels came to Sedom," Ri Bekhor Shor gives a classically anti-Christian commentary:

> "And the two angels" — And from this verse is a refutation of the sectarians who say that these three men were the Trinity, [23]as one may refute them: if so, where is the third? There are only two parts, as it is said, "And the two angels," etc. Furthermore, it says, "And God sent us to destroy it" — now, which one sent? Are they not equal?

2. In 24:2, when it comes to Avraham making his servant swear by placing his hand under his thigh, Ri Bekhor Shor writes this:

> Now, the sectarians say that this was because of their shame that Jesus came from there. But we may refute them: he was not conceived from a man, according to their words, so they should have sworn on the womb of a woman![24]

*

Let us complete this lecture with the poem that Ri Bekhor Shor writes at the end of *Parashat Bo*:

> He Who inclined His ear to His people and listened so,
> To see it and know it as exile's pains did grow;
> Heart torn, soul brought low,
> Strength and power upon him you did bestow.
> For you are its Redeemer, King and Savior, we know,
> And you saved it from every evil and every blow.
> As I complete the section of "*Bo el Paro*."

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

[1] The source of the name is Moshe's blessing to the tribe of Yosef (*Devarim* 33:17): "The firstborn ofhis ox (*bekhor shoro*) is his glory, and the horns of the aurochs are his horns; with them he will gore together the ends of the earth." Apparently, R. Yosef used this appellation himself. Thus we find, for example, in his commentary to *Devarim* 10:10: "I, Bekhor Shor, give a sign…"

[2] Scholars dispute whether the Ri ben R. Yitzchak (or "the Ri of Orléans") mentioned by the Tosafists is the same person as Ri Bekhor Shor. Most assume that they are identical; see E. E. Urbach,*Baalei Ha-Tosafot*, pp. 132-140.

[3] Five of his poems have survived, most of which deal with the troubles of the Jewish nation in exile and the anticipation of redemption. One of the most famous poems is recited as part of the penitential prayers of Erev Rosh Hashana in Ashkenazic communities: *Adon Mo'ed Ke-Tikach*.

[4] A stunning example of his talent can be found in the concluding poem of *Parashat Vayera*, which begins with the words "*Vayera elav*." In this six-line poem, Ri Bekhor Shor uses six different definition of the word *elav* or *eila*v:

> My God will builds its porticos and **its lintels**above [part of the Temple, mentioned in juxtaposition with the doorposts; see *I Melakhim*6:31];
> His powerful and **his mighty ones** [see*Yechezkel* 17:13] assemble in the court thereof.
> And we will offer there, before Him, His lambs and**His rams** like a turtledove.
> His terebinths and **His oaks** [see *Yeshayahu*1:29] will bear fruit in love,
> And the fatlings of the flock wear **its tallow** like a glove,
> As I complete the section of "*Vayera elav*."

[5] See lessons 8-10.

[6] There is no doubt that the impetus for his explanation is Jewish-Christian polemics, and Ri Bekhor Shor is challenging here the Doctrine of the Trinity, as he writes in the continuation of the story (19:1):

> "And the two angels" — And from this verse is a refutation of the sectarians who say that these three men were the Trinity; one may refute them: If so, where is the third? There are only two parts, as it is said, "And the two angels."

See also R. Avraham ibn Ezra's commentary to 18:1.
[7] Perhaps Ri Bekhor Shor alludes here that in fact his view is that the truth lies with the view of the Sages, but he is compelled to explain according to the *peshat* because of his opposition to the Christians.
[8] As it is stated in the next verse, "And Yisrael said to Yosef, 'I may die this time, after I have seen your face, for you are still alive.'"
[9] See lessons 8 and 10.
[10] That is, Yitzchak said in his heart, to himself.
[11] A gauntlet, the glove that medieval knights were accustomed to wear, was, for the most part, made of metal.
[12] In the continuation of the passage of circumcision, he explains the punishment of excision for someone who violates the covenant (17:14): "According to the simple meaning, he will be cut off and excised from the others that are marked as my servants; he is not marked, so he cannot be reckoned as my servant."
[13] Ri Bekhor Shor assumes that we are talking about glowing embers, not ashes from a long-dead fire in a furnace that has cooled.
[14] The issue of strengthening the miracle is not mentioned here, but this is what his words imply.
[15] See also his commentary to *Vayikra* 2:13:

> Everyone knows that God does not need any aroma or any act of offering, but it is for Israel's benefit. When one sins and brings an offering, he achieves atonement and knows that he is clean; consequently, he is more careful about avoiding dirtying himself with sin, just like a man who has clean clothes avoids mud, but when they are filthy, he does not care…

[16] See *Kiddushin* 39a, *Sanhedrin* 60a, and particularly *Yerushalmi Kilayim* 1:7.
[17] The word means to give a tribute (*doron*), and it seems to me that Ri Bekhor Shor invented this conjugation, *le-hadrin*. See also his commentary to*Bamidbar* 8:11.
[18] See lecture 10.
[19] We should not see in this any inconsistency: the sharp opposition of Ri Bekhor Shor to the commentary of the Rashbam on the *mitzva* of*tefillin* does not emerge from the fact that the Rashbam opposes the halakhic ruling, but from the fact that the Rashbam explains a practical *mitzva* in an allegorical way. Ri Bekhor Shor spends a great deal of time combatting Christianity, which explains all of the *mitzvot* in an allegorical manner, which motivates his opposition to the above-mentioned commentary of the Rashbam. See below in this essay.
[20] I have heard many teachers and students err about this law, believing that Hebrew slaves are freed in the sabbatical year, while Halakha mandates that each goes free in the seventh year of his servitude. Perhaps the source of their error is the universal emancipation of slaves in the jubilee year; from this, they applied the freeing of servants to the sabbatical year.
[21] Even in cases which are similar to those presented by Ri Bekhor Shor; see the Rambam,*Hilkhot Rotzei'ach U-Shemirat Ha-Nefesh* 2:13, 3:11.
[22] S.A. Poznanski, *Mavo al Chokhmei Tzarfat Mefarshei Ha-Mikra* (Jerusalem, 5725), p. LXIX.
[23] That is, the Christian Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
[24] See also his commentary to *Devarim* 6:8.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Lecture #12:
Summary of Exegesis of Northern France
Introduction to Spanish Exegesis

A. The *Peshat* School in 12th Century France

Over the past few lessons, we have become familiar with the school of northern French[1] exegetes of the 12th century, and in the next few, we will

address the exegetical school that developed in Spain. Before proceeding, we will summarize the exegetical path of the northern French exegetes, the men of the *peshat* school. The *peshat* school was founded by Rashi, who wrote his commentary according to the way of *peshat* alongside the Sages' interpretations. Those who followed in his footsteps — R. Yosef (Mahari) Kara, student-colleague of Rashi; the Rashbam, Rashi's grandson; and R. Yosef Bekhor Shor of Orléans[2] — took this idea of*peshat* to an extreme, shunning use of the Sages' words for purposes of biblical interpretation.

The *peshat* school in northern France lasted for a short period of about a century. The critical literature has raised a number of hypotheses as to the causes of the development of the school during this period. M. Z. Segal claims that there is a connection between the involvement of these scholars in Talmudic interpretation and the nature of their biblical exegesis:

> It appears that this compulsion comes from the study of the Talmud, specifically the halakhic section of it, which flourished among them during these years. It is no coincidence that the great *pashtan* of Talmudic explication, Rashi, is also the first*pashtan* of Scripture. Rashi's students and study partners — Rabbi Shemaya,[3] the Rashbam, and Ri Bekhor Shor — were also great Talmudic commentators. They were compelled to study Talmud according to the way of *peshat*, because the correct and direct understanding of the Talmudic text was exigent for them in order to extract practical Halakha. Since the Talmud and Scripture were for them the two sides of one Torah, they applied their methodology of studying Talmud to studying Scripture, and they used the same tools for understanding Scripture which they had used in order to understand the Talmud, i.e., evaluating the words according to the demands of the language and explaining the matter in a way faithful to the sequence of the text and clear logic.[4]

Segal believes that the impetus for the development of *peshat* exegesis in the 12th century was internal, coming from the Jewish community, and it was influenced by the Talmudic methodology that demanded a disciplined approach based on the explanation of the text by the techniques of*peshat*, with the intent of applying this exacting reading in the practical world. In contrast, O. Limor believes that the impetus was cultural and external to the Jewish community, connected to the 12th Century Renaissance, which helped to define the period of the High Middle Ages:

> Around the year 1100, an innovative cultural movement which historians call the Renaissance began. The center of the movement was in northern France, and it was expressed in many domains of cultural creativity, among which was studying and interpreting Scripture. This movement manifested itself both in the Christian majority and the Jewish minority, each one of them according to its characteristics and its ways. Both the activity of Rashi's students and the activity of the Victorines[5] should be seen as part of this Renaissance, as the spirit of innovation and critical thinking finds its

expression here in biblical commentary. In this sphere, we find that they have specifically those qualities which one may find among the scholars who dealt with classical literature: textual criticism, consideration of the context, and rational thought. Similarly, one may find among the scholars of both camps the same issues being discussed: criticism of the past versus the authority of the past, as well as the attempt to pursue independent thought and objective truth, actively and consistently.[6]

It is important to stress that Limor does not claim that the specific contents and tools of the exegesis of *peshat* were based on Christian culture; rather, she maintains that this type of study, according to the way of *peshat,* was influenced by the methods of study developed by the Christian Church.[7]

Once we have examined the *peshat*exegesis of 12th-century France and the factors which contributed to its development, we must ask the following question: Why did this school last for such a short time? Why, after the 12th century, do we not find another *pashtan* in northern France? The answer is the persecution of French Jewry in the 13th and 14thcenturies. This persecution included, among other things, the Crusades and the burning of the Talmud in Paris in 1242, reaching its climax with the expulsion of Jews from France in 1306. The difficult conditions of persecution destroyed the spiritual and material status of French Jewry, and they prevented the continuous development of Torah creativity.[8] Granted, we still find a few interpretations of the Torah in France after the 12th century, but these interpretations are mainly a collection of previous commentaries.[9]

Thus, the period of the exegesis in northern France was brief, but it had great significance on the development of this type of exegesis and on Torah scholars throughout the generations. Now, let us turn to a description of Jewish biblical exegesis in Spain in the 11th and 12thcenturies.

B. The Golden Age of Spain

In the year 711 C.E., Spain was conquered by the Muslims. With the stability of Muslim rule, the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry began. This era was characterized mainly by two phenomena. First, court Jews[10] held key positions in the service of the caliphs.[11] Second, there was a flourishing of culture, spirituality, and Torah throughout the Jewish community in Spain. This boom was expressed in many major spheres of Jewish creativity: biblical commentary, halakhic literature, poetry (both holy and mundane), Hebrew grammar, Jewish philosophy, and Kabbala.

There is no doubt that these two phenomena – namely the honored status of the sages of Spanish Jewry in the centers of power and the cultural development of the Jewish community – influenced each other. This period was one in which unique individuals could flourish – rabbis and intellectuals who were well-integrated in society and the developing Arabic culture, which

included, among other things, delving into Arabic philosophy (influenced by Greek philosophy), developing science, and studying philology.

Indeed, Muslim culture served as both an example and as a stimulus for Jewish scholars. These sages used the model of enlightened Islam to forge the tools and devices to become the first Hebrew grammarians[12] and biblical exegetes. At the same time, they sought to contend with the Muslim faith in the battle for religious primacy. Due to their greater political power and numbers, the Muslims clearly had the upper hand; nevertheless, in cultural terms, there was certainly a chance for the Jews to prove the superiority of their religion. For this purpose, the sages of Israel enlisted the best of Arabic culture developed in Spain. They used the tools of philology and linguistics to develop the research of biblical language based of the three-consonant root (the Arabic model), and from this sprang many grammatical books and Arabic dictionaries. Furthermore, they wrote beautiful poetry, which borrowed its meter from Arabic poetry and its expression and language from *Tanakh*.

This culture left its mark on Jewish exegesis of Spain. However, despite these influences, which were external to the community, there was another characteristic of Spanish Jewry that also influenced the biblical commentators, albeit indirectly –the relationship to the Talmud. In Spain, a new genre of Jewish writing was created and developed, the literature of halakhic codes, developed by R. Yitzchak ibn Ghiyyat[13] and R. Yitzchak Alfasi. In this literature, the methodology is to present to the student the halakhic conclusion, in its most pragmatic form, disconnected from the Talmudic analysis. This changed irrevocably the importance of study for the reader, since using these texts, one could reach a halakhic conclusion even without a throughout knowledge of the Talmud. Professor U. Simon expands on this:

> Using this literature, it became possible for the first time in our history to achieve a reasonable proficiency in Halakha without dedicating oneself to long and deep study of the Talmud. This breakthrough not only freed spiritual energy for the construction of that multi-branched culture mainly based on Scripture, but it allowed also emancipation from the Sages' exegesis, while being faithful to Halakha. Thus it happened that the*Geonim* of Babylonia at one end and the greats of northern France at the other gave their power to Scripture and Talmud. At the same time, the first linguistic scholars (such as R. Yehuda Hayyuj and R. Yona ibn Janach) and biblical scholars (such as R. Moshe ibn Gikatilla and R. Avraham ibn Ezra) arose on Spanish soil. These luminaries did not innovate anything in the Talmudic arena, and they even minimized their use of the Sages' interpretations and derivations in clarifying the meaning of the verses… They could allow themselves to ignore the literature of halakhic Midrash because they were confident in their interpretive ability to reconcile the halakhic ruling with the simple meaning of the verses.[14]

An additional result of being disconnected from the Sages' interpretations, also characteristic of the Spanish sages of this era, was a

stunning expertise in the twenty-four books of *Tanakh*. This great proficiency is the result of the freeing of energies from studying Talmud in order to delve into Scripture. This encyclopedic knowledge is expressed in the integration of verses and verse fragments in the writings of these commentators, as well as their use of biblical wordplay.

Unfortunately, the writings of most biblical commentators of this era were lost, mainly because they were written in Judeo-Arabic. Thus, for example, the commentary of R. Moshe ben Shmuel Ha-Kohen ibn Gikatilla (middle of the 11th century), who was a poet, linguist, and biblical commentator, was lost to posterity. Of his biblical interpretations (written in Arabic), only some citations have survived. Another important exegete was R. Yehuda ben Shmuel ibn Balaam (second half of the 11th century), who was also a linguist and biblical commentator. All of his writings were written in Arabic; from his commentaries on the Torah, only those on *Bamidbar* and *Devarim* have survived.

The Golden Age reached its end with the invasion of extremist Muslims, who founded the Almohad Caliphate in southern Spain in the middle of the 12th century. After this conquest, the Jews of the area were ordered to convert to Islam. Some of them fled south to North Africa, but most of them relocated to northern Spain's Christian principalities.

Despite the destruction of southern (Arabic) Spanish Jewry, the influence of the Golden Age extended far beyond its limitations of time and space. The sages of Spain who were compelled to abandon their homes wandered penniless, but they brought with them treasures of wisdom which they had acquired in the land of their birth. From the second half of the 12th century, we find the development of Judaism in Arabic in the realms of Christian Spain, under the influence of R. Avraham ibn Ezra, R. Yehuda Ha-levi, and R. Yehuda Alharizi.

C. The Distinction Between the Schools

We can summarize the distinctions between the biblical exegesis of northern France and the biblical exegesis of Spain in the following way: The Jewish exegetes of northern France based their approaches, for the most part, on sources and ideas from Jewish tradition, which we may describe as internal concepts. These are not based at all on the ideas and outlooks of the Christian culture amidst which the exegetes resided. (As we stated above, even according to those who believe that the methodology of *peshat* was influenced by Christianity, the contents and the tools were certainly not drawn from Christianity.) In contrast, the Jewish exegetes of Muslim Spain drew their tools from internal sources as well as external sources. The many domains to which the scholars of Spain had been exposed left their mark on the character of the Spanish commentaries.

In the sphere of biblical commentary, the main representative of the Golden Age was R. Avraham ibn Ezra, and we will dedicate the coming lectures to his commentary.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

[1] It is important to distinguish between northern France and southern France (Provence). Provençal exegesis was much closer to that of Spain, as we will see in the coming lessons.
[2] To this group we may add R. Eliezer of Beaugency, who also lived in the 12th century in northern France. He presumably composed commentaries to all of Scripture, but only his commentaries to *Yeshayahu, Yechezkel*, and *Trei Asar* have survived. R. Eliezer of Beaugency is one of the most extreme exegetes of *peshat* in 12thcentury France. While the Rashbam and Mahari Kara feel a need to explain their relationship to the Sages, R. Eliezer does not feel the need to apologize for his relationship to the Sages.
[3] R. Shemaya was one of the most important of Rashi's students, as well as his scribe.
[4] M. Z. Segal, *Parshanut Ha-Mikra*, pp. 61-62.
[5] This was an important medieval school of monks from the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris. Some of these monks devoted their lives to the study and interpretation of Scripture. In the 12th century, the Victorines began to study the Bible according to the*peshat*. Until this period, the general tendency of biblical commentary by Christians had been allegorical: the Christians preferred the symbolic, spiritual interpretation, and they scorned the literal interpretation. The monks of the Abbey of St. Victor stressed the importance of studying the Bible literally and delved into it. They did not reject the allegorical interpretation; rather, they claimed that one should understand the literary significance, and only afterwards should one pass to the allegorical interpretation.
[6] O. Limor, "*Parshanut Ha-Mikra Ba-Mei'a Ha-12*," in *Bein Yehudim Le-Notzerim* (Open University: Tel-Aviv, 5753), vol. IV p. 61.
[7] A similar phenomenon exists, according to a number of critics, in Talmudic commentary as well. See E. E. Urbach, *Ba'alei Ha-Tosafot*, pp. 744-52; Yisrael M. Ta-Shma, *Ha-Sifrut Ha-Parshanit La-Talmud*, Vol. I, pp. 93-117.
[8] Here as well there is a similar phenomenon found among the Talmudic commentators (for the same reasons); see Urbach, ibid., pp. 521-2.
[9] Two examples are *Da'at Zekenim* and *Hadar Zekeinim*, the authors of which are unknown.
[10]Court Jews were courtiers who were close to the king and had high positions. For example, Chasdai ibn Shaprut was appointed physician to thecaliph Abd ar-Rahman III of Cordoba (912-961), and the warrior and poet R. Shmuel Ha-Nagid moved toGranada, where he was first tax collector, then a secretary, and finally an assistant vizier to the Berber king Habbus al-Muzaffar.
[11] This was a term for the political leader in Muslim lands; the English "caliph" comes from the Arabic title "*Khalifat Rasul Allah*," the "successor of the messenger of God," Muhammad.
[12] These were Dunash ben Labrat, Menachem ben Saruk, and Yosef ibn Janach.
[13] He was an 11th-century halakhic authority who composed a code of law.
[14] *Encyclopedia Mikra'it, Tanakh — Parshanut*, p. 660.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Lecture #13:
R. Avraham ibn Ezra, Part I

A. BIOGRAPHY

General Background

R. Abu Iṣḥāq Avraham ben Meir ibn Ezra (1089-1164), known simply as Ibn Ezra, was born in Tudela, Spain. Ibn Ezra was educated in the

Spanish approach, the guiding principle of which was that in order to reach the ultimate truth, it is incumbent upon a person to be familiar with and understand all areas of human knowledge. Consequently, Ibn Ezra was renowned as a poet, grammarian, philosopher, astronomer, physician, and mathematician.

Ibn Ezra was extremely poor for most his life, and he earned his meager living by tutoring the children of wealthy nobles and composing books for them. This arises from his words in his introduction to the Book of*Eikha*: "These books of mine, in my exile, were holding my hands" – in other words, writing these books allowed him to make a living. It appears that Ibn Ezra succeeded in dealing with his difficulties with a sense of humor, as he describes his fate in a sardonic way.[1]

The periods of his life may be split in two, the first lasting until 1140 and the second from that point until his death.

His Early Years

In the first part of his life, ibn Ezra lived in Spain (although he visited Algeria and elsewhere in North Africa). Ibn Ezra, as we have noted, like his Golden Age colleagues, received a wide-ranging education. On the one hand, he acquired great expertise in the works of great Jewish minds throughout the generations; on the other hand, he was also fluent in Arabic, and he was involved in the rich Muslim culture, its literature and its scientific innovations. During this period, he wrote mainly secular poetry.

Ibn Ezra had a family in Spain, but we know very little about his family. As far as we know, he had five children.[2] His wife and four of his children died at a young age while he was still in Spain. His surviving son, Yitzchak, became known in his own right as a poet. Yitzchak was a close friend of R. Yehuda Ha-Levi, and in the year 1140, when R. Yehuda Ha-Levi moved to Israel, Rabbi Yitzchak joined him. He later settled in Baghdad and apparently converted to Islam.

Leaving Spain and Moving to Italy

The second period of Ibn Ezra's life began in the year 1140. In this year, Ibn Ezra started living a life of wandering throughout Christian Spain. During this period, he composed most of his books.

The reason for this departure was apparently the conquest of Muslim Spain by the Almohads.[3] In 1140, the Almohads initiated a cruel occupation, which compelled Jews to convert to Islam or face murder or expulsion. Ibn Ezra left Spain for Rome, a city of scholars[4] and a wealth of books. Ibn Ezra's departure was clearly under circumstances of haste and fear.[5]The destruction of Spanish Jewry and their rich legacy is lamented by ibn Ezra in his dirge "*Ahah Yarad al Sefarad*":

Alas! The rain / upon Spain / from heaven was foul.

Greatly distressed / stood the West / hands trembling, to howl…
The Torah was withdrawn, the Holy Writ gone / and the Mishna was hidden;
And the Talmud / barren stood / for all its glory was overridden…
Cordoba was stunned / and wholly abandoned / became like the sea's desolation.
The names of the sages / and warriors for the ages / died in famine and privation…

Jews in medieval Europe did not know Arabic, and ibn Ezra took upon himself the task of translating the works of the Spanish scholars, with a twofold aim: supporting himself financially by doing the translation and maintaining Spanish culture even after its destruction. Ibn Ezra saw himself as having a central role in keeping the cultural tradition of Spain alive.

Not only did Ibn Ezra translate the three grammatical treatises of R. Yehuda ibn Hayyuj from Arabic to Hebrew, he also composed books of grammar for European Jews, after he saw personally how their knowledge of Hebrew was not sufficient.

Ibn Ezra acquired some admirers in Italy, who respected his works and recognized their worth (although simultaneously, some opponents took great exception to his interpretations and labeled them as heresy). For his own part, Ibn Ezra was less than impressed by the compositions of his new acquaintances in Europe. In his commentary to *Kohelet* (5:1),[6]he criticizes in his caustic way the poetic style imported from the Land of Israel, which influenced the lands of Ashkenazic Jewry. Instead, he provides the reader with specific guidelines for writing poems; he also stresses the importance of being precise[7] with the Hebrew language, and he complains of the faltering speech of Ashkenazic Jews.[8]

While he lived in Italy, ibn Ezra composed a number of works; among them was his *Peirush Ha-katzar* to the Torah (which we will deal with presently), his commentary to *Nevi'im* (which was lost, aside from his commentary to *Yeshayahu*), and a book dealing with the calendar, *SeferHa-ibbur*. Ibn Ezra did not stay very long in Rome,[9] and he ended up wandering through different towns in northern Italy.

The Life of Ibn Ezra in France

From Italy, ibn Ezra wandered to southern France in 1148. It may be that the cause of this peregrination was the influence of the Second Crusade on the Jews of Italy. Although the Crusades did not pass through Italy *per se*, the initiative for this Crusade came out of Italy, and it therefore may be that some Italian Jews emigrated because of the intensification of anti-Semitism. [10] It is possible that he did not feel sufficiently appreciated in Italy,[11]but it is also possible that he felt responsibility to transfer to other lands the traditions of Spain.

In southern France, Ibn Ezra encountered a community which was excited by his innovations and appreciated his contributions. The translator

Yehuda ibn Tibbon describes the influence of ibn Ezra's writings on the Jews of southern France:[12]

> But the exiles in France[13] and throughout the borders of the Edomites lands did not know Hebrew and they held these books[14] as sealed tomes… until the sage R. Avraham ibn Ezra arrived in their lands and helped them in this respect with his brief compositions, including many precious and valuable matters in them… Thereafter, some of them followed this discipline, and they occupied themselves a bit in it. Then I encountered those who diligently are at its doors, who travel by its lights; men began to seek it, and they tasted of its sweetness, and when they saw that their eyes would light up, their ears opened up and they were drawn after it. Thus, they desired to understand its literature…

During this period, ibn Ezra composed some wide-ranging compositions in the disciplines of astrology and astronomy.[15]

In the year 1152, Ibn Ezra once again took the wanderer's staff into his hand and moved to northern France. It appears that he arrived in the city of Dreux in northern France and fell ill there.[16] Ibn Ezra vowed that if he would rise from his sickbed, he would go back and interpret the Torah a second time. Indeed, after he recuperated, Ibn Ezra wrote a new commentary on the Torah, *Peirush Ha-arokh*.[17]

At the time of his sojourn in northern France, Ibn Ezra apparently merited the great respect of the major scholars of northern France, Rabbeinu Tam and Rashbam. One may learn of Rabbenu Ta'ms great evaluation of Ibn Ezra from the exchange of poetry among the two. This exchange actually began because of Ibn Ezra's criticism of Rabbenu Tam's poetic abilities:

> What gall brings the Gaul in verse's abode?
> Like a stranger in the temple, no fear to tread.
> Were Yaakov to make sweet as the manna his ode,
> I am the sun that melts his heavenly bread.[18]

Rabbeinu Tam responded:

> The Abiezrite may still the thought that springs,
> That his comrade touched between his wings;
> I am the servant of Avraham, his property,
> And I bow and prostrate before him in all things.[19]

In his response to Rabbeinu Tam, Ibn Ezra expresses his humility, and he recognizes Rabbeinu Tam's superiority:

> Is it right for the bull of God's people, their shepherd prized
> To bow his head in a missive to the people's most despised?
> Heaven forfend that God's own angel
> Should bow and prostrate before Bilam chastised.[20]

While in France, Ibn Ezra wrote additional commentaries to some of the*Ketuvim*. He also produced a number of compositions dealing with mathematics,[21]astrology, and astronomy. In 1158, he moved to England, and there he lived until his death in 1164.[22]

Ibn Ezra, Renaissance Man

Despite his difficult and peripatetic life, Ibn Ezra composed dozens of books, more than one thousand poems, mathematical and biblical riddles, [23] and various exercises of wit.[24]

It may be that the riddles were composed by Ibn Ezra when he was lonely or during his wanderings, whether because of the need to dispel his boredom or because of the need to challenge himself in the absence of intellectual equals. However, Ibn Ezra was not only a sharp-tongued thinker; he was a believing Jew, with a passionate love for his people and his Creator, for the Torah and its commandments. Two elements – that of the man of science and the man of spirit – have left their mark very deeply on the different compositions of Ibn Ezra.[25]

We will finish this biography with a quote from Professor Simon's introduction to his edition of Ibn Ezra's "*Yesod Mora*":[26]

> In absolute contrast to his difficult and miserable personal life, his intellectual life was rich. He was a poet and liturgist of great stature, an innovative and authoritative astronomer, a sought-after astrologer. He was is an expert in mathematics and the Hebrew calendar, a grammarian and a linguist, a man of intellect and thought, and above all, the greatest of the biblical commentators throughout the generations.

B. Survey of His Commentaries

Ibn Ezra wrote commentaries on the Torah, the Five *Megillot*, *Yeshayahu*, *Trei Asar, Tehillim, Iyov*, and *Daniel*. It appears from his words that he wrote commentaries to other books of *Tanakh* as well, but they have been lost.[27] As we noted above, he wrote two commentaries to the Torah,*Peirush Ha-katzar* and *Peirush Ha-arokh*, the Short and Long Commentary. *PeirushHa-katzar* was written first, and after a number of years, he produced *Peirush Ha-arokh*, from which there remain only fragments on *Bereishit* and the entirety on*Shemot*.[28]

Ibn Ezra's commentaries, unlike those of the commentators of northern France, are difficult to comprehend. There are a number of reasons for this. First, it may be that these are summaries of lectures that he presented to his students, and the text therefore displays extreme terseness. Second, Ibn Ezra was the first of the commentators of Spain to write in Hebrew, and he was therefore sometimes compelled to coin phrases and expressions that have not endured in the Hebrew language and are thus

unintelligible today. In addition, Ibn Ezra believed that some interpretations should be kept secret, and he therefore wrote them in a sort of code. Because of the difficulties of understanding his explanation, various supercommentaries were composed very soon after Ibn Ezra wrote his commentary.

C. Introduction to the Commentary on the Torah

As opposed to the French commentators, the sages of Spain were accustomed to writing introductions to their compositions. In Ibn Ezra's introduction to his commentary (written in rhyme), ibn Ezra presents the different approaches to biblical interpretation followed by the commentators of previous generations. He voices strong criticism of these approaches, and in the end, he presents his own path. In order to understand his method, we must first survey the interpretive options that Ibn Ezra rejects.

The first approach is the way of the scholars of Spanish *yeshivot*, such as R. Shmuel ben Chofni, R. Yitzchak Ha-yisraeli, and R. Sa'adia Gaon, who weave philosophical views into their commentaries on the Torah. Ibn Ezra has no problem with external wisdom — he himself includes many diverse disciplines in his writings, and he claims that they are essential in order to understand the Torah. Rather, the main argument of Ibn Ezra is that in the framework of a "straight" commentary on the Torah - that is, an interpretation based on *peshat* - one should not expand upon or explore philosophical questions, since they do not contribute to our understanding of the verses and the readers do not understand the philosophical debate:

> One way is long and broad again,
> Beyond our contemporaries' ken…
> And one who wants to understand external science,
> Let him learn from books by men of understanding and reliance…

We should note that despite the fact that Ibn Ezra rejects this path, in a number of places Ibn Ezra himself presents long and convoluted philosophical or scientific analysis.[29]

The second way is that of the Karaites, who deny the tradition of the Oral Torah. Ibn Ezra fights against the Karaites with all of his power, and in his commentary he works hard to prove that there are many commandments which cannot be understood without the Sages' traditions:[30]

> The second view chosen by the twisted…
> And this is the way of Anan and Binyamin,[31] like the Sadducees,
> As well as ben Mashiach, [32]Yeshua,[33] and all who voice heresies.
> The scribes' words they treat with spite,
> And each inclines to the left or to the right.
> Every man as he wants interprets each clause,
> Both in the commandments and in the laws…
> How shall they rely in commands on what their notions have wrought,
> Each moment veering to and fro by their thought;

For in the Torah you will not find
Even one commandment fully defined…
This shows us that Moshe relied on the oral tradition,
Which provides the heart joy and balm for our condition,
For there is naught between the oral and written teaching;
They both are our patrimony, beyond impeaching…

The third way is the way of those who understand the Torah as allegory. Ibn Ezra mainly opposes this as a path leading to Christianity:

The third way is one of darkness and murk…
In all things, they see secrets as they piddle,
Believing that the Torah and its rules are a riddle;
I decline to address at length their arts,
For "they are a people of wayward hearts" (*Tehillim* 95:10).

Ibn Ezra believes that one may use allegory only when there is no other way to interpret the verse: [34]

If logic forces one to deny it,
If the pure senses[35] make one defy it,
Then we must seek out the transcendental,
For common sense[36] is the fundamental.
The Torah was not for the unintelligent designed,
And the emissary between man and God is his mind.
As long as one's intellect does not reject it,
We must explain the verse simply and thus respect it.

The fourth way is that of the homiletic exegetes in Christian lands, who do not relate to the *peshat* of the verses, instead following the Midrashic approach. This is superfluous, as the Sages have already done this, and there is no need to "reinvent the wheel:"

This is the way of the sages in the lands of the Edomites and the Greeks
Who do not give weight to grammatical techniques…
Now since we have found in the ancient books this lore
Why should the latter-day scholars do this anymore?

To describe his own interpretive path (which we will analyze in the coming lecture, God willing), ibn Ezra uses the metaphor of the point inside a circle. The point symbolizes the "straight" interpretation, the truth, and everything else radiates out from it. For example, the Christian path is outside the circle entirely, but the fourth way is very close to the center.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

[1] The most prominent example is the poem which Ibn Ezra composed describing the advantages of his worn cloak (brought here in part):

I have a cloak which is like a sieve;
To winnow wheat or barley, I could give.
I will spread it out for a tent at evenfall,
And the stars above will put light in it, as I live.

His lack of fortune in every profession he turned to is described in a magnificent poem as well (brought here in part):

Constellations and stars in their state,
To my birthplace, they incline as they rise.
Were candles to be my merchandise,
The sun would not be taken in until my demise.
I try to succeed, but I am not able,
For they have wronged me, the stars of my skies.
Were I a merchant of burial shrouds,
As I live, no man dies.

[2] This is what he mentions in his commentary on *Shemot* 2:2.

[3] See lesson #12.

[4] The most famous of them was the author of the *Arukh*, R. Natan ben R. Yechiel.

[5] Echoes of this may be found in his poems in the introductions to the *Megillot*:

From his land they did banish,
From the realms of the Spanish;
To Rome he did vanish
With a fainting soul.
(Introduction to *Kohelet*)
And I am Avraham son of Meir, from distant lands.
He took me out from the land of Spain, the wrathful oppressors' hands.
(Introduction to *Eikha*)

[6] In his commentary to the Five *Megillot,* he indicates that these are the first commentaries which he composed to Scripture.

[7] Ibn Ezra opposed and considered inferior the style of R. Eliezer Ha-Kalir (*Eretz Yisrael* poet of the 6th century), which the European scholars imitated. It may that Ibn Ezra's criticism was the cause of the removal of Ha-Kalir's poems from Sephardic and Eastern prayer books. They were replaced by the poets of Spain, including Ibn Ezra himself, as well as those of R. Shlomo ibn Gabirol and Moshe Ibn Ezra.

[8] This is what he writes:

> We are obligated to know the grammar of the language, so that we will not make a mistake. For example, there are those who say the Grace After Meals and pronounce the word "*zunenu*," but they do not know that "*zanenu*" is from the root *zana* (to stray), just as "*anenu*" comes from "*ana*" (to answer). They do not realize that the root is "*zan*" (to provide food), for "*zunenu*" is comparable to (*Tehillim* 85:5): "Restore us again (*shuvenu*), O God of our salvation."

[9] It may be that sharp criticism of the views of his predecessors brought about a dispute with the sages of Rome.

[10] Ibn Ezra, as a child of Spanish Jewry and a wanderer in France, was familiar with the anti-Semitism of both Muslims and Christians. He writes in his well-known poem "*Tzama Nafshi*":

See, the true mistress [Judaism]
While the maidservant does stress [Namely Hagar, the mother of Yishmael]
"It is your child who is lifeless [Islam claims that the Jewish nation is not the chosen people, that it is "the dead child;" see *I Melakhim* 3:22-23]
And my child who lives" [They claim that Islam is the chosen faith]
Is this not your portion from the start? [The nation of Israel is God's portion — "For God's portion is his people," *Devarim* 32:9)
Seek out his blood's part! [Seek to avenge the blood of Israel]
Pour wrath on the head of the living goat. [Seek the blood of Israel from the Christians, symbolized by a goat. The Christian Church is seen by the Sages as the successor to Edom, founded by Esav, who was known as "*ish sa'ir*" in *Bereishit* 27:11, which can be translated as "hirsute man" or "hircine man"]

[11] As he wrote in his poem, "*Nedod Hesir Oni*":

There is no glory among the Edomites,
For any scholar who there alights,
In the land of the Kedarites.
And they hoot at us.

[12] Yehuda ibn Tibbon (1120-1190) is often called “the father of the translators.” Among the important compositions which he translated from Arabic to Hebrew are R. Sa’adia Gaon’s *Emunot Ve-De’ot*, Bachya ibn Paquda’s *Chovot Ha-levavot*, and R. Yehuda Ha-Levi’s *Sefer Ha-kuzari*. In his youth, when he was thirty years old, he had to leave his birthplace Granada for Provence in southern France; it seems that he left because of the Almohad invasion. He apparently knew Ibn Ezra in Spain, and afterwards encountered him once again in France.

[13] Citing *Ovadia* 1:20. The “Tzarfat” and “Sefarad” mentioned in this verse are most probably not France and Spain, as they have been used respectively for the past millennium in Hebrew, but rather places in North Africa and Asia Minor.

[14] This is a reference to the grammarians R. Yehuda ben Hayyuj, Yona ibn Janach, and R. Shmuel Ha-Nagid.

[15] His astronomical works were famous from the 13th to the 15th centuries; *Sefer Ha-Ibbur* and*Reishit Chokhma* were translated into Latin, Spanish, and French. For this reason, the lunar crater Abenezra (21.0°S 11.9°E) was named after him. (I thank my brother Avraham Poupko for this point.)

[16] It may be that his illness was the result of his extensive travels at an advanced age.

[17] This is what he writes in his introduction to*Peirush Ha-Arokh* (in *Ha-Keter* edition, *Bereishit*, vol. I, p. 27): “I made a vow to God in my illness to explain the law given on Mount Sinai.”

[18] This means the following:

What gall brings the Gaul in verse’s abode? [What makes this Frenchman, Rabbeinu Tam, think he can write poetry?]
Like a stranger in the temple, no fear to tread. {Rabbeinu Tam is trampling the holy precincts of poetry]
Were Yaakov to make sweet as the manna his ode [If Rabbeinu Yaakov Tam would write poetry as sweet as manna]
I am the sun that melts his heavenly bread. [Then Ibn Ezra will take the role of the midday sun, melting the manna, as described in*Shemot* 16:21; i.e., Ibn Ezra’s poetical abilities far exceed those of Rabbeinu Tam)

[19] This means the following:

The Abiezrite may still the thought that springs [Ibn Ezra may rest at ease]
That his comrade touched between his wings [That his friend has stolen his occupation]
I am the servant of Avraham, his property [Rabbeinu Tam sees R. Avraham ibn Ezra as his master, referencing the eponymous patriarch in *Bereishit* 23:18 and 24:34)
And I bow and prostrate before him in all things [Rabbeinu Tam concedes that Ibn Ezra has the greater skills]

[20] This means the following:

Is it right for the bull of God’s people, their shepherd prized [*Avir*, bull is used as a term for the patriarch Yaakov, *Bereishit* 49:24; here it refers to Rabbeinu Tam, the bull of God’s people and their shepherd]
To bow his head in a missive to the people’s most despised? [To humble himself before the lowly Ibn Ezra]
Heaven forfend that God’s own angel [a term of honor for Rabbeinu Tam]
Should bow and prostrate before Bilam chastised.

Since Rabbeinu Tam concluded with the words “And I bow and prostrate before him,” words based on Bilam’s self-effacement before the angel of God in *Bamidbar* 22:31, Ibn Ezra compares himself to Bilam and Rabbeinu Tam to the angel of God.

[21] It is accepted among researchers that the decimal numeral system, which had been known for ages in India, first appeared in Europe in Ibn Ezra’s writings. The following comes from Ibn Ezra’s"*Sefer Ha-mispar*", describing the number zero:

Now, if he does not have any one, but he does have in the next level, i.e., the tens, he should put a circular symbol first, to indicate that in the first level there are none, and then he should write the number of tens afterwards.

[22] It is told of ibn Ezra that in the year of his death, he jokingly applied the following verse to himself (*Bereishit* 12:4): “And Avraham was seventy five years old when he left Charan” the

city; he said, “And Avraham was seventy five years old when he left *charon*” — the furious wrath of the world.

[23] Here are two of his riddles:

> What is the name which has the quality,
> That the fourth is a fourth of the third,
> And the second is a tenth of the fourth,
> And the first to the second is a fifth?

The answer is Aharon (*alef-heh-reish-nun*), and the values are based on *gematria*:

> “That the fourth is a fourth of the third” — the fourth letter (*nun* = 50) has a value which is one quarter of the third letter (*reish* = 200).
> “And the second is a tenth of the fourth” — the second letter (*heh* = 5) has a value which is a tenth of the fourth letter (*nun* = 50).
> “And the first to the second is a fifth” — and the first letter (*alef* = 1) is a value which is a fifth of the second letter.

An additional riddle:

> In a country without soil,
> From knights to the blood royal,
> They walk with no toil.
> If the king is made spoil,
> All shuffle off this mortal coil.

This is description of chess.

[24] Ibn Ezra loved palindromes. Consider the following examples:

אבי, אל חי שמך, למה מלך משיח לא יבא?

(My father, named Living God, why will the King Messiah not come?)

דעו מאביכם כי לא בוש אבוש, שוב אשוב אליכם כי בא מועד.

(Know from your Father that I will certainly not tarry; I will certainly return to you when the appointed time comes.)

[25] See his commentary to the verse (*Shemot*31:3), “And I fill him with the spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge, in every discipline,” which describes Betzalel:

> Betzalel was filled with every subject of mathematics, algebra, geometry, astronomy, science, and the secrets of the soul. He had an advantage over all of the men of his generation: he knew every discipline, while many of the “wise of heart” did not know even one discipline. This is why it says, “in every discipline.”

It appears that ibn Ezra is actually describing himself.

[26] This is book dealing with the reasons for the*mitzvot*.

[27] In fact, R. Moshe Kimchi wrote his commentaries to *Mishlei* and *Ezra-Nechemya*.

[28] *Peirush Ha-katzar* to *Sefer Bereishit* is published in the *Ha-keter* edition (Bar-Ilan University).

[29] For example, in his commentary to *Shemot*12:2, Ibn Ezra explains at length the Hebrew calendar, and he rejects the Karaite approach to the topic. In his commentary to *Shemot* 3:15, Ibn Ezra deals at great length with the Holy Names and the significance of their numerical value.

[30] We will expand on this in the coming lesson.

[31] This is Binyamin ben Moshe Nahawandi, of the 9th century, one of the founders of the Karaite community in Jerusalem.

[32] This is Hasun ben Mashiach, a Karaite sage who lived in Baghdad in the 10th century.

[33] This is Yeshua ben Yehuda, a Karaite sage of Ibn Ezra’s generation.

[34] For example, Ibn Ezra describes the term “foreskin of the heart” as an instance of a situation in which one is obligated to explain the verse in a metaphorical way.

[35] This indicates that one denies that which is obvious to the senses.

[36] This refers to a rational approach.

DAYS OF DELIVERANCE: ESSAYS ON PURIM AND HANUKKAH

by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

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Lecture #14:
R. Avraham ibn Ezra, Part II

A. Exegetical Approach

In our previous lecture, we dealt with Ibn Ezra's biography and the four exegetical approaches that he rejects. In this lecture, we will discuss the fifth approach, the way in which Ibn Ezra interprets the Torah. Already in his introduction to the Torah (*Peirush Ha-Katzar*), Ibn Ezra alludes to his exegetical approach:

> This is the book of the straight
> By Avraham the bard, the work I create
> According to binding grammar's dictate,
> Fit in reason's eyes, beyond debate,
> And all its supporters it shall elate.

Ibn Ezra describes his commentary as "the book of the straight,"[1] and an analysis of his commentaries indicates that the word "straight" is a reference to following the way of *peshat*. Ibn Ezra explains the work as a commentary based on the fundamentals of grammar ("According to binding grammar's dictate") and conforming to the requirements of logic ("Fit in reason's eyes"). As his introduction continues, Ibn Ezra lays out what defines his interpretation, "The fifth among these ways:"

> The fifth among these ways,
> The foundation of my commentary upon them stays;
> And it is right in my eye,
> Before God's face on High.
> His awe alone I savor;
> In the Torah, I will never show favor.
> I will explicate each word's grammar with all of my strength,
> And afterwards as I am able, I will explain it at length…
> Because *derash* does not make the way of *peshat* mistaken,
> For the Torah has seventy faces which we may awaken.
> Only when it comes to teachings, laws, and decrees,
> If the verse has two reasons which may please,
> And the one reason relies on the scribes' expertise,
> For they are all righteous, we need no guarantees,
> We will doubtless rely on their truth, with strong hands and ease.
> God forbid that we may involve ourselves with Sadducees,
> Who say that the scribes contradict the details written in these.
> Rather, our predecessors embody truth,
> And all of their words are truth;
> And Lord God of truth
> Shall direct his servant on the way of truth.

Ibn Ezra begins by declaring that he does not feel himself chained to previous commentaries ("In the Torah, I will never show favor"); this refers both to Midrashic sources and the commentaries of his predecessors. Furthermore, Ibn Ezra expresses his intent to explain the Torah through the rules of grammar, linguistics, and reason – i.e., human intelligence.

However, this is all stated with regard to the narrative sections of the Torah; in his commentaries to the halakhic part of the Torah, Ibn Ezra indeed sees himself as bound to the Sages' exegesis. (Even if he is not chained to the Sages' method, the nature of halakhic exegesis, he sees himself as committed to the Sages' conclusion.[2])

The nature of the commentary in practice matches his declarations of intent. Ibn Ezra's commentary is indeed characterized by a great emphasis on grammar, language, and stylistic sensitivity. Similarly, his commentary is anchored in rationalism, and he includes, among the rest, comments based on his multi-disciplinary knowledge. Ibn Ezra sets himself apart from his contemporaries, the*peshat*-based exegetes of France: although they do display some stylistic sensitivity, linguistic and grammatical exactitude is not common among the French *pashtanim*. Moreover, in his uncompromising desire to explain *Tanakh* according to the Sages' views as well, Ibn Ezra is different from the French exegetes.[3]

In general, Ibn Ezra writes in a concise, terse form, and sometimes his severe brevity makes it difficult to understand what exactly he means.[4] Ibn Ezra does not have the expansive knowledge of Talmudic sources that we find among the sages of northern France, and he therefore does not quote a great deal from the Sages or refer to them often. A particularly prominent characteristic of Ibn Ezra's commentary is his reference to other commentaries. (In his commentaries, over thirty other exegetes are mentioned![5]) Sometimes, he accepts their words and sometimes he rejects them; this rejection may be expressed with respect and admiration or with anger and mockery, usually accompanied with caustic wit.

B. Issues of Language and Grammar

As we have said, Ibn Ezra's commentaries include broader reference to linguistic and grammatical issues. Aside from specific commentaries in which Ibn Ezra explains a word or verse based on grammatical considerations (based in part on the commentaries of the grammarians who preceded him), Ibn Ezra formulates in a consistent way linguistic and grammatical rules in his commentary. Let us see a number of examples for this.

1) Ibn Ezra has a tendency to avoid identifying exceptions to the rule; he strives to formulate rules which are adequate for all circumstances. This is apparent in his approach to the confounding term "*na."* Ibn Janach, in *Sefer Ha-shorashim*, explains that the meaning of the word "*na"* is "now" or "please" (as Rashi, *Bamidbar* 12:13, explains as well). When Aharon asks Moshe to pray for Miriam, he says

(*Bamidbar* 12:12), "Let her*na* not be like the dead…" Ibn Janach interprets this as a term of supplication and request. As for Moshe's prayer, "God, *na*, heal her, *na*" (ibid. v. 13), Ibn Janach explains the first appearance of the word as a term of supplication and the second appearance as a term of urgency, thus rendering it: "God, please, heal her now."[6] Ibn Ezra (*Shemot* 4:13) opposes this, preferring to define "*na*" the same way throughout the passage:

> …I have already explained **that every *"na"* in *Tanakh* is "now."** Similarly, "Speak now in the people's ears" (*Shemot* 11:2); "Hear now, Yehoshua" (*Zekharya* 3:8); "This man must now be put to death" (*Yirmeyahu* 38:4); "Woe now to us, for we have sinned" (*Eikha* 5:16).

Ibn Ezra systematically explains all of the appearances of the word "*na"*[7] as meaning "now" exclusively.[8]

Ibn Ezra also defines the word "*im*" following the same principle. The word describes a state that is not necessarily applicable — in other words, a conditional situation. This interpretation creates a problem with the verse, "*Im* you shall lend money to my people" (*Shemot* 22:24), because there is a *mitzva* to lend to a pauper. Rashi, in his commentary to this verse, quotes the view of the Sages, according to whom this is one of three instances in which "*im*" does not indicate what follows is optional. Ibn Ezra, as is his wont, attempts to reduce the number of exceptions to any rule, and he gives a unique meaning to all of the ostensibly exceptional appearances of "*im.*" He thus explains the verse: "If God has given you the wherewithal to allow you to lend to a pauper." The lending is conditional because not every individual is in a financial position to be able to and required to lend to his impoverished brother.[9]

2) An additional linguistic element of Ibn Ezra's view is the meaninglessness of trivial changes; the verse uses synonyms frequently, and there need be no justification for interchanging them. Similarly, there is no reason necessary for variations in spelling. In this context, one of the most prominent examples that Ibn Ezra addresses (*Shemot* 20:1) is the difference between the Ten Commandments in*Shemot* and in *Devarim*:

> Behold, we have seen that from the beginning "I" until the end "who will bear His name in vain" (*Shemot*20:7), there is no difference between the two passages. From the beginning of "Remember" (*ibid.* v. 7) until the end of the Ten Commandments, there is an alteration at every opportunity. The first is "Remember," while the second is "Keep" (*Devarim* 5:12)…

After a long list of comparisons and various answers attempting to resolve the contradictions, Ibn Ezra writes:

> Avraham the author says: This is the way of those who speak the Holy Tongue. Sometimes they will explain their words in great detail, and sometimes they will state matters succinctly and tersely, so that the listener may understand their meaning. Know that the words are like

> bodies, while the meanings are like souls, and the body is like the soul's utensil; therefore, the rule of all the wise in every language is that they maintain the meanings, but they do not worry about changing the terminology as long as the meaning remains the same.
>
> I will present some examples of this. God says to Kayin, "You are cursed from the earth… When you work the earth, it will no longer give its strength to you; you shall be a wanderer and a nomad in the land" (*Bereishit* 4:11-12). Kayin replies, "Behold, you have banished me today from the face of the earth" (v. 14). Only a thoughtless person would believe that the meaning is not the same because of the change in terminology. Eliezer says (*ibid.*24:17): "Please let me sip," but he later says (*ibid.* v. 45): "I said to her: 'Please let me drink.'"
>
> There are many more examples of this phenomenon: one may find different words, but the meaning is the same. As I have already stated, sometimes their way is a brief one, and sometimes it is long, so that sometimes one will add or remove a prefix or suffix, but the matter remains the same…
>
> Nevertheless, the members of this generation look for a reason for variations in spelling…

3) Another rule propounded by Ibn Ezra is "*Moshekh atzmo ve-acher immo,"* "It draws itself and another along with it."[10]This rule means that the verse will often use a word (or a number of words, or even a one-letter prefix) to refer to multiple items, even though it appears in the text only once. Using this rule, Ibn Ezra explains many verses in *Tanakh*.

One example of this is found in Moshe's final blessings to the tribes of Israel (*Devarim* 33:6), "May Reuven liveand not die, and may his men[11] be numbered." The second clause is quite troubling, as it is not a blessing but a curse.[12] Ibn Ezra explains that "not" is subject to the rule of "*Moshekh atzmo ve-acher immo*:"

> "And may his men be numbered" — And may his men **not** be numbered; it is like, "And I did not study wisdom" (*Mishlei* 30:2-3) and "as" in "as Almighty God" (*Shemot* 6:3), as I have explained many verses.

According to Ibn Ezra, the term "not" refers to both dying in the first clause and being numbered in the second, as if it were written, "May Reuven live and not die, andmay his men not be numbered." The second half of the verse thus means: may the men of the tribe not be few in number, but rather many.

Let us look at two other examples of*"Moshekh atzmo ve-acher immo"*:

> For I am more of an ignoramus than any man; I do not have human understanding. And I did not study wisdom, and knowledge of the holy I know. (*Mishlei* 20:2-3)

The verses are difficult: if the person is ignorant and unlearned, how would he know "knowledge of the holy"? According to Ibn Ezra, one should explain the verse so that the adverb "not" may be applied not only to the first clause, but to the second clause as well, as if it were written: And I did not study wisdom, and knowledge of the holy I know **not**.

The last example is from the beginning of *Parashat Vaera* (*Shemot* 6:3): "And I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov as 'Almighty God', but my name 'Lord' I did not make Myself known to them." According to Ibn Ezra, one should explain the verse as if it is were written: And I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov as "Almighty God," but **by** my name "Lord" I did not make myself known to them. An interesting point is that in this example, Ibn Ezra is applying the rule not to a word, but to a prefix, the single letter *bet*, which can mean in, as, by, with, etc.

C. Logic and Reason

Ibn Ezra applies the test of rationality when he explains the verses. He writes in his introduction (cited above) that his way is "Fit in reason's eyes." Therefore, when the words of the Sages are not logical in his eyes, he will challenge them (in the narrative part of the Torah).

Thus, for example, in the story of the Binding of Yitzchak (*Bereishit* 22:4), Ibn Ezra finds it illogical to say that Yitzchak was thirty-seven at the time, as the Sages suggest (*Bereishit Rabba* 56:1). If that were true, the test would be of Yitzchak, not of Avraham! Therefore, Yitzchak must be twelve or thirteen years old when the story takes place:

> Our Rabbis have said that Yitzchak was, at the Binding, thirty-seven years old. Now, if these are words of tradition, we will accept them; but logically, this is not proper, for Yitzchak's righteousness should be revealed, and his reward would be double the reward of his father – he gave himself over willingly to be slaughtered. However, the verse tells us nothing about Yitzchak. Others claim that he was five years old, but this cannot be, because he carried the wood for the offering. What is most reasonable is that he was about thirteen years old, and his father compelled him and bound him against his will. The evidence[13] of this is that his father hid the secret from him.

We should note that in this interpretation, Ibn Ezra distinguishes between two types of Midrashic sources, tradition (*kabbala*) and speculation (*sevara*), and in this he determines the limits of following one's personal view. If there is a *kabbala*, a tradition of the Sages handed down from Moshe Rabbeinu, we must accept their words. However, if their words are speculation, an interpretation that they concocted of their own accord, their

speculation is no better than anyone else's. This is what he says in his commentary[14] to *Bereishit* 11:29 (*PeirushHa-arokh*):

> Now, some have said[15] that Sara was called "Yiska" because she would foresee (*sokha*) with the Holy Spirit, but this is by way of hermeneutics or speculation, not tradition. Moreover, this is not an issue of a commandment.

In other words, there is no requirement to accept the Sages' words when it arises "by way of hermeneutics or speculation." However, if this aggadic material is the Sages' *kabbala*, then there would be no option but to accept them.

This is most explicitly stated when Ibn Ezra explains the term "*Ur Kasdim.*" Is Ur the name of a city or is it a term for fire?

> Our predecessors have stated that Avraham Avinu was cast into a fiery furnace. This is not mentioned in the verse, but if it is a tradition, we will accept it like the words of the Torah. (*Peirush Ha-arokh*, *Bereishit* 11:28)

An additional interpretation of the Ibn Ezra based on the rational approach is his understanding of the plagues in Egypt. According to Ibn Ezra, the Israelites suffered just as much from the plagues as the Egyptians. This is how Ibn Ezra explains *Shemot* 7:24: "All of Egypt dug around the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the waters of the Nile." He writes:

> Many say that when the water was in the hands of the Egyptian, it was as red as blood, but it turned clear again when in the hands of the Israelites. If so, why was this sign[miraculous occurrence] not written in the Torah? In my view, the plagues of blood and frogs and lice included Egyptians and Hebrews, for we must follow what is written. Now, these three caused a bit of damage, but in the plague of wild animals, which was severe, God distinguished between Egypt and Israel. The same was true of the plagues of pestilence and hail because of their herds. However, this was not true of boils and locusts, because they were leaving Egypt. (*Peirush Ha-arokh ad loc*.)

Thus, just as the Egyptians dug, the Hebrews dug as well. Ibn Ezra assumes that if the Torah is describing a situation in which the Jewish nation is miraculously spared suffering, it would mention this explicitly, because there is no reason for the Torah to conceal miracles.[16]Therefore, one cannot assume that there is a difference between Israel and Egypt in the plagues unless this is stated explicitly in the verse. For example, concerning the plagues of wild animals, pestilence, and hail, it is explicitly stated that the Jews did not suffer from these plagues (*Shemot*8:17; 9:6, 25). If so, according to Ibn Ezra, when the verse notes that "All of Egypt" had to dig for drinking water, this refers to all of the residents of Egypt, natives and Hebrews alike. Thus, the Israelites suffered equally from blood, frogs, lice, boils, and locusts.[17]

D. Structure and Sequence in the Torah

According to Ibn Ezra, the Torah is written generally according to chronological sequence. Despite this, sometimes there are some divergences from chronological sequence, a phenomenon that is describes as "*Ein mukdam u-me'uchar ba-Torah,*" "There is no earlier or later in the Torah." Ibn Ezra stresses that in every place in which we encounter this phenomenon, we must explain why the verses alter the chronological sequence and what the aim is in juxtaposing one passage with the next.[18]

One of the most famous examples of "*Ein mukdam u-meuchar*" and the juxtaposition of passages appears in the beginning of *Parashat Yitro*. There is a famous dispute as to whether Yitro arrived before the Giving of the Torah, and the verses are written in their proper chronological order, or if Yitro came after the Giving of the Torah, and the verses are not in order.[19] Ibn Ezra proves that Yitro arrived after the Giving of the Torah and he explains the reason for the change in the order:

> Now I will explain why the passage of Yitro was inserted here. Because we have mentioned above the evil done by Amalek to Israel, here we mention the contrasting good that Yitro did for Israel. It is written, "And Yitro was elated about all the good" (*Shemot* 18:9), and he gave good and correct advice to Moshe and to Israel, and Moshe said to him, "And you will be eyes for us" (*Bamidbar*10:31), and this means that he enlightened their eyes. Now, Sha'ul said [addressing the Kenites, Yitro's descendants], "And you did kindness with all of the Israelites" (*I Shemuel*15:6). Because it is written above (17:16), "God is at war with Amalek," Israel must fight [Amalek] when God will grant them rest [from their other enemies]. So it mentioned the matter of Yitro here because [his descendants] reside near the nation of Amalek; this will remind Israel of the kindness of the ancestor, and they will not touch his seed. (*PeirushHa-arokh*, *Shemot* 18:1)

According to Ibn Ezra, the reason for the change of the chronological sequence is to sharpen the distinction between Amalek and Yitro, "to separate between this act and that." [20]Similarly, (Ibn Ezra adds the historical element of the relationship to the family of the Kenites; despite the fact that the Kenites live among the Amalekites, we must repay the kindness of Yitro and not include them in the war with Amalek.

Ibn Ezra relates a great deal to the juxtaposition of the passages in the halakhic sections of the Torah, and he refuses to accept a capricious sequence of laws. In *Peirush Ha-arokh* to *Shemot* 21:2, he describes his essential approach to the order of *mitzvot* in the Torah:

> "When you buy" — Before I am able to explain this, I must present the rule that each and every law or commandment stands on its own. If we happen to find a reason why this law is adjacent to that one or this commandment to that one, we will cling to it with all of our

ability. However, if we are unable to do so, we will believe that the deficiency comes from our lack of intelligence.

[In this case, this law comes first because] there is no more difficult thing for a human being than being under the control of another human being; therefore, it starts with the law of the slave.[21]

There is an apparent contradiction here. On the one hand, Ibn Ezra proclaims that "each and every law or commandment stands on its own;" on the other hand, he says that there is a reason for the order of the laws. We may find a resolution in his comments to *Devarim* 24:6:

"No one shall take a mill or an upper millstone in pledge" — The deniers say that this passage is attached to "to be happy with his wife" (*ibid.* v. 5) because this alludes to sleeping, for it is prohibited to withhold himself from sleeping, but this is vanity and emptiness…

As for the one who relies on the juxtaposition of passages, this is not a valid claim, as every commandment stands on its own. The juxtaposition is the way of*derash*. Still, this passage is cohesive…

Ibn Ezra opposes the interpretation of the Karaites,[22] who explain the *mitzva*, "No one shall take a mill or an upper millstone in pledge," as a prohibition to withhold a wife's conjugal rights. The Karaites reach this understanding based on the juxtaposition of the passages. In the previous verse, it says, "When a man is newly married, he shall not go out with the army or be liable for any other public duty. He shall be free at home one year to be happy with his wife whom he has taken." In there view, the first verse is a positive command, and the next verse, concerning the millstone, is the negative prohibition.[23]Concerning this, Ibn Ezra says that every*mitzva* stands on its own, that it is impossible to derive the content of the*mitzva* based on the juxtaposition; nevertheless, one may explain this "in the way of *derash*" – that is, in a way which does not affect the understanding of the*peshat* of the verses.

Finally, let us see the view of Ibn Ezra when it comes to the juxtaposition of passages in the context of verses 15-17 of chapter 21 of *Shemot*, in the first part of*Parashat Mishpatim*. In this passage, a number of laws are brought in sequence, and there is no apparent link between them:

15. Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death.

16. Whoever steals a man and sells him, if he is found in his hands, shall be put to death.
17. Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death.

Concerning the juxtaposition of these verses, Ibn Ezra cites the Gaon (Rabbeinu Saadia)[24] in his commentary to the middle verse (*Peirush Ha-arokh*):

> The Gaon says: Why does this verse come in between striking a parent and cursing a parent? He responds that the verse addresses reality, because minors who are kidnapped and grow up in a foreign place do not know their fathers, so it may come to pass that they may strike them or curse them. The punishment is for the kidnapper.

According to Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon, the verses describe the reality of human trafficking: most of the victims are minors, and it may be that when they return as adults, they may strike or curse their parents without knowing who they are. In a case such as this, the punishment for striking or cursing is upon the kidnapper.

We must stress that Ibn Ezra says that "the verse addresses reality" (literally, "the present," i.e., the usual circumstances). Ibn Ezra does not discount the simple meaning of the text, which prescribes the penalties in the usual case of a man knowingly striking his parents, and this distinguishes him from the Karaites mentioned above.

God willing, in the next lecture we will discuss Ibn Ezra's understanding of the relationship between the Written and the Oral Torah.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

[1] Certainly, his intent is not to refer to the Book of*Bereishit,* which is also described as "the book of the straight," because Ibn Ezra writes explicitly that this is "the book of the straight/ by Avraham the bard," i.e., the work composed by R. Avraham Ibn Ezra.
[2] We will expand on this, God willing, in the coming lesson.
[3] As we continue our analysis, it will become clear that despite his declaration of principles concerning his fidelity to the Sages, ibn Ezra often diverges from the Sages' exegesis.
[4] We have discussed the motives for his terse, difficult style in the previous lesson.
[5] A full list appears in E.Z. Melamed, *Mefarshei Ha-Mikra* vol. II (Jerusalem, 5735).
[6] Thus, it makes sense that God responds that healing her immediately is not an option, declaring (v. 14) "Certainly, if her father were to spit in her face, would she not be embarrassed for seven days?"

[7] In comparing Ibn Ezra's explanations of the verses in which Rashi states that "*na*" is a term of request, we find that Ibn Ezra's commentary fits well in the *peshat* of the verses.
[8] There is, however, one case in which "*na*" does have another meaning. In describing the eating of the paschal offering, the Torah commands, "Do not eat of it *na*" (*Shemot* 12:9). Ibn Ezra explains this as well:

> What appears correct to me is that it has nothing like it in *Tanakh*. What it means is the opposite of cooked, that which is called "raw" elsewhere, for example, "He will not take from you cooked meat, but rather raw" (*II Shemuel* 2:15). As I have already said, the Arabic language for the most part is similar to the Hebrew language. Now, raw meat is called in Arabic *nayyeh*, and the letter *alef, heh, vav* and *yud* are interchangeable in their language as in ours.

Thus, the Arabic *nayyeh* becomes the Hebrew *na*, but only in this case.
[9] Ibn Ezra does the same in the two additional places in which the Sages interpret "*im"* as introducing an obligation. In *Shemot* 20:21-22, the verse states, "Make me an altar of earth… *Im* you shall build an altar of stones," and Ibn Ezra explains the following:

> The meaning of "*Im* you shall build" is as follows: Make Me an altar of earth right now… And if you merit to enter the land, then you shall build an altar of stones.

In *Vayikra* 2:14, the verse states, "*Im* you shall offer a first-fruits offering to God." Ibn Ezra explains that we are not talking about the *omer* offering, which is mandatory, but rather a voluntary flour-offering:

> Many have said that the word "*im*" refers to an obligation. In my view, this is unnecessary, because the obligation is to bring the premier of the first-fruits, not the first-fruits, and one who wants to bring a flour-offering from the first-fruits voluntarily is entitled to do so.

[10] The English term for this is ellipsis.
[11] The term "*metei mispar,*" literally "men of number," appears a number of times in *Tanakh*, and it refers to a sparse population; see *Bereishit* 34:4,*Devarim* 26:5, *Yeshayahu* 3:25. The word "*metei*" should not be confused with "*meitei*," which means "the dead of," as in "*meitei milchama*," "casualties of war" (ibid. 22:2).
[12] Rashi, following Onkelos, explains: "'And may his men be numbered' — He shall be counted along with his other brothers…" In other words, his men should be considered in the number of the tribes of Israel. In Rashi's view, because of Reuven's sin (see *Bereishit* 35:22), there was speculation that he would not be considered a tribe. Moshe therefore stresses that despite the sin, he will still be considered in the number of tribes.
[13] Literally, "the witness." This is a common expression used by Ibn Ezra.
[14] In the *Torat Chayim* edition, this appears at the end of volume I of *Bereishit*. In Bar-Ilan University's Responsa Project, it appears under the name *Shitta Acheret*.
[15] *Seder Olam* II; *Sanhedrin* 69b; see Rashi *ad loc*. v. 29.
[16] See also his commentary to *Bereishit* 46:23, addressing the Sages' view (cited by Rashi *ad loc*., v. 26) that Yokheved was born "between the walls" as they entered Egypt.
[17] Ibn Ezra (*ad loc*.) explains why the Israelites were spared certain plagues but not others.
[18] I. Gottlieb, *Yesh Seder La-Mikra: Chazal U-Farshanei Yemei Ha-beinayim al Mukdam U-Me'uchar Ba-Torah* (Jerusalem-Ramat Gan, 2009), counts more than 150 cases of discussion of juxtaposition of passages, in its many varieties, in Ibn Ezra's commentary.
[19] See *Mekhilta*, beginning of *Parashat Yitro; Zevachim* 116a; Ramban, *Shemot* 18:1.
[20] This juxtaposition is quite appropriate when we consider the similar terminology in the two passages, as Cassuto notes in his commentary on*Shemot*: About Amalek it says, "And Amalek came, and it waged **war**" (*Shemot* 17:8), and about Yitro it says, "And Yitro came… And each inquired of the other's **peace**…" (18:5-7). Similarly, in the battle with Amalek, Moshe says to Yehoshua, "**Select men** for us" (17:9), while in the application of Yitro's counsel, it says "And Moshe **selected men** of valor" (18:25); other examples abound.
[21] See also his commentary to *Vayikra* 19:3;*Devarim* 16:18, 24:6.
[22] Ibn Ezra's relationship to the Karaites will be dealt with in the next lecture.
[23] They prove this from the verse in *Iyov* (31:10), "Then let my wife grind for another." Thus, grinding is a euphemism for intercourse.
[24] Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon is quoted in Ibn Ezra's commentary dozens of times – mainly so that Ibn Ezra may challenge his view.

FESTIVAL OF FREEDOM: ESSAYS ON PESAH AND THE HAGGADAH

by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

Lecture #15:
Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra, Part III

A. Evaluating *Midrash Halakha*

Integration of *Peshat* and *Derash* in Halakhic Passages

In his introduction to *Peirush Ha-katzar*, Ibn Ezra defines his relationship to halakhic *derash*:

> Only when it comes to teachings, laws and decrees,
> If the verse has two reasons which may please,
> And the one reason relies on the scribes' expertise,
> For they are all righteous, we need no guarantees,
> We will doubtless rely on their truth, with strong hands and ease.
> God forbid that we may involve ourselves with Sadducees,
> Who say that the scribes contradict the details written in these.
> Rather, our predecessors embody truth,
> And all of their words are truth;
> And Lord God of truth
> Shall direct his servant on the way of truth

Ibn Ezra believes that it is inconceivable for the Sages' halakhic tradition to contradict the*peshat* of the verses. On this point, he argues with the Rashbam, who goes as far as to explain the halakhic verses against the tradition of the Sages. As we have explained in the previous lessons, Ibn Ezra supports the view of philological *pashtanut*and exerts great effort to explain the verses in accordance with the rules of grammar and topical logic. However, when there is a contradiction between the *peshat* and the Sages' tradition, ibn Ezra pushes the simple meaning of the words so that it will fit with the Sages' view, but he also strives to have it dovetail with the rules of grammar and language. This is what he writes in his introduction to the Torah (*Peirush Ha-arokh*), describing "the fifth among these ways":

> But in commandments and laws, on our predecessors I will rely
> And **I will fix the grammar of our language,** for their words are to live by.

An example of this may be seen in his comments on *Shemot* 23:2. The verse literally reads:

> Do not be after the many for evil
> And do not speak up in a trial to turn
> After the many to make turn.

The simple meaning of this verse is that the Torah proscribes bowing to the will of the majority (in a jurisprudential setting) for evil purposes — "Do

not follow the majority to do evil. This is a warning for the judge not to be swayed by the majority opinion: Do not speak up in a trial to pervert justice, deciding on the basis of the majority." In other words, according to the simple meaning of the verse, the final word "*le-hattot*," to make turn, is not part of the prohibition, but rather its result: if a judge follows the majority and ignores the evidence, this perverts justice.

However, the Sages derivation from this a law flips the simple meaning of the text (although it is not directly contradictory). While the *peshat* indicates that the judge must not bow to the pressure of the majority nor be concerned about expressing a view opposed to the majority, the Sages derive from this verse that the halakhic ruling is determined by a majority vote. Thus, "*le-hattot*" is actually an imperative, and it has no negative connotation.[1] Ibn Ezra attempts to incorporate the Sages' words in the *peshat*of the verse:

> Our Sages have explained that we derive from here that the law follows the majority, and what they have transcribed[2] is the truth. After the verse says, "Do not follow the majority to do evil," we may derive from this that if the majority are for the good, it is a *mitzva* to follow them.

Thus, Ibn Ezra tries to reconcile Sages' approach with the text.

Rejecting the Sages' View

Despite these words of Ibn Ezra expressing the unquestionable authority of the Sages in Halakha, it appears that many times ibn Ezra veers in his interpretation from the interpretation of the halakhic ruling. Thus, for example, in the *PeirushHa-katzar* to *Shemot* 13:13, "And every firstling donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, and if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck," ibn Ezra writes:

> If the firstling is from a herd of cattle or flock of sheep, it is God's, and if it is the firstling **of an unclean animal such as a donkey**, redeem it with a lamb.

According to the Sages and the halakhic ruling (see Rashi *ad loc.*; *Bekhorot*5b; *YD* 321:1) the verse is talking about a donkey alone. Ibn Ezra explains that the intent is to include all unclean animals,[3]apparently based on the presumption that "the verse addresses reality."[4]

How may we resolve the contradiction between ibn Ezra's adamant commitment to the Sages' rulings and the fact that, in many places, ibn Ezra veers from this path and explains in accordance with the *peshat* alone? This question has a number of answers, which together give a full picture of ibn Ezra's path as it diverges from that of the Sages.

First of all, it may be that ignorance of the halakhic ruling is what causes him to interpret verses differently than the Sages. We must assume that because of ibn Ezra's poverty and wanderings, he did not always have the books necessary for clarifying the halakhic ruling, [5]and Ibn Ezra, unlike

the French exegetes, was not a Talmudic expert.[6] In other words, it may be that ibn Ezra did not know at all that he was explaining the text in opposition to the Sages' view.

Furthermore, it makes sense that ibn Ezra sees himself as bound by the Sages' legal authority, but not specifically their reading of the verses. The law itself is a tradition from the Sages, but reading the verse can be done by way of *derash*. Because of this, when the *peshat*contradicts the reading of the Sages but not the law itself, ibn Ezra absolves himself by explaining that the interpretation is an*asmakhta* (support) – that is, the Sages themselves do not believe that this is the verse's intent, but they want to hang the law on the verse. In the language of the ibn Ezra, "There was a tradition in their hands from the Prophets, and they set the verse as a memorial and a sign for the readers."[7]Thus, as we have seen, ibn Ezra anchors majority rule in the verse, but in a different way than the Sages' reading. Ibn Ezra himself expands on this issue elsewhere:

> And I say that the reason is that we have in the Torah places in the Sages are known to utilize an*asmakhta*, but they know the essence of the matter.
>
> For example, "And he will inherit it" (*Bamidbar* 27:11) is known in the transcription[8] as [the source of] a man inheriting his wife, and they expounded this verse as a memorial, for all of Israel know the interpretation of the verse, according to its literal and simple meaning… [9]And what is correct is that the verse [should be read] according to its simple meaning, and they supplement it with this matter of tradition.
>
> Similarly, "And the firstborn whom she bears" (*Devarim* 25:6) has a literal meaning, but they also have a tradition (*Yevamot* 24a) teaching that the oldest of the brothers should be the levir, and they expounded this verse as a memorial and an*asmakhta*.[10]
>
> Similarly, concerning "To a foreign people" (*Shemot* 21:8), they had a tradition that a man cannot sell his daughter twice (*Kiddushin* 18a), and they put the verse as a sign and a memorial. Nevertheless, its simple meaning is its literal meaning…[11](*Peirush Ha-katzar*, *Shemot* 21:8)

In all of these examples, ibn Ezra diverges from the Sages' interpretation, since according to him, the Sages themselves do not intent to engage in biblical exegesis; they merely want to moor a well-known law, traditionally transmitted, in the text of the verse, apparently as a mnemonic device.

Finally, sometimes ibn Ezra holds that the Sages' interpretation is the view of a single authority (not the majority), and therefore one may reject it.[12]

B. Relationship to Karaites

Together with the great respect that ibn Ezra displays towards the Sages, he has a profoundly negative view of the Karaites. Ibn Ezra is known for his fierce war against the Karaites, but it is important to note that he does not hesitate to cite their interpretations if he believes they are correct. For example, the Karaite exegetes Yefet ben Eli and Yeshua the Karaite[13]are quoted a great deal by Ibn Ezra. Only when the Karaite comments are opposed to the accepted law does ibn Ezra go on the offensive against them, using caustic and sharp language.

Ibn Ezra does not oppose only specific interpretations of the Karaites: he actively refutes their general view. According to his view, the truth of the Oral Torah may be established not only by finding its laws in the verses of Written Torah, but by confronting the reality of the absence of many laws in the Written Torah. These exigent rules are only found in the Oral Torah, and without their existence there is no significance at all to the laws of the Written Torah. Ibn Ezra expresses this beautifully in his introduction to the Torah, as he addresses the second way and its uselessness in terms of understanding the Jewish calendar:

> For in the Torah you will not find
> Even one commandment fully defined.
> One of these I will relate,
> For those who know it, it is great.
> Indeed, one is excised for eating on the Day of Atonement,
> And Passover brooks neither leaven nor, for the pure, postponement.
> Seven are the days when no labor may be done;
> Instead there are offerings, tabernacles and trumpets, each one.
> Now, in the Torah, the rules of the year are not stated,
> So how would we have the months calculated?
> …Verily, the commands of the festivals bind all Israel for all time,
> So why does the Torah not provide us testimony, pure and prime?
> Now, for allusions we here and there must inspect;
> Why is this so in our Torah, which is perfect?
> This shows us that Moshe relied on the oral tradition,
> Which provides the heart joy and balm for our condition,
> For there is naught between the oral and written teaching;
> They both are our patrimony, beyond impeaching…[14]

When ibn Ezra rejects the Karaite commentaries, he sometimes does so with ridicule and sarcasm towards the Karaite exegete (and in these comments, his sophisticated sense of humor is prominent). An example of this may be seen in ibn Ezra's commentary to *Shemot* 21:35 (*Peirush Ha-arokh*), "When a man's ox will injure his fellow's ox…"

> Ben Zuta says that "his fellow" refers to the ox. He did not notice that it is possessive, so it is "his fellow's ox." The only fellow ox here is ben Zuta himself!

The final two words in this clause are "*shor re'ehu*." According to ben Zuta, the word "*re'ehu*" in the verse is adjectival, and it should be rendered "its

fellow ox." Ibn Ezra argues that "*re'ehu*" refers to the owner of the damaging ox; the injured ox is owned by his fellow. Ibn Ezra points out that this parallels "*shor ish*" earlier in the verse, which clearly means "an ox belonging to a man;" "*ish*" does not modify "*shor*." He sarcastically concludes that only the obtuse ben Zuta himself is deserving of bovine companionship.

Ibn Ezra is equally brutal in his comments (*Bereishit* 29:17) about ben Efrayim, another Karaite exegete. The verse describes Leah's eyes as "*rakkot*" (spelled *reish-kaf-vav-tav*), weak or sensitive. He writes:

> "*Rakkot*" — as its literal meaning indicates… However, ben Efrayim claims that it is missing an *alef*, and it should be understood as "*arukkot*." He was the one missing an *alef*.

Ben Efrayim believes that the word "*rakkot*" is missing an *alef*, so that it should have been written "*arukkot*" (spelled *alef-reish-kaf-vav-tav*), "long." Ibn Ezra argues that perhaps we should take the *alef* from ben Efrayim (spelled *alef-peh-reish-yud-mem*), yielding "*ben parim*" (spelled *peh-reish-yud-mem*), "son of bullocks."Once again, ibn Ezra describes Karaite intelligence as bovine.

We should note that it is a bit bizarre that ibn Ezra fights so fiercely against the Karaites, because he wrote his comments after he had moved to the lands of Christian Spain, while the Karaites were active in Muslim Spain. Perhaps it is specifically because ibn Ezra accepts the comments of the Karaite exegetes in a not insignificant number of places that he must make it clear that he is not part of the Karaite camp, and he does this through harsh criticism towards them.

C. Ibn Ezra and Rashi

In Ibn Ezra's introduction, he describes the fifth way (the one which he adopts):

> **The fifth among these ways,**
> The foundation of my commentary upon them stays;
> And it is right in my eye,
> Before God's face on High.
> His awe alone I savor;
> **In the Torah, I will never show favor**.

Generally, we may say that ibn Ezra fears no man, and he critically analyzes the commentaries of Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon, ibn Janach, Dunash ben Labrat and others. He praises the interpretations of which he approves and he sharply criticizes those which he finds wanting. Ibn Ezra's approach to Rashi is exceptional, because in the rare instances in which he refers to him, he does not praise him; but he also does not reject him in his characteristically caustic style, noting only that Rashi is mistaken.[15] It may be that the reason for this is the respect that ibn Ezra has for Rashi, but it is difficult to accept this for two reasons. First, there is no doubt that ibn Ezra has a great deal of

respect for Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon, but he does not hold himself back from his sharply ironic tone.[16] Second, in his *Safa Berura*,[17] ibn Ezra expresses his view of Rashi, which is not complimentary at all:

> There is no doubt that they[18] knew that the direct way is as it is; therefore, they formulated the rule, "No verse loses its simple meaning." Thus, the *derash* is merely supplemental. The following generations made every *derash*essential and crucial, as Rav Shlomo*z"l* does, so that the *Tanakh* was explained by way of *derash*. Though he was under the impression that this is the way of *peshat*, **in his writings one will find only one*peshat* out of a thousand** — yet the sages of our generation boast of these books. (*Safa Berura*, Wilensky edition [Jerusalem, 5738], p. 64)

Ibn Ezra mocks not only the interpretations of Rashi, but the intelligence of a generation which cares about his homilies. If so, why does ibn Ezra not criticize Rashi himself?

It seems that Ibn Ezra was aware of Rashi's status in France, and he was concerned that harsh criticism of Rashi would lead to his commentary being condemned, or at least rejected. Therefore, in his commentary to the Torah, ibn Ezra keeps his silence. In the venue of *Safa Berura*, which was not designed for mass consumption but for intelligent individuals, ibn Ezra notes almost off-handedly his attitude towards Rashi's comments.[19] His feelings towards Rashi also explain the few citations of French exegetes in his commentaries, as compared to the great number of citations of the scholars of Muslim Spain (including Karaites, as we said above). Thus, ibn Ezra does not pick fights with the exegetes of Christian Europe for the simple reason that he has no great respect for their commentaries and does not have a common denominator with them. According to him, Karaite exegesis is better than the absurd commentaries of the traditional *parshanim*.

D. The Concept of "*Sod*"
Covert and Overt Writing

Ibn Ezra conceals in his commentary more than his relationship to Rashi; he embraces the general phenomenon of "*sod."* One who reads his commentaries often encounters the cryptic phrase "*Ve-zehsod,*" "And this is a secret," and the like.[20]

> An example of this may be found in*Peirush Ha-arokh*, *Shemot* 28:6:
>
> The matter of the *efod* and the breastplate is a deep secret, and I will only allude to the secret a bit, for one "who knows the knowledge of the Most High"…
>
> An additional example may be in his explanation of the goat to *Azazel*:
>
> If you are capable of understanding the secret which stands behind the word *Azazel*, you will know its secret and the secret of its name, for

there are others like it in Scripture. I will reveal to you part of the secret by allusion; when you are thirty-three, you will know it.[21]

What is the meaning of all these secrets, and whom are they designed for?

In order to answer this question, we must first define precisely who the target audience of ibn Ezra is.

There is no doubt that ibn Ezra's commentaries are not designed for the simple Jew. Rashi and Ri Bekhor Shor succeed in interesting both the simple Jew and the intellectual Jew. Ibn Ezra, on the other hand, often relates to matters of grammar and language in his commentary, and he makes complex mathematical calculations that may be far beyond a simple Jew's ken. Therefore, it appears that ibn Ezra directs his interpretation to a sophisticated audience which "knows the knowledge of the Most High" (*Bamidbar*24:16) – an audience that is unusually intelligent. The most prominent expression of this orientation is ibn Ezra's tendency to allude to his *sod* by writing in code, expressed generally in an enigmatic style which is not easy to decipher. Similarly, the integration of extensive scientific investigations[22] into his commentary may be understood only by those who are particularly intelligent.[23]

The Reasons for Allusive Interpretations

Sometimes, Ibn Ezra hides his secrets because he is worried that he will be seen as a heretic. The best example is his comment to *Devarim* 1:2:

> If you wish to understand the secret of the twelve, see also, "And Moshe wrote" (*Devarim* 31:22); "And the Canaanites were then in the land" (*Bereishit* 12:6); "On God's mountain, He will be seen" (*Bereishit*22:14); "And behold his bedstead was an iron bedstead" (*Devarim*3:11).

What is "the secret of the twelve"? Ibn Ezra explains in his commentary to*Devarim* 34:1:

> "And Moshe went up" — According to my view, this verse was written by Yehoshua, because after Moshe went up, he did not write, and he wrote it by the way of prophecy.

"The secret of the twelve" is ibn Ezra's claim that the last twelve verses of the Torah were not written by Moshe, but rather by Yehoshua. In his above-mentioned comment at the beginning of*Devarim*, Ibn Ezra uses these twelve verses as a model for a wider phenomenon of adding verses into the Torah, as spelled out in the examples which he brings there.[24] It is understood why ibn Ezra prefaces his words by metaphorically swearing the reader to secrecy, because the determination that these verses were written after Moshe's death could be construed as undermining the belief that the Torah in its entirety was dictated to Moshe by God. Ibn Ezra himself believes, apparently, that one

may say about lone verses that they were not written by Moshe, but this is not acceptable for the Torah as a whole.[25] If so, a concern that he might be labeled as a heretic motivates ibn Ezra to conceal his views here.[26]

Peirush Ha-shelishi, the Supercommentary

We may prove this hypothesis by comparing ibn Ezra's commentary, which was written and published in France, to a later interpretation of the Torah written by his private student, [27] R. Yosef b. R. Yaakov of Moudeville. [28] Ibn Ezra dictated this to him in his twilight years in London,[29]but only fragments of it have survived.[30]This comparison teaches us that in the interpretation of the Torah written in France, ibn Ezra does not include all of his ideas.

One of the most prominent examples is ibn Ezra's understanding of the following cryptic verse (*Bereishit* 35:22): "Reuven went and slept with Bilha, his father's concubine, and Yisrael heard; and Yaakov's sons were twelve." The words of the Midrash are well-known and cited by Rashi; they detach this incident from the simple meaning of the text.[31] This view of Rashi reflects the Sages' dictum: "Whoever says that Reuven sinned is solely in error" (*Shabbat* 56a). Ibn Ezra explains the verse differently:

> Our Rabbis have explained this well; indeed, "The clever conceal the contemptible" (*Mishlei* 12:16).

Apparently, ibn Ezra is complimenting the Sages and conceding the point; but what does he mean by citing the proverb, "The clever conceal the contemptible"? In his commentary on*Mishlei*, ibn Ezra explains that "the clever" person is the one who knows to "conceal" an act which is "contemptible." Therefore, it may be that ibn Ezra means to tell us that the Sages in fact believe that Reuven did sin; nevertheless, they hid the sin and reinterpreted the verse in a way different from the *peshat*. In any case, it is clear that ibn Ezra utilizes his obscure language so that one cannot, God forbid, accuse him of indicting Reuven for sleeping with his father's wife; on the other hand, for those who understand the matter, he alludes to his real view by quoting *Mishlei*. In *Peirush Ha-shelishi*, the following is written about Reuven's sin:

> "And Israel heard" — what Reuven did, therefore, "And Yaakov's sons were twelve" and no more. For Bilha had been desecrated, Rachel was dead, and he despised Leah and her handmaid because of Reuven. Therefore, he never again came in to a woman and did not bear children — thus, his sons were only twelve…

Apparently, Ibn Ezra in this commentary reveals what he had concealed in his earlier commentary. Perhaps in his old age, he was not concerned about airing his views; perhaps he did not think that his discussions with his student would ever be publicized.

Another *sod* of Ibn Ezra's commentary explicated by *Peirush Ha-shelishi* is how he explains Rachel's theft of the *terafim*. Rashi, faithful to his view of defending the acts of the greats of the nation,[32] explains that Rachel steals the*terafim* in order to prevent her father from worshipping idols. We will examine ibn Ezra's comment on this verse:

> I find it likely that the *terafim*resemble the human form, designed to receive the higher powers, but I cannot explain this in detail…
>
> There are those who say that Rachel stole them to wean her father from idolatry. If it were so, why would she take them with her and not hide them beside the road?
>
> It seems likely that her father Lavan knew the constellations, and she was worried that her father would look in the constellations to know which way they had fled…

Ibn Ezra understands that there are three approaches ("I find it likely;" "There are those who say;" "It seems likely"). We can immediately identify the second interpretation cited as Rashi's interpretation, which he rejects for the following reason: if Rachel intends to break her father's idolatrous habits, why does she not toss away the *terafim* along the journey?

To this question, we must add another question: is Lavan able to get other*terafim* to replace the ones she steals? Since it appears clear that he could get them, how would the theft help anyone?

Ibn Ezra posits a final explanation: the *terafim* were tools of prediction, and Rachel took them in order to prevent her father from obtaining information about their location. However, we must note that here as well, ibn Ezra uses his enigmatic style, demurring, "but I cannot explain this in detail."

When we read his words to his student, we understand why ibn Ezra could not raise publicly his view concerning the theft of the *terafim*. We do not have in our hands the *Peirush Ha-shelishi* for *Parashat Vayeitzei*, but we do have the commentary to *Parashat Vayishlach*. There (*Bereishit*35:2) we find: "And Yaakov said to his house and to all with him, 'Remove the foreign gods in your midst and purify yourselves and change your clothes,'" and it is not clear what foreign gods these are. Rashi explains that the verse refers to booty from the city of Shekhem. Ibn Ezra, as cited in *Peirush Ha-shelishi*, says this:

> "And Yaakov said to his house[33]and to all with him, 'Remove the foreign gods in your midst'" — but until this point, he did not say this to them. **Now, Rachel stole her father's *terafim*, because under their father's law they all were, the women and the children.** This is what is written there (*ibid*. 31:53), "The God of Avraham and the god of Nachor will judge between us, the God of their fathers."
> "'And purify yourselves'" — wash yourselves, **because until now you have served foreign gods.**Therefore, "'And change your clothes,'"

similar to (*Devarim* 21:13), “And she will remove her clothes of captivity,” for all of the garb and jewelry of idolaters is impure, and one may not even benefit from them. Therefore, they gave the rings to him, and Yaakov hid them.

There is no doubt that when ibn Ezra writes “but I cannot explain this in detail” in his “conventional” commentary he means that Rachel stole the *terafim* in order to use them. Writing this explicitly might not only, God forbid, serve to strengthen the views of the heretics, it could lead to removal of ibn Ezra’s commentary from the Jewish library, and therefore ibn Ezra does not write it. At the same time, he does not want to conceal this interpretation totally, and he therefore alludes to it.

*

At the end of these three lessons dealing with R. Avraham Ibn Ezra, we may reach the conclusion that his contributions are remarkable. This is not only due to the dozens of original interpretations which he crafts, but mainly because of his methodology. He advocates studying the Torah and its commentators with the Fear of Heaven on the one hand, but on the other hand critically. One must accept the truth from whoever says it, and above all one must never show favor in the pursuit of Torah.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

[1] This is how the debate appears in *Chullin* (11a):

> What is the rabbis’ source that we follow the majority?
> What is their source?! It says “Decide on the basis of the majority…”

The Talmud goes on to explain why the derivation from the verse is not appropriate for all cases.

[2] “The scribes” (literally, transcribers or copyists) is ibn Ezra’s term for the Sages. Other terms are “our predecessors,” “our ancestors,” and “our sages”.

[3] In *Peirush Ha-arokh*, he reverses himself and endorses the view of the Sages.

[4] There are additional examples of ibn Ezra’s commentaries rejecting the view of the Sages:*Peirush Ha-arokh, Shemot* 20:13, 22:13; *ibid*. 22:28 (*Ha-katzar* and *Ha-arokh*); etc.

[5] This is apparently one of the reasons that ibn Ezra does not cite a great number of the French exegetes, as opposed to the Spanish exegetes and grammarians, whose work, apparently, he knew by heart.

[6] This fact is evident from the absence of Talmudic citations in his commentary.

[7] This is the fourth approach in his introduction to the Torah for *Peirush Ha-arokh*.

[8] This refers to the tradition of the scribes, i.e., the Sages.

[9] In order to understand ibn Ezra’s words, we should cite the verse in its entirety: “If his father has no brothers, you will give his inheritance to his close relative from his family, and he will inherit it (*otah*)” (*Bamidbar* 27:11). There is no doubt that according to the *peshat* of the verses, the words “And he will inherit it” refer to the inheritance mentioned in the beginning of the verse. (“*Otah”* is the third-person feminine, which may refer to a female person or a feminine noun.) This is how the Sages expound it (*Bava Batra* 111b):

> I might think that she shall inherit him? The verse says, “And he will inherit her” — he inherits her; she does not inherit him.

According to ibn Ezra, it was clear to the Sages that the simple meaning of the verse would be understood by all, and they decided to use the verse to anchor another law, transmitted by tradition.

[10] The Torah (*Devarim* 25:5-6) says:

> If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the firstborn whom she bears, he shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.

Rashi understands, "And the firstborn whom she bears" in the following way: The mother referred to here is the mother of the deceased, whose widow is married by her living son, the levir. He is called the firstborn because preference is given to the oldest surviving brother, but any of the surviving brothers can fulfill this role, assuming the role of the firstborn, and "he shall succeed to the name of his dead brother," by taking the portion of the dead brother in their father's estate.

Nevertheless, according to the *peshat*, there is no doubt that the mother mentioned is the widow, as she is the subject of the previous verse, and this verse continues to describe her situation: "The wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger… And the firstborn whom she bears…"

According to ibn Ezra, the Sages do not reject the*peshat* of the verses, but they only use it as a framework on which to hang these laws, laws which have been accepted traditionally (see *Yevamot*24a).

[11] The verse speaks about a Hebrew maidservant: "If she is displeasing in the eyes of her master who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. To a foreign people he has no authority to sell her, as he has betrayed her" (*Shemot* 21:8). The *peshat* of the verse is that the master cannot sell his Hebrew maidservant to a non-Jew, but the Sages derive from this verse that one cannot sell a Hebrew maidservant twice (i.e., if the father sells his daughter and she is emancipated, he may not sell her again). Here as well, ibn Ezra claims that the *peshat* of the verse is accepted by the Sages, but they have made a support for the law, which is derived from the tradition, on the verse.

[12] However, sometimes ibn Ezra's classification of the Sages' view as a lone opinion is in error; see for example, *Peirush Ha-katzar*, *Shemot* 21:19.

[13] They were 10th-century Karaite exegetes.

[14] In another place (*Peirush Ha-katzar*, *Shemot*13:12), Ibn Ezra relates to this point concerning the*mitzva* of redeeming the firstborn:

> Behold, we need to know about the redemption of the firstborn, and we cannot know it from what is written, but rather from the words of tradition.

[15] See *Peirush Ha-arokh*, *Shemot* 9:30, 16:15.

[16] See, for example, *Peirush Ha-katzar*, *Shemot*23:20:

> "Behold I am" — So says Avraham, the noted Spaniard. Behold, I am sending forth my hand by speaking against the great man who attacked his betters verbally, and arrogance has issued from his lips.

[17] This is one of ibn Ezra's grammatical treatises.

[18] This refers to Rashi's teachers.

[19] In this context, we might ask how the Rashbam dared to challenge the Sages and Rashi. AaronMondschein writes in *"R. Avraham Ibn Ezra — Ha-ish Neged Ha-zerem," Beit Mikra 49* (2004), p. 147:

> Rashbam comes from the "inside." As a famous master of Halakha, he stands on the same firm ground on which his potential critics stand, and by this he leaves them without proper ammunition. Not so ibn Ezra; his foreign identity card is not that of a rabbinical scholar, one whose Torah is his occupation.

[20] The word "*sod*" is applied to more than one hundred times of his comments on the Torah.

[21] The Ramban reveals this secret in his commentary to *Vayikra* 16:8: "And behold, R. Avraham of faithful spirit conceals the matter, but I am a gossip, so I will tell his secret…" See *loc. cit*.

[22] See, for example, his commentary to *Shemot*12:2 (explaining the luni-solar Hebrew calendar),*ibid*. 12:40 (calculating the time of residence of the Israelites in the land of Egypt), as well as *Bamidbar*3:39 (comparison of ratios).

[23] For ibn Ezra, Spain provides the model of the particularly intelligent, those who are fully educated: they were experts in grammar, astrology and astronomy (in that era, there was no distinction between the two), medicine, mathematics and philosophy — the disciplines which ibn Ezra incorporates into his commentary on the Torah.

[24] These are the four verses which the ibn Ezra cites:

A) "And Moshe wrote this song on that day" (*Devarim* 31:22) — in this case, the entirety of the chapter is problematic, because all of *Devarim*, aside from the introduction and the last four chapters, is written in the first person, and the speaker is Moshe Rabbeinu. This seems to indicate that whatever is written in the third person is the work not of Moshe, but another person.

B) "And the Canaanites were then in the land" (*Bereishit* 12:6) — it appears that "then" in the verse addresses a later reader, one living in a time in which the Canaanites are no longer in the land, so at earliest it must be after the conquest of Yehoshua.

C) "As it will be said today, 'On God's mountain, He will be seen'" (*Bereishit* 22:14) — it is implied that this was written during the era in which the Israelites would perform their festival pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

D) "And behold his bedstead is an iron bedstead; is it not in Rabba of the Ammonites?" (*Devarim* 3:11) — it appears that the verse comes to verify the historicity of the war against Og, King of Bashan, by noting the fact that until this very day (the time of composition), one may still see the iron bedstead, thus proving that Og was indeed a giant. From this, it is clear that the verse was not written by the generation that fought Og and saw him, but a later generation.

[25] See *"Shittat Ha-bechinot" shel Ha-Rav Mordekhai Breuer*, pp. 311-2.

[26] In the 18th century, there was an exchange of correspondence between Shmuel David Luzzatto and Shlomo Yehuda Rappaport, in which the former accused ibn Ezra of being a closet heretic:

> What can we say when we see his cleverness, making himself a saint in the eyes of the readers of his work? He says: "Look, I am pure," and this is part of his twisty scheme. His thoughts are the opposite of his words.(*Kerem Chemed*, 5599, No. 20)

[27] This is what is written in the beginning of*Parashat Vayishlach*:

> And I, Yosef b. R. Yaakov of Moudeville, have heard from him the interpretation of these portions in London orally, and I have written it in my language.

In other words, the content is Ibn Ezra's, but the formulation and style is that of his student, R. Yosef b. R. Yaakov.

[28] Out of gratitude for this student, ibn Ezra put together the important book *Yesod Mora*, dealing with the reasoning of the *mitzvot*.

[29] On this commentary, see Aaron Mondschein, "*Shitta Shelishit Le-feirusho shel R. Avraham Ibn Ezra*," in *Or Le-Yaakov: Mechkarim Ba-Mikra U-vemegillot Midbar Yehuda* (Tel Aviv, 5757), p. 179.

[30] This appears in the HaKeter edition.

[31] This is what Rashi writes:

> Since he disarranged his bed, the verse equates it to sleeping with her. Now why did he disarrange and profane his bed? When Rachel died, Yaakov took his bed — which had been regularly placed in Rachel's tent, not in the other tents — and relocated it to Bilha's tent. Reuven came and challenged his mother's humiliation. He said, "My mother was forced to compete with her sister; now, must she compete with her sister's handmaid?" This is why he disarranged it.

According to this, the conclusion of the verse, "And Yaakov's sons were twelve," is tied to the beginning of the verse. Rashi concludes and explains that the words, "And Yaakov's sons were twelve" are in fact the Torah's testimony establishing Reuven's innocence:

> Our rabbis have derived that it teaches us that they were all equal and they were all righteous, for Reuven did not sin.

[32] See lecture #6.

[33] Ibn Ezra is slightly paraphrasing the verse.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

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FESTIVAL OF FREEDOM: ESSAYS ON PESAH AND THE HAGGADAH

by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

Lecture #16:
Rav David Kimchi

A. Biography

The Radak — R. David Kimchi (1160-1235) — was born and active in Provence, in southern France, near Spain. The Radak was a member of a family of Spanish grammarians and exegetes, including his father R. Yosef[1] and his brother R. Moshe.[2] Like R. Avraham ibn Ezra, the Kimchi family brought the fundamentals of linguistics and grammar from Spain to France.

R. Yosef was the Radak's mentor, and he is quoted more than three hundred times in his son's commentaries: "My lord father explained" or "This is what my lord father wrote." Radak also studied Torah with his brother, R. Moshe, and he is often cited in his commentary in the following way: "And my master brother, R. Moshe, explained." [3]The Radak also wrote commentaries to *Bereishit*,*Nevi'im Rishonim* and *Acharonim*, *Tehillim,* and*Divrei Ha-yamim*. We do not know if he wrote any commentary on the other books of the Torah as well.

The Radak composed two linguistic works: "*Sefer Ha-dikduk*" (the Book of Investigation) and "*Sefer Ha-shorashim*" (the Book of Roots), which are bound together in a volume called "*SeferMikhlol*" (the Book of the Array). *Sefer Ha-dikduk*deals with Hebrew grammar; *Sefer Ha-shorashim* is a Hebrew lexicon.[4] The importance of these works to the sphere of biblical exegesis if incalculable. Despite the fact that we do not have the Radak's commentaries on four of the five books of the Torah, *Sefer Mikhlol* is an important exegetical source. In *Sefer Ha-shorashim*, we may discover, using the Radak's dictionary, the meanings of dozens of verses.[5]

For example, consider the verse (*Shemot*16:15), "And when the Israelites saw it, they said one to another: 'What is it?' (*man hu*) — for they did not know what it was." The two words "*man hu*" may be seen as interrogatory — "What is it?" — or declarative — "It is *man*!" The Radak, in *Sefer Ha-shorashim*, takes the latter view; according to him,*man* comes from the root *mem-nun-heh*, a portion or a gift:

> Since they did not know its name, they called it *man*, that is, a gift and a portion from God…

B. The Radak's Exegetical Approach

The Radak's Attitude toward *Derash*

As the scion of a family of Spanish grammarians, the Radak's exegesis is based on the approach of *peshat*, founded on principles of linguistics, vowelization, grammar, lexicography, and tradition. The Radak's style in his commentary is direct and clear.[6]

Despite the fact that Radak sees himself as a *pashtan*, he does not hesitate to cite *derash*. However, when the Radak quotes these sources, it is obvious that he has a distinction between *peshat*and *derash*. Generally, the Radak will bring the explanation according to *peshat*, and afterwards he will add, "And there is *derash*…" The Radak explains, in his introduction to his commentary on*Nevi'im Rishonim,* what his guiding principles are for utilizing Midrashic sources:

> I will cite the words of our rabbis of blessed memory in places in which we need their interpretation and their tradition nevertheless. Also, I will bring some Midrashic sources **for the lovers of*derash***.

Thus, the principles of the Radak in citing Midrashic sources are:

1. *Derash* may be used when it is difficult to resolve the *peshat* without any *derash*.[7]
2. "For the lovers of *derash*," the Radak cites a nice *derash* in order to explain the text and engage his readers. Indeed, many Midrashic sources brought by the Radak draw the reader's attention.

Morality and Ethics as the Torah's Purpose

In his introduction to *Nevi'im Rishonim*, the Radak explains the importance of practice over study:

> Our rabbis of blessed memory said… "Whoever says: 'I have nothing but Torah' does not have Torah" (*Yevamot* 109b). This means [that if one says]: "I have no interest in performing commandments; I only wish to read the Torah," even the merit of reading the Torah is not his by right, as it says: "And you shall study [them and keep them] to fulfill them" (*Devarim* 5:1). Anything which exists in practice exists in study, and but anything which does not exist in practice does not exist in study… For the study without practice is ineffectual; in fact, it is harmful and damaging to oneself and to others…

What he means by this is that a person is required to study the Torah in order to fulfill it; if Torah study is purely theoretical, it is meaningless and even detrimental — "harmful and damaging." These words of the Radak apply not only to *mitzvot*— which are obviously binding and demand action — but even to the narrative section of the Torah: the study of the words without action does not help at all.

Furthermore, it appears that in the view of the Radak, the Torah is not a historical tome, and therefore not all of the stories of the Patriarchs have made it into the Torah. Those stories of the Patriarchs which have been selected to put into the Torah must fulfill one criterion: teaching a moral lesson.[8] When it is not clear, the exegete must find it. We find in the Radak's commentary to the Book of *Bereishit* many formulations along these lines: "Therefore this story was written;" "And this was written to teach people;" "To teach you;" "So that a person may learn;" "This entire story is to inform us;" etc. The numerous expressions testify to the Radak's worldview, according to which the Torah is designed to teach us the ways of the world.

A profound example of this may be seen in his commentary on the conversation of Yosef's brothers, after Yosef accuses them of espionage and wants to imprison one of them (*Bereishit*42:21):

> And they said one to another, "Indeed, we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore, this distress has come upon us.

Apparently, this verse comes to teach us that Yosef's brothers regret selling him. However, according to the view of the Radak, the Torah's stories are not designed to tell us stories about the Patriarchs but to teach us morals, and therefore the Radak explains the verse otherwise:

> "Therefore, this distress has come upon us" — We may learn from this story that when distress comes upon a person, he should inspect his actions and examine what the bad action is that he has done; he may express remorse and confess before God, and then he may seek atonement from Him.

> Another example, from the same cycle of stories, is that of Yosef and Potifar's wife:

> It was all for his good and the good of his father and his brothers, and even though it was difficult at the outset, it was for the good in the end. The same is true of the sin of the butler and Pharaoh's dream; all of this was by God's reason, for by this Yosef came to power. **This story is written to let us know the reason of the matter: if anything happens to a person, he should trust in God. This is also written to**

> **tell you the righteousness of Yosef; one may learn from this to conquer his inclination and to keep faith with one who trusts him, whoever it may be, and never act falsely. (**Commentary to *Bereishit* 39:7)

In other words, this story has two morals. One concerns bad things befalling good people: when something bad happens to a person, he should trust in God that all is for the good; "even though it was difficult at the outset, it was for the good in the end."[9] The second lesson concerns conquering one's evil inclination in order to keep faith with another who has demonstrated his trust, even if it is a non-Jew such as Potifar ("whoever it may be"). As in the first example, the Radak here expresses his belief that the Torah's aim in relating the Patriarchs' stories is not to convey knowledge of their actions, but rather to teach a lesson and a moral.

In the introduction to the Binding of Yitzchak, the Radak writes his explicit view of the aim of the Torah's stories:

> The issue of the test is very difficult to say of God, for He knows the heart and understands the innards, and He knew that Avraham would do what He commanded… In fact, the truth is that this test serves to show people the Avraham's full love. **It is not done for those generations; rather, it is for the following generations, who believe in the Torah as Moshe Rabbeinu's transcription of God's words. Through its stories, they will see the extent of Avraham's love for God, and they will learn from it to love God with all of their hearts and all of their souls…**
>
> In truth, before the Torah and its stories were written, this important matter was handed down to the seed of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, for Yitzchak transmitted it to Yaakov, and Yaakov to his sons. However, after the Torah was written for Yaakov's sons, the matter was publicized in the world, some believing it and some disbelieving it… **Now that most people in the world believe this great story,[10] it testifies significantly to the nature of Avraham Avinu, who loved God so completely and wholeheartedly. It is worth it for a person to learn from him the way of His love.** (Commentary to*Bereishit* 22:1)

Consequently, when the Radak does not find a message, he notes the problem. Thus, for example, in his commentary to *Bereishit* 47:7, he writes:

> "And Yaakov blessed Pharaoh" — He gave him peace in the way that one comes before a king… **but I have found no reason for this story, as to why it was written.**

Unapologetic about the Patriarchs

According to the Radak, just as one may learn from the positive acts of the forefathers of the nation, so one may learn from their negative acts. Therefore, the Radak does not engage in apologetics; instead, he writes explicitly that the narratives which describe the negative acts of the Patriarchs have been written in order to help us avoid this sort of behavior.

An example of this is Sara's mistreatment of Hagar. The Radak does not hesitate in criticizing Sara, teaching us a moral lesson:

> "And Sarai mistreated her" — She did more than appropriate, subjugating her cruelly. It seems that she would strike her and curse her and she could not stand it so she fled.**Sara did not act in accordance with the trait of morality and the trait of piety.**Even though Avraham permitted her to do this, saying, "Do what is good in your eyes," it was appropriate for her to pull back her hand and not to mistreat her, for the sake of his own honor. Sara displayed neither the trait of piety nor a good soul, for **it is not appropriate for one to do whatever one can to whoever is under one's control…** Furthermore, what Sara did was not good in God's eyes, as the angel said

> to Hagar, “For God has heard of your mistreatment” (v. 19), and he gave her a blessing in place of this… **This story is written in the Torah so that one may adopt the good traits and avoid the bad ones.**(Commentary to *Bereishit* 16:6)

Details for Moral Purposes

According to the Radak, superfluous details apparently come to teach us a lesson. This, for example, is his approach in his commentary to the story of the three angels’ visit to Avraham (*Bereishit*18). The point of the angels’ coming to Avraham is to inform him of Yitzchak’s birth and Sedom’s destruction. Why does the verse set out in great detail the words and actions of Avraham?

The Radak answers:

> “Do not pass” — “*Na”* is a term of supplication and request… Now, this entire story serves to teach a person to conduct himself with all beings with righteousness and kindness. To act kindly is to bring guests into one’s home, to honor them and to provide their needs: washing their feet, drinking, even providing a bed if they will sleep in his house. (Commentary to*Bereishit* 18:3)

Difficult Formulations

The Radak argues that the Torah uses “problematic formulations” in order to point to a certain message. An example of this may be seen in his commentary on the verse (*Bereishit* 18:21), “I shall go down now, and I shall see whether they have done altogether according to its cry, which has come to Me.” God is speaking of Sedom, but the phrasing, “I shall go down now, and I shall see,” is puzzling. The Radak explains:

> Even though everything is revealed and known before God, the Torah writes this to teach people not to be hasty in their judgment. God said, “To see,” and He said, “And I shall see” — this “seeing” refers to considering the actions of the party, “seeing” if there is a reason to exempt them from the punishment, just as a human will debate judicial matters.

Redundancies and Parallelism

Among the many principles that the Radak discusses, let us talk about the principle of *kefel lashon*, redundancy. The Radak points out consistently that the Torah often uses repetitious language, not because each word introduces new meaning, but because the verse seeks to stress the significance of a given issue. This view stands in stark contrast to that of Rashi, who argues that generally speaking, one must assign meaning to every word, as there cannot be any redundancy in the biblical text.

For example, in the story of the Binding of Yitzchak, God says to Avraham, “Do not send your hand towards the youth, and do not do anything to him.” The Radak explains that there are not two different commandments; rather, “It repeats this issue in different words to amplify the warning.” Rashi, in accordance with his view, explains otherwise:

> “Do not send your hand towards the youth” — To slaughter. He said to Him: “If so, did I come here for nothing? Let me wound him slightly, and take some blood out of him.” Therefore, He said to him, “And do not do anything to him” — do not put a blemish in him.

Another example is found in the story of Yaakov’s anxious anticipation of his encounter with Esav, in which the Torah says, “And Yaakov feared exceedingly, and he was distressed” (*Bereishit*32:8). The Radak explains:

> It repeats this matter in different words to magnify his trepidation.

However, we must understand the words of the Radak in the context of Rashi's explanation (which the Radak cites):

> "And Yaakov feared" — lest he be killed.
> "And he was distressed" — lest he kill others.

The Reasons for *Keri* and *Ketiv*

One issue which occupies the Radak a great deal was establishing the Masoretic text. The Radak travelled around Spain a great deal in order to inspect different manuscripts. [11] Sometimes, the version of the Radak is different from the version which we have.[12]

The Radak refers in a number of places to the issue of understanding the difference between*ketiv* (the text as it is written) and *keri* (the text as it is read). These are his words in his introduction to*Nevi'im Rishonim*:

> I will write the reason for the written and the read… It appears that these words are present here because, during the first exile, the books were lost and disarranged, and the sages who knew Scripture died. When the members of the Great Assembly returned the Torah to its ancient form, they found a difference of opinion in the books, so they followed the majority, according to their view. In cases in which they did not fully understand the matter, they wrote one version but did not vowelize it.

According to the Radak, the differences between *keri* and *ketiv* emerge from the doubts created after the destruction of the First Temple, because of the exile, concerning the text of the books of *Tanakh*. The members of the Great Assembly expended great effort to explain the text and to decide among the different versions. When they could not decide among them, they made one the *ketiv* and the other the *keri*.[13] Generally speaking, the Radak explains both the *keri* and the*ketiv*. Sometimes, he posits that they reflect an equivalent idea — "And the matter is one" — but sometimes he explains the *keri* and *ketiv* in different ways.

Original Interpretations

The Radak has to his credit a number of totally original interpretations. Here are two examples:

A) Yitzchak's desire to bless Esav specifically is explained by the Radak in this way:

> This is why Yitzchak asked his son to bring him game, so that his heart might be gladdened and he might bless him, **for he knew that he needed his blessing because he was not a good, suitable man.** However, Yaakov did not require a blessing, because Yitzchak knew that Avraham's blessing would be his, along with the unique blessing of establishing Avraham's seed, and his sons would inherit the land. After all, Avraham never blessed Yitzchak. (Commentary to *Bereishit* 27:4)

According to the Radak, Yitzchak recognizes Esav's personality as well, and specifically because of this, he chooses to bless him and not Yaakov: Esav needs the blessing more, because Yaakov will merit Avraham's blessing in his own right, just as Yitzchak received it even though Avraham never explicitly blessed him.

B) After Yosef's coat of many colors is brought to Yaakov, the Torah says:

> Then Yaakov tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, "No, I shall go down to the netherworld to my son, mourning." Thus his father wept for him. (*Bereishit* 37:34-35)

The conclusion of v. 35 is difficult, because the subject of the sentence, “But he refused to be comforted and said, ‘No, I shall go down to the netherworld to my son, mourning,’” is Yaakov, so that the term “his father” is totally superfluous, and it would have been enough to write “and he wept for him.” [14]The Radak explains the verse:

> “And his father wept for him” — It says “his father” because he demonstrated a father’s love for a faithfully serving son who was his constant companion. Even though he was a shepherd with his brothers, at most times he was standing with his father and serving him. Therefore, at all of the times during which he was missing his service, he would recall him and he could not hold himself back from crying.

According to the Radak, the verse stresses the uniquely loving relationship of Yaakov and his son Yosef. Similarly, the Radak explains the cry of Yaakov, which is mentioned in the end of the verse and not in the previous verse, which describes his mourning. The Radak reveals himself as an exegete of great humanity and sensitivity, who understands the seething emotions of the soul.

C. The Radak and Christianity

Despite the fact that these lessons deal with the exegesis of the Torah, it is incumbent upon us to mention the commentary of the Radak on *Tehillim*.[15] In his commentary, he clearly explains some matters based on the events of the Crusades, and as a result of this, some of his commentaries were censored. We will bring two examples of comments which relate to the Crusades:

> “A band of evildoers have encircled me, like a lion, my hands and my feet” — For they have encircled me like a lion encircles his prey in the jungle with his tail. Any animal which finds itself in this circle will not depart out of dread and fear of the lion; instead, they draw in their hands and feet, so that the lion preys on them inside the circle. Similarly, we in exile are inside the circle, so that we cannot leave it without falling into the hands of the predators, for if we leave the domain of the Ishmaelites, we will fall into the domain of the uncircumcised. Behold, we gather in our hands and feet and stand in fear and dread of them, for we have no right to flee with our feet and fight with our hands, and therefore it is as if our hands and feet are in fetters. (Commentary to *Tehillim* 22:17)

> Concerning this psalm, there are those who say that it was said by David in his exile among the Philistines, and there are those who say that this was said in the language of the exiles, and this is what is correct. Thus, he says it in singular language, as if every one of the exiles is moaning and crying out from the exile, desiring the Holy Land, hoping that the glory may return to it. (*Ibid*. 42:2)

***

We will conclude with a poem in honor of the Radak which appears in the introduction to the Radak’s *Sefer Mikhlol*, written by the publisher, R. Yitzchak b. Aharon Rittenberg, in the year 1862:

> Who is like David, Yosef’s son,
> In every house faithful to the holy tongue?
> Who is like him to gather every one
> Of the array of tools in the artisan’s belts hung?
> General and specific are his grammatical feats,
> And they are many; no man is left out of the story.
> There is no breach, no outgoing, no crying in our streets.[16]
> Your right hand, David, is raised in the holy tongue’s glory.
> Its roots you have planted; now they flower in the sun.

The true Torah's explanations you have explored,
And the vision of its prophets, seven on one,[17]
As good wisdom from your spirit you poured.
All nations have seen your writing,
And they have adorned you with the highest laurel.
They compose this dictum, voices uniting:
"If there is no *kemach*, [18] there is no Torah" is the moral.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

[1] He was an important exegete in his own right, who wrote many commentaries to Torah and*Neviim*. Most of his commentaries have not survived through the ages, but he is quoted extensively by his two sons, R. David and R. Moshe.

[2] R. Moshe Kimchi was also a biblical exegete who explained according to *peshat*. Most of his writings have been lost, but at this time we have his commentaries on *Mishlei, Iyov,* and *Ezra-Nechemya*.

[3] The Radak is very careful to distinguish between his brother and the Rambam, whom he also quotes a great deal; he refers to the latter as, "The master, Rabbeinu Moshe," or "The great sage, Rabbeinu Moshe."

[4] As for the impetus for writing his works, the Radak explains the following in *Sefer Mikhlol*:
If a person comes to study the discipline of grammar, he will wear himself out trying to study all of the authors' works; indeed one will have to study them all of his days! It is not good for a person to be ignorant of grammar; rather he must involve himself with Torah and commandments, with interpretations and needful things from the words our rabbis of blessed memory. Thus, one must deal with grammar briefly so that one may study the words appropriately… However, God has inspired me and strengthened my heart to write the book in a concise manner, and I have come like the gatherer after the harvester and the picker after the vintner, and I have set out in their footsteps to abridge their words and to write a book. I have called it *Sefer Mikhlol*, because I wanted to include in it the grammar of language and its topics in the briefest manner, so that it will be simple for students to study it and to understand its path, and they will find in it everything they need of grammar and the like at their fingertips…

[5] R. E. Z. Melamed, scholar of biblical exegesis, in his book *Mefarshei Ha-Mikra*, Vol. II (Jerusalem, 5735), pp. 782-8, compiles a list of verses explained through *Sefer Ha-shorashim*.

[6] Perhaps it is specifically his clear style which has worked to the Radak's disadvantage, so that his commentary is not as widely studied as those of Rashi and ibn Ezra. Rashi and ibn Ezra write very concisely and sometimes (particularly in the latter's case), their words are difficult to understand because of their extreme terseness, and therefore they have many supercommentaries. The Radak does not have many supercommentaries; ironically, the accessibility of the text ultimately leads to its being less widely studied.

[7] See *Bereishit* 24:32, s.v. "*Va-yitten*," "*U-mayim*."

[8] The Ralbag was influenced by this method, and he explores, in his commentary to the Torah, the moral lessons that he finds in these stories.

[9] This does not contradict his view (cited above, concerning the words of Yosef's brothers, "Therefore, this distress has come upon us…") that when one finds himself in distress, he must inspect his actions and repent. The individual must inspect his actions because of the distress which has already befallen him, hoping simultaneously that it will ultimately turn out for the good.

[10] In the part we have skipped, the Radak explains that despite the fact that the Christians believe that one should explain the *mitzvot* of the Torah in an allegorical manner, they concede that the narratives of the Torah are true.

[11] This is what arises from his own words in a number of places in his commentary:
There are books in which it is emended: "And from the tribe of Reuven" (*Yehoshua* 21:7).
This is what I have in a number of precise books, but in others I have found it [vowelized] with a*kamatz*" (*Yechezkel* 11:16).

[12] See *Yeshayahu* 13:16, 16:20; *Yirmiyahu* 17:13.
[13] Abarbanel, in his introduction to the Book of*Yirmiyahu* (pp. 299-300), disputes this: How can I believe in my soul and how can I raise on my lips that Ezra the Scribe, who found the book of God's Torah and the books of his Prophets, and the others who spoke with the Holy Spirit, were flummoxed by doubts and discombobulated? We know that a Torah scroll missing one letter is invalid, all the more so for *keri* and *ketiv*!
[14] Because of this question, Rashi brings a source from *Bereishit Rabba* (84:21): "Yitzchak cries because of Yaakov's distress…" According to this explanation, the term "his father" does not relate to Yaakov (the subject of the previous verse, "For I shall go down…"), but to Yaakov's father Yitzchak: Yitzchak feels Yaakov's pain.
[15] The Radak's commentary on *Tehillim* was one of the first books in Hebrew.
[16] The verse is *Tehillim* 144:14, "Our oxen are carrying, there is no breach, no outgoing, no crying in our streets" — in other words, thanks to Radak's writings, "There is no breach" (crack) in our language and "no crying in our streets," i.e., no unanswered questions.
[17] Perhaps the reference is to the seven books of the Prophets: *Yehoshua, Shoftim, Shmuel, Melakhim, Yeshayahu, Yirmiyahu and Yechezkel*. Another possibility is that it alludes to *Yeshayahu*4:1, "And seven women shall take hold of one man in that day, saying, 'We will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes, only let us be called by your name; take away our disgrace.'" In other words, the Radak takes away our disgrace.
[18] **Translator's note**: "*Kemach*" literally means flour; in *Avot* 3:17, this refers to the necessity of material sustenance in order to pursue spiritual activities. Here, it is a pun on the family name Kimchi.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Lecture #17:
Ramban, Part I

A. Biography

Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman[1] (henceforth known as the Ramban) was born in Girona, Catalonia (today in northeast Spain), part of the Crown of Aragon, in 1194. This area was heavily influenced by Spanish Muslim culture and by French Ashkenazic culture. Indeed, the Ramban's writings reflect Spanish philosophy as well as the studiousness which characterized Ashkenazic Jewry. The Ramban was a physician by profession, but he studied *Tanakh*, Talmud, philosophy and philology as well.

The Raman served as a yeshiva head in Barcelona and as leader of the Jewish community. In the year 1232, following the polemics about the Rambam's writings,[2] the Ramban tried to resolve the conflict between the Rambam's supporters on the one hand and his opponents on the other, by offering a compromise: the Rambam's work would no longer be banned, but there would be a minimum age for studying philosophy and science. In its time, the Ramban's attempt at compromise was not successful.

In the year 1263, as part of his position as chief rabbi of Castilian Jewry, the Ramban was asked by King James I of Aragon[3] to represent Judaism in a public debate with Christianity. This disputation occurred in Barcelona, in the royal palace and in the royal presence. Pablo Christiani, a Jewish apostate, represented the Church. For four days, Christiani attempted to bring proofs of Jesus' divinity and of the abrogation of the commandments of the Torah from the *Tanakh* and the Talmud, but the Ramban refuted all of his claims. The disputation ended with the Ramban victorious, and he received a reward of 300 dinars. The Ramban summarized the debates in a book, which exists today as the *Sefer Ha-vikuach*, and following the publication of this work, the organizers of the disputation wanted to put the Ramban on trial for defaming and libeling Christianity. This came about two years after the end of the disputation (1265). Due to the king's intervention, this was delayed, but the disputation's organizers succeeded in convincing Pope Clement IV to condemn the

Ramban to perpetual exile over what he wrote in *Sefer Ha-vikuach*. Thus, in 1267, the Ramban had no choice but to flee Spain; he moved to the Land of Israel.

By mid-1267, the Ramban had reached the coast of Acre, and on the 9th of Elul (the first of September) he arrived in Jerusalem.[4] The Ramban was shocked by what he found: Jerusalem was in ruins, the economic status of the Jews was very difficult, and their numbers were very low, to the extent that it was quite challenging to find a ten-man quorum for public prayer. The Ramban describes in a long elegy the misery of Jerusalem's Jewish population at this time:

> Over these I cry and forswear all pleasure,
> For the city remains in waste and desolate beyond measure.
> Our holy and glorious temple, where our fathers praised you, has been burned with fire, and in ruins lie all our treasures.
> …
> How the faithful city has become a byword!
> Great among the nation, supreme and preferred,
> How has this befallen the land's sovereign? How absurd!
> The dove city, perfect to every extent,
> Sun-bright, moon-beautiful in ascent,
> Myrrh and frankincense are her scent.
> …
> Holy one, I saw in you, by today's light,
> A most difficult and troubling sight.
> I found in you a Jew who weathered cruelty and spite;
> A dyer he was, and I witnessed his plight.[5]
> He had borne every unbearable slight.[6]
> Old and young gather in the house to make a quorum:
> A congregation, though they have no place in the forum,[7]
> No possession or property to maintain decorum,
> Poor, needy, indigent, without argent or aurum.

The destroyed state of the city and the status of the Jews in it touched the Ramban's heart, and with great determination he came out to strengthen the city and to reorganize the remnants of the community in Jerusalem. Among other projects, the Ramban built a synagogue (named after him) in the city at a partially ruined site. With the Ramban's arrival in Jerusalem and his activities to revive the community, Jews started to return. Despite his minimal stay in Jerusalem (about a year, apparently), his influence on the character of the city was tremendous, and we may credit the Ramban with rejuvenating Jewish Jerusalem in the 13thcentury. From Jerusalem, he returned to Acre, which had the largest and most important Jewish community in the Land of Israel, where he lived until his death at age 76 in the year 1270.[8]

B. The Ramban's Writings

The Ramban composed dozens of works, among them novellae on different tractates of the Talmud; *Sefer Milchamot Hashem*, in which the Ramban protects the Rif from the attacks of the Baal Ha-maor; halakhic compositions and philosophical works; glosses on the Rambam's *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*; books of responsa, etc. However, his most famous work is his

commentary on the Torah, which was among the first books to be published in Hebrew.

In his writings, the Ramban demonstrates clear his expansive and deep mastery of the Talmud; the writings of the Rif, Rashi and Tosafot (the Tosafists are mentioned in his commentary on the Talmud more than one hundred and fifty times[9]); the Sages' homilies; his predecessors' exegesis (Onkelos, Rashi, ibn Ezra); and philosophical knowledge of great breadth and depth.[10] The Ramban integrates the studiousness of the Ashkenazic-French study hall, with the philosophy and philology which characterized Torah study in Spain. The Ramban was considered in his time the head of Spanish Jewry, but he was accepted and praised by the sages of France and Ashkenaz.

Rav Dr. Yitzchak Unna, in his research on the Ramban, describes very well[11] the complexity of the Ramban:

> The Ramban unifies, as it were, the virtues of both sides. Aside from his great expertise in Talmud and his respect for tradition, he also exhibits knowledge of philosophy and fine sensitivity for all linguistic issues. Nevertheless, tradition is always his guide in his commentary, and in every place he tries to repel the attacks against it. However, he knows well the nature of the problems which the Torah sets before us; he recognizes the streams of time and the questions which come out of them, and he does not retreat before them.

C. Characteristics of Commentary to the Torah

As we have said, in all of his writings, the Ramban's commentary to the Torah is the most widely distributed. Thus, he had great influence in shaping Jewish thought.

As for the aim of his commentary, the Ramban writes in his introductory poem:

> In the name of God, awesome, mighty and great,
> I shall begin my comments on the Torah, to innovate…
> My mind is not broad enough for all of its secrets to accommodate.
> Hidden in its house and veiled in the rooms of its estate,
> For every treasure and every wonder and every deep secret and every glorious wisdom incarnate,
> Remains stored up in it, sealed in its storehouse, innate —
> In allusion and speech, to write and state.
> As the prophet, glorious in crown and in royal garb habilitate,
> The anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel did dictate:
> "I have seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad" (*Tehillim* 119:96)…
> But what shall I do? My soul longs to plunge in the Torah's stream!
> There is in my heart a consuming fire, a burning gleam
> Stopped up in my innards to the extreme.

I long to follow in the footsteps of the first ones, the lions of the team,
The geniuses of the generations, masters of might and esteem:
To bear with them the heaviness of the beam,
To write in them simple meanings in verses and lore, in commandments and homilies to deem
Ordered in all things and sure, as they seem.
The lamps of the pure candelabrum I set as my light,
The words of Rabbeinu Shelomo,coronet of beauty, diadem of glorious might.
His name is his crown; Scripture, Mishna and Talmud, his delight.
His is the firstborn's rite.
Of his words I think, in their love I sink, to debate and defend, to examine and excite
Every definition and derivation
And every allegorical citation
Mentioned in his commentation.
And Rabbi Avraham ben Ezra, I will speak of
With open rebuke and hidden love.

This introductory poem reveals a number of characteristics of this commentary. First of all, the Ramban in his commentary intends to offer new interpretations ("I shall begin my comments on the Torah, to innovate…") and not to explain the verses sequentially. When the Ramban does not interpret a given verse, we may assume that he intends to accept Rashi's approach (unless he explicitly states otherwise), as he writes in his poem, "The lamps of the pure candelabrum I set as my light/ The words of Rabbeinu Shelomo**,** coronet of beauty, diadem of glorious might."[12] Another characteristic of the commentary is its being a wide-ranging, comprehensive commentary, in which the Ramban uses specific verses as jumping boards to general topics. The Ramban does not look only at the verse which stands before him, but rather the general context, and he relates to additional contents and topics which are tied to the issue under discussion.

D. Two Examples of the Ramban's Generalist Approach

We will now examine two instances of the Ramban's wide-ranging exegesis from the Book of *Bereishit*: the food designated for the human race, as descendants of Adam and Noach, and the massacre of the male citizenry of Shekhem by Yaakov's sons.

Man's Dietary Laws

First let us consider his commentary on *Bereishit* 1:29-30, "And God said, 'Behold I have given to you all seed-bearing vegetation…" The Ramban explains at length the shift which occurs in the menu of people from their creation until Noach leaves the Ark:

> …but he gave to Adam and his wife every seed-bearing herb and all of the fruits of the tree. To the animals of the land and the birds of the

heaven, he gave every grassy herb, not the fruits of the tree or the seeds. Their food is not for all of them together equally, but until the Noahides, they were not allowed to eat meat, according to our Rabbis. This is the simple meaning of the verse. Now, this is because the owners of the moving soul have a bit of an elevation in their souls; they may be compared in it to the intelligent soul, having a choice in their good and their foods-, and fleeing from pain and death. Indeed, the verse says (*Kohelet* 3:21), "Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?"

When they sinned, and every flesh corrupted its way upon the earth, He decreed that they would die in the Flood, and because of Noach they were saved, in order that the species might survive, so He gave them permission to slaughter and eat, that this might serve for their survival.

Nevertheless, there was no permission given to them [to partake] of the soul, and He forbade them [to eat] a limb from a living animal. Similarly, He added for us the commandments to forbid every type blood, because it maintains the soul, as it says (*Vayikra* 17:14), "For the soul of every flesh, its blood is in its soul," and He said to the Israelites, "The blood of very flesh do not eat, for the soul of every flesh is its blood," for He permits [the consumption of] the body of the living that does not speak after its death, not the soul itself…

We should note the many topics to which the Ramban relates in this comment:

1. An explanation of the verse itself, in which the Ramban distinguishes between that which is allowed for human beings and that which is allowed for animals to eat.
2. The reason to forbid eating animals for Adam.
3. A reason to annul the prohibition for Noahides.
4. Delimiting the application of eating animals.

On the other hand, Rashi explains the verses precisely:

"For you it shall be to eat, and for all the animals of the land" — the verse equates for them wild and domesticated animals to eat,[13] and it does not allow Adam and his wife to kill a creature and to eat meat, but every grassy herb they may eat, all of them together. When the Noahides were permitted to eat meat, it says (below 9:3), "Every creeping thing which lives," etc. "like the grassy herb" which I gave to Adam, "I have given you everything."

The Execution of the Men of Shekhem

An additional example is the Ramban's interpretation of the narrative of Shekhem, in which the Ramban (*Bereishit*34:13) relates to a wide range of topics. First, he wonders how it is that Yaakov seems shocked and surprise

by his sons' action; was he not present when they devised their scheme and convinced the men of Shekhem to circumcise themselves?

> There is a question here: it appears that by the will of her father and his counsel they answered, for they were before him, and he knew how they responded, speaking with guile; if so, why was he angry? Moreover, how can it be that he would marry his daughter off to a Canaanite who had defiled her? Behold all of the brothers respond thus with guile, and Shimon and Levi alone did the act [of the killing the men of the city], but their father cursed [Shimon and Levi] alone?
>
> Now, the guile was in their saying that every male should circumcise himself, for they believed that the people of the city would not have done that, and if perhaps they would listen to the princes and they would all be circumcised, they could come on the third day when they were in pain and take their daughter from Shekhem's house. This was the counsel of the brothers, sanctioned by their father, but Shimon and Levi wanted to be avenged of them, and they killed all the men of the city.
>
> It may be that the anger of Yaakov, who cursed their wrath, came because they killed the men of the city, who had not sinned towards him, and what was fit for them is that they should have killed Shekhem [the prince of the city] alone. This is what the verse says, "The sons of Jacob answered Shekhem and his father Chamor with guile, because he had defiled their sister Dina." For all of them agreed to speak to him with guile, because of the outrage committed against them.
>
> Now, many have asked: how could Yaakov's righteous sons have committed this act, spilling innocent blood?
>
> The master responded in *Sefer Shofetim (Hilkhot Melakhim* 9:14) and said that Noahides are bound [to enforce] laws… and a Noahide who violates one of them is killed by the sword… Because of this, all of the citizens of Shekhem were deserving of capital punishment, because [Prince] Shekhem was a thief, and they saw and knew this, but they did not bring him to justice.
>
> These things are not right in my eyes, for if so, Yaakov would have to have taken the lead in killing them. Even if he was afraid of them, why did he rage against his sons and curse their anger repeatedly, punishing them by sundering and scattering them? Did they not take the initiative and fulfill a commandment, trusting in God, Who in fact saved them?!
>
> In my view, the law [enforcement] which they counted for the Noahides among their seven commandments is not to establish judges in each and every province alone; He also bound them to uphold the laws of theft and fraud… This includes appointing judges in each and every

city, just as for Israel, but if they do not do so, they are not killed, because [law enforcement] is a positive commandment for them. Indeed they said (*Sanhedrin* 57a), that "their prohibition is their death penalty," and a prohibition is only that which one is proscribed from doing. This is the way of the Talmud in Sanhedrin (59b)…

Why does the master[14] search for a liability? Were the men of Shekhem and the seven nations not idolaters and adulterers, committing all that God finds abominable… Nevertheless, it is not the responsibility of Yaakov and his sons to hold them accountable for these offenses.

Rather, the issue of Shekhem is this: Yaakov's sons, because the men of Shekhem were so evil that their blood was water in their eyes, sought to avenge themselves with the sword of retribution, and they killed the king and all the men of his city… Thus, Yaakov said to them here that they had put him in jeopardy, as it says, "You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land" — and there,[15] "Cursed is their anger" — because they committed violence against the men of the city, who had said to them in his presence, [16] "And we will dwell with you and become one people." However, [Yaakov's sons] made the choice to undermine their words, even though the possibility existed that [the men of Shekhem] might return to God, which would mean that they killed them for nothing, for they did not do any evil to them. This is why he said: "Tools of violence are their wares" (*ibid*. 49:5).[17]

If we believe the book *Milchamot Benei Yaakov*[18] (which is *Sefer Ha-yashar*), their father's fears were fulfilled, for all the neighbors of Shekhem gathered against them and waged three great battles against them, and were it not for their father who girded his weapons of war and fought, they would have been in jeopardy, as it is told in this book. And our Rabbis (*Bereishit Rabba*80:10) made mention of this concerning the following verse (48:22): "Which I took from the hand of The Amorite, by my sword and by my bow." We see that all who surrounded them gathered to engage them, so Yaakov had to gird his weapons of war, as Rashi writes*ad loc*.

Nevertheless, the verse chose brevity, for this is a hidden miracle, as they were heroic men and it was their might that saved them, just as the verse truncates the issue of Avraham in Ur Kasdim… Indeed, this is the meaning of "God's terror [was upon the cities surrounding them]" (35:5), for awe and fright fell upon [Shekhem's neighbors] when they saw their might in war, and therefore it is said (35:6), "And Yaakov came to Luz, he and all the people with him," to let us know that neither they nor their servants fell in battle.

The Ramban relates to a number of points:

1. Why does Yaakov get angry at his sons after they kill the men of Shekhem, while according to the verse, he himself was involved in the trickery, because he was present at the time of the speech between his sons on the one hand and Shekhem and Chamor his father on the other? Why was he angry at Shimon and Levi, when all of the brothers responded deceitfully?
2. Philosophical question: how can it be that the righteous sons of Yaakov killed deceitfully?
3. Response of the Rambam: since Noahides are obligated to appoint judges, and the abuse of Dina shows that there were no judges in Shekhem, the lawful sentence for the men of Shekhem was death.
4. Rejecting the view of the Rambam according to the simple meaning of the verses.
5. Rejecting the view of the Rambam on halakhic grounds, and a lengthy analysis defining and delimiting the requirements of the seven Noahide laws.
6. The view of the Ramban that Yaakov's sons indeed sinned by killing the men of Shekhem deceitfully.
7. The reference of the Ramban to Yaakov's suspicion (v. 30), "You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites. My numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household" — a concern which proved true.
8. The reason for the Torah's omission of the Amorite war against Yaakov is that it is a hidden miracle, and there is no need to spell out hidden miracles. At this point, the Ramban adds examples of other hidden miracles not mentioned in the verses.

Using these two examples, we may see by way of these two examples that it is not only that the Ramban, in his commentary to a lone verse, may relate to many facets of exegetical, halakhic and philosophical issues; he seeks an explanation which jibes with the details of many wider contexts. The proof is not local, but wide-ranging, comprehensive, taking in a broad perspective. One may see also the analytical style constructed, in which the Ramban, in an organized, consistent way, lays out the issues, brings different opinions and deals with them until he develops his own view.

As for the Ramban's writing style in his commentary on the Torah, there are clear parallels between it and his writing style in his novellae on the Talmud. There as well, we are talking about organized, topical, analytical writing. In his Talmudic novellae, it is clear that there is a wider analytical element, for he draws from the style of the Tosafists; still, he integrates the Tosafists' analyses within his orderly topical framework, as appropriate for a scholar brought up on the Spanish tradition. Apparently, he copied this style for his biblical exegesis as well.

In the next lesson, God willing, we will deal with specific philosophical topics which are common in the Ramban's commentaries on the Torah; these have proven to be quite influential in shaping Jewish thought throughout the generations.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

[1] The official Spanish name of the Ramban wasBonastruc ça Porta. He is also referred to as Nahmanides, and his last name is sometimes given as Girondi, indicating the city of his birth.
[2] This controversy arose due to the Rambam's reliance on Greek philosophy in *Moreh Ha-nvukhim*; there was strong opposition to his writings among French Jewry. According to his opponents, the Rambam made the Jewish tradition subservient to concepts from Greek (pagan) philosophy. The polemics began when Rabbi Shelomo min Ha-har and his student Rabbeinu Yona Girondi (the Ramban's cousin) turned to the French sages to express the Ashkenazic opposition to the Rambam's writings. The French sages indeed expressed their strong objections, banning both that work and *Sefer Ha-madda*, the first part of Mishneh Torah. For their part, the Spanish sages band the works of Rabbi Shelomo min Ha-har, the initiator of the ban.
[3] He was also known as *Jaime el Conquistador*(the Conqueror).
[4] This is what arises from his elegy over the destruction of Jerusalem (see below):

> For on the ninth day of the month of Elul, five thousand and twenty-seven, you came in the ruined city, desolate and without her children, sitting with her head covered…

[5] A Jew who is oppressed and suffers
[6] By occupation
[7] In the marketplace, i.e., the congregation had no way to make a living.
[8] There are a number of traditions concerning his place of burial; according to one version, he was buried in Acre, and according to other traditions, he was buried in Jerusalem or Hebron.
[9] The Ramban had great regard for the Tosafists. For example, in his comments on *Chullin* 94a, he writes this:

> And this reason… I have learnt from the words of our French masters, of blessed memory, and I have added some applications, but our Torah is theirs.

In his introduction to his *Dina De-garmi*, he writes:

> The French sages have been gathered to their people: they are the teachers; they are the educators; they are the one who reveal the hidden…

[10] While the Rambam tries to unify Greek philosophy and the Torah, the Ramban believes that one should not put foreign elements in Judaism (see "*Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman*", Rav Dr. Yitzchak Unna, Jerusalem, 5737, p. 11).
[11] *Ibid*. p. 16.
[12] Below we will discuss at length the relationship of Ramban to Rashi.
[13] The Ramban disputes this view; he believes that man was not equated to animals initially when it came to eating vegetable matter.
[14] This refers to the Rambam.
[15] This is in Yaakov's blessings, *Bereishit* 49:7.
[16] This was in Yaakov's presence.
[17] In other words, there was a logical chance that the men of the city of Shekhem, who consented to circumcise themselves, so that they were ready to accept on themselves the faith and the morality of Yaakov's family.
[18] The history book which describes in a narrative style the events of our forefathers from the time of Adam until the period of the Judges. The book was edited, apparently, around the 9th century.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Lecture #18:
Ramban, Part II

In the previous lesson, we looked at the most prominent characteristic of the commentary of the Ramban on the Torah - his comprehensive approach to many topics in the category of theology and faith. This lesson is dedicated to a number of philosophical topics that recur throughout the Ramban's commentary on the Torah.

A. *Ma'aseh Avot Siman Le-Vanim*

An interesting issue in the commentary of the Ramban is his melding of historiography and exegesis, an idea expressed in the dictum, "*Ma'aseh avot siman le-vanim,*" "The happening of the fathers is an omen for the children."[1] The source of this view is found in the words of the Sages:

> R. Pinchas said in the name of R. Hoshaya the Great: The Holy One, Blessed be He said to our patriarch Avraham, "Go and pave the way before your children."
>
> Thus, **you find that everything that is written of Avraham is written of children as well.** Of Avraham it is written, "And there was a famine in the land" (*Bereishit* 12:10), and of Israel it is written, "For these two years, the famine is in the midst of the land" (*ibid.* 45:6). Of Avraham it is written, "And Avram went down to Egypt to sojourn there" (*ibid.* 12:10), and of Israel it is written "And our fathers went down to Egypt" (*Bamidbar*20:15). Of Avraham it is written, "To sojourn there" (*Bereishit* 12:10), and of Israel it is written, "To sojourn in the land we have come" (*ibid.* 47:4). Of Avraham it is written, "For the famine was severe in the land of Canaan" (47:4),[2] and of Israel it is written, "And the famine was severe in the land" (43:1)… (*Bereishit Rabba*, Vilna, *Parashat Lekh Lekha* 40)
>
> R. Yehoshua of Sikhnin said: **The Holy One, Blessed be He, gave an omen to Avraham: every incident which befell him befell his children.**
>
> How so? He chose Avraham from all of his father's house, as it says, "You are Lord, the God, You Who chose Avram and took him out from Ur Kasdim, and you made his name Avraham" (*Nechemya* 9:7), and He chose his children from seventy nations, as it says, "For a holy people are you to Lord your God, and you Lord your God chose to be a treasured people, from all the peoples upon the face of the earth" (*Devarim* 14:2). To Avraham it is said, "Go for yourself" (*Bereishit* 12:1), and to his children it says, "I will bring you up from the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites…" (*Shemot* 3:17). To Avraham it is said, "And I will bless you and make your name great, and you will be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you" (*Bereishit* 12:2-3), and to his children it says, "God shall bless you" (*Bamidbar* 6:24). To Avraham it is said, "And I shall make you a great nation" (*Bereishit* 12:2), and to his children it says, "And what great nation" (*Devarim* 4:8)… [3](*Midrash Tanchuma,* Warsaw*, Parashat Lekh Lekha* 9)

It appears that in each of these two homilies, the nature of the link between the ancestors' actions and the experiences of their descendants it is different. According to the*midrash* in *Bereishit Rabba*, the connection between the progenitor and the seed is the connection of cause and effect. The father – in a conscious, intentional way - influences the future of his children by his acts: "Go and pave the way…" In other words, the parent has the capacity to influence the experiences of the children. The view of R. Yehoshua of Sikhnin in *Midrash Tanchuma* is different: we are not talking about a conscious or willful act of the father, but rather information given to the father about his seed — "**an omen… that everything which happened to him happened to his children."** What befalls the father is a *siman*, an omen, a portent. The examples cited are not those in which the ancestors are active; rather, events that happen to the ancestor are an allusion, a presage of the future which will befall his children. In other words, the *Avot*, the Patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, could have learnt from what occurred to them what would happen to their descendants in the future. According to this, the ancestor does not influence history in a conscious way, but one may predict and foretell history based on the ancestor's experiences.

The Ramban relates to this idea in a number of places, generally in a way similar to that of the *Midrash Tanchuma* – the events of the fathers constitute an expression of prophetic transmission, the message of God to the Patriarchs (and to the readers of the stories). He even mentions, in a roundabout way, the language of "*siman le-vanim*."

The Ramban relates first to this topic in his commentary to *Bereishit* 12:7:

> "And Avram passed through the land, to the place of Shekhem" — I will tell you a rule to allow you to understand all of the coming passages, the matter of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. This is a fundamental subject, mentioned by our Rabbis in a condensed way, namely that **the incidents which befell our fathers is an omen for the children *(siman le-vanim).*** Therefore, the verses will elaborate on the narrative of the journeys, digging wells, and other incidents, and one may be led to think that these things are extraneous and purposeless, **but they all come to teach of the future.**When a prophecy of the Patriarchs comes true through these occurrences, he must think of the matter decreed to come upon his seed as a result.

The Ramban expresses this view many more times, including later in the same chapter:

> Behold, Avraham went down to Egypt because of the famine to sojourn there, in order to keep himself alive in days of famine. The Egyptians wronged him without cause by taking his wife, so God avenged him with great plagues, and He took him out from there with flocks, silver, and gold, and Pharaoh also ordered his men to escort him. **He alluded to him that his children would go down to Egypt because of famine, in order to reside there in the land,** and the Egyptians would treat them badly and take their women from them, as it says (*Shemot* 1:22), "And let live every girl." Nevertheless, God would take revenge with great plagues, taking them out with silver and gold, sheep and cattle, very great flocks; indeed [the Egyptians] would compel them, sending them out of the land. **There was not one iota of the father's experience which the children did not undergo**. This is explained in *BereishitRabba*… (Ramban, *Bereishit* 12:10)

On the other hand, as he goes on to explain *Bereishit* 12:6, it may be that there is a slightly different element involved:

> … Know that once a decree delivered by angels emerges from the potential to the actual via symbolization, this decree will be fulfilled in all cases. Therefore, the prophets perform an act of prophecy, as Yirmiyahu ordered Barukh (*Yirmiyahu* 51:63-64): "When you finish reading this book, tie a stone to it and cast it into the midst of the Euphrates, and say, 'Thus shall Babylon sink,'" etc. This is the issue of Elisha's putting his hand on the bow: (II *Melakhim*13:17): "Then Elisha said, 'Shoot,' and he shot. And he said, 'The Lord's arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Aram!'" And it says there (v. 19): "Then the man of God was angry with him and said, 'You should have struck five or six times; then you would have struck down Aram until you had made an end of it, but now you will strike down Aram only three times.'" Therefore, God strengthened Avraham in the land, causing him to perform acts which symbolized all of the future events which would befall his seed. Understand this.

Some see a mystical element in the words of the Ramban, according to which the acts of the fathers do not just teach us about the destiny of their seed, but rather create and determine the future. However, as we have seen, the Ramban in his commentary views the essence of the issue as a prophetic transmission; he directly compares these things to the symbolic acts performed by different prophets. It appears that the intent of the Ramban is to set out that there are different levels of certainty as to words of prophecy — some prophecies may not necessarily be fulfilled (for example, a prophecy dependent on human activity), while other prophecies will definitely occur. The form of the expression of the prophecy determines the level of certainty and teaches us about it.[4]The claim of the Ramban is that any prophecy which is given over not only verbally, but actively as well, is a prophecy which is immutable. In

other words, since these events happened, microcosmically, to the father, the future of the prophecy, macrocosmically, is certain. In this sense, Avraham's actions pave the way for his children.

It seems that the Ramban also accomplishes another goal by developing this principle - he explains the tension in the Midrashic sources between the active language of, "'Go and pave the way before your children,'" on the one hand, and the passive formulation of, **"The Holy One, Blessed be He, gave an omen to Avraham."**Once we understand that there are varying levels of probability for the practical fulfillment of different prophecies, this becomes clearer. Nevertheless, this is not a simple concept, which is why the Ramban ends with the two-word imperative: "Understand this."[5]

This idea is almost explicit in his introduction to the Book of *Shemot*. As he explains there, the Patriarchs determine and shape the future, but in essence, it is not their actions which accomplish this; it is God's proclamation of the future, as reinforced by events, which creates and determines this future:

> Thus ends the Book of *Bereishit*, which is the book of the creation and invention of the world and the creation of every creature; [it is also the book of] the experiences of the *Avot*, which are, for their seed, a matter of creation **because all of their experiences are illustrations. They allude to and tell of all future events which are fated to befall them.**
>
> After completing the [story of] creation, another book begins, detailing all of the results **emanating from these allusions.**Thus**,** the Book of *Shemot* is dedicated to the issue of the first explicitly-decreed exile and the redemption from it.

In particular, the Ramban stresses how the generations of exile and redemption of the Jewish people are alluded to in the narratives of the *Avot*. As we have seen, the events of Avraham's life allude to the first exile, the Egyptian exile. The Ramban goes further and determines that the events which befall Yitzchak allude to the second exile, the Babylonian/Persian exile. This is what the Ramban writes in his commentary to *Bereishit* 26:1:

> In my view, this issue contains an allusion to the future, because the exile of Avraham to Egypt due to famine alludes to the fact that his children will be exiled there, but his going to Avimelekh was not exile, for he settled there of his own accord.
>
> However, Yitzchak's descent there because of the famine does allude to this exile, for he was exiled from his place against his will and went to another land; indeed, he is exiled from his place to the land of the Philistines, which was the land of his father's sojourning. This alludes to the Babylonian exile, for it is the place of their fathers' sojourns, namely Ur Kasdim…

The Ramban adds and specifies points of comparison between Yitzchak's exile and the Babylonian exile. Just as Yitzchak leaves the land due to the compulsion of famine and goes to a land which his father settled in the past, the Israelites are similarly destined to go out of their land against their will and go to the land of their fathers' sojourns, in Babylonia (indeed, we first encounter Avraham in Babylonia, in Ur Kasdim). Just as Yitzchak's settlement in Philistines is without affliction, so too, the Babylonian exile is destined to be without subjugation and affliction (the Jews prospered in Babylonia). Just as the Philistines sent Yitzchak out of their land after he had settled there, the Israelites are similarly destined to be sent out from the Babylonian exile (by the edict of Cyrus the Great).

Following this line of thought, the Ramban sees the events of Yaakov's life as alluding to the Edomite exile. To this exile, the Ramban dedicates huge swathes of his commentary, as this is the exile in which the Ramban and his contemporaries reside:

> "To Esav his brother, to the land of Seir" — Because the south of the Land of Israel is next to Edom, and his father resided in the southland, one would have to pass by

> Edom or close to it. Thus, [Yaakov] was afraid lest Esav hear, so he sent messengers ahead of him to his land.
>
> However, the Sages, likening him to "One who takes the dog by the ears" (*Mishlei*26:17), have already criticized him. As they put it (*Bereishit Rabba* 75:3): "The Holy One, Blessed be He said to him: He was going along his way, and you sent to him and said (*Bereishit* 32:5), 'So says your servant Yaakov?'"
>
> **In my view, this also alludes to the fact that we initiated our downfall in the hand of Edom**, for the kings of the Second Temple forged a covenant with the Romans (*Chashmonaim* 1:8), and some of them went to Rome, which was the ultimate cause of our downfall in their hands, and this is mentioned in our Rabbis' words and publicized in books (*Yosippon*, ch. 65).(Ramban, *Bereishit* 32:4)
>
> This is how it is for us with Rome and Edom. It is our brothers who have caused our downfall in their hands, for they forged a covenant with the Romans. The latter King Agrippas of the Second Temple fled to them for assistance, and because of the famine, the Jerusalemites were captured. Now, the exile has been lengthened a great deal, without our knowing when it will end, like the other exiles. We are in it like the dead, saying (*Yechezkel* 37:11), "Our bones are dried up [and our hope is lost]; we are indeed cut off…" Nevertheless, they shall bring up all of us from all the nations as an offering to God (*Yeshayahu* 66:20), and they will have severe mourning when they see our glory. We will witness God's vengeance, for "He shall lift as us up, and we will live before Him" (*Hoshea* 6:2).(Ramban, *Bereishit* 47:28)

This historical view of the Ramban is of great significance, not just in the field of exegesis, but also because it has such a clear polemical anti-Christian aim. The Church sought to prove that Jesus and Church history were already predicted and prefigured in *Tanakh*. Taking into account the Christian approach, one may understand the significance of the commentaries of the Ramban, in which he stress that indeed there is an allusion to the future in the stories of the *Avot*, but the allusion is for Israel's future — what is decreed upon their seed — but not for others, who are not of their seed.[6]

B. The Superiority of the Land of Israel

The Ramban is known for his deep love of the Land of Israel. We may detect echoes of this in his poetry,[7] and indeed the Ramban moved to Israel. In his commentary to *Bereishit* 35:16, he writes: "I have merited arriving in Jerusalem myself — praise be to God, good and beneficent!" In the halakhic sphere, the Ramban is the first of the enumerators of the 613 commandments who counts living in Israel as a *mitzva*:

> We have been commanded to settle the land… and not to leave it in the hands of other nations, nor [to leave it] desolate… And I say that the commandment which the Sages go to extremes to express is that of living in the Land of Israel… It is a positive commandment for all generations, and everyone is bound by it, even in a time of exile. (Ramban, *Glosses to Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, Positive 4) [8]

According to the Ramban, the superiority of the Land of Israel predates its being given to Avraham and to the People of Israel. For example, the Ramban explains that the overturning of Sedom was due to the superiority of the Land of Israel.

> Know that **Sedom was judged by virtue of the superiority of the Land of Israel, for it has the status of God's portion, and it does not tolerate abominable people**. When it vomited out the entire nation because of its abominations, it came first and vomited this people out, for they were the most evil, towards Heaven and towards creations… For there are exceedingly evil and sinful nations whom He does not do this to, **but all of this was because of the superiority of this land, for God's sanctuary is there**.[9](Ramban, *Bereishit*19:5)

In other words, the unique superiority of the Land of Israel is because of its status as "God's portion" and "God's sanctuary," and the unique connection of this land to God incurs a great attribute of justice more so than other lands, since God is less tolerant of sins in His portion than in other places. The issue is explained more broadly in his commentary on *Parashat Acharei Mot*(*Vayikra* 18:25), where the Ramban explains that God does not directly control the affairs of the nations of the world. Instead, He appoints angelic representatives for each and every people and land, and He directs them by way of these intermediaries.[10] The Land of Israel, in contrast, is managed by God directly:

> This is the matter… God in His glory created everything, and He put control of the lower realms in the upper realms, and he put over each and every one, in their lands and by their nations… He gave them sublime angels to be princes over them… Now, God in his glory is the God of gods and the Lord of Lords, for the entire world. However, the Land of Israel, the center of the civilization, is God's portion, dedicated to His name; He does not appoint over it any angel as an officer, marshal, or governor. Instead, He gives it as a portion to the nation which unifies His name, the seed of his beloved… Thus, He gives to us the land so that He, in his blessedness, will be our God and we shall be unified for His name. Behold, the land which is the portion of God, in His glory, will vomit out anyone who defiles it, and it will not tolerate idolaters and adulterers.[11]

The Ramban goes quite far in his approach, and he declaims that the main significance of the fulfillment of commandments is specifically in the Land of Israel. Fulfilling the commandments outside the land — even those which are clearly bodily obligations, such as putting on *tefillin* — is designed only in order for us not to forget the commandments upon returning from exile. He cites the explanation of the *Sifrei (Ekev* 43):

> "And you will quickly perish" (*Devarim*11:17) — [God says:] "Even though I have exiled you from the land to dwell outside it, remain distinguishable by the commandments, so that when you return, they will not be new to you."
>
> This is analogous to husband who, furious at his wife, sends her to her father's home. He said to her, "Keep wearing your jewelry, so that when you return, they will not be new to you."
>
> Thus said *Yirmiyahu* (31:20): "Set markers for yourself" — these are the commandments, which make Israel remarkable…"

The Ramban concludes:

> They explained that it should not be new to you when you return to the land, **for the essence of all the commandments is for those who reside in the land of God.**[12] (Ramban, *Vayikra* 18:25)

It appears that the connection between the Land of Israel and the fulfillment of the commandments is an outgrowth of the special status of the Land of Israel as a land with a direct link to the Divine Presence.

Indeed, the Ramban manages to find praise for the Land of Israel even amid God's severe rebuke:

> And this is what it says here (v. 32), "So that your enemies who live there will be desolated" — this is in fact good news, cheering the exiles; our land does not accept our enemies, and this is a great proof and promise for us. For you will not find in civilization a land which is as good and broad, and which was always settled, yet is so devastated… For from the time we left, it has not accepted any nation or state; though all of them try to settle it, they do not succeed…(Ramban, *Vayikra* 26:16)

C. *Nissayon*

An additional philosophical issue which appears in the Ramban's commentary is *nissayon*, testing or proving. In the Torah, there are a number of situations in which God tests people, and there is a basic philosophical question common to all of them: what is the point of the *nissayon*, when all is known and revealed to Him? What reason does Omniscient God have to "test" human beings?

The Ramban relates to this in an explicit way regarding the *nissayon* of the Binding of Yitzchak:

> This is called a *nissayon* for the one being tested, but the Tester, in his blessedness, will command him **to realize his potential in actuality, to earn the reward of good action and not the reward of a good heart alone.** Know that "God examines the righteous" (*Tehillim* 11:5), when He knows full well that the righteous will do His will, but He seeks to demonstrate his righteousness, He will give him a test. However, he will not examine the wicked, who will not listen regardless. **Thus, each of the tests in the Torah is for the benefit of the one being tested.**(Ramban,*Bereishit* 22:1)

If so, in the view of the Ramban, the test is designed to serve not the Tester, God, but rather the one who is being tested. The *nissayon* in the Torah is an opportunity which is provided for the righteous to apply in practice their dedication to God and to earn a reward for this. In this way, they will receive a reward not only for their potential dedication, but for their actual dedication.

In a similar way, the Ramban explains the test of the manna, about which the Torah says, "So that I may test them, whether they will follow My law or not" (*Shemot* 16:4). The *nissayon* is designed to take the Israelites' dedication and readiness from the realm of the potential to the realm of the actual, realizing their reliance on God:

> "So that I may test them, whether they will follow My law or not" — to test them and to provide them good in the end, that they will believe in Him forever…

Furthermore, the Ramban explains (*Devarim* 8:2) "And you shall recall all the way" in the following manner:

> "And you shall recall all the way" — … but He subjected them to this test, for from it He knows that they will keep His commandments forever.

According to the Ramban, the aim of the test of the manna is to take the total dedication of the Israelites to God from the potential to the actual, as they will exemplify throughout their years of wandering in the desert, and the reward for withstanding the test is that they will believe in Him forever.[13]

As we have said, we have cited only some of the philosophical issues which the Ramban deals with in his commentary. Throughout his work, the reader may find dozens of analyses of philosophical topics, which continue to shape our worldview until this very day.

[1] In the Ramban, this is actually formulated: "The incidents which befell our fathers…" The term "*Ma'aseh avot siman le-vanim*" is mentioned by*Acharonim* who cite the view of the Ramban.
[2] This verse actually appears concerning Yaakov and his children; perhaps the reference is meant to be the verse, "And there was a famine in the land" (*Bereishit* 12:10), which appears in Avraham's narrative.
[3] Afterwards, additional homilies are cited.
[4] This is similar to what Yosef says to Pharaoh (*Bereishit* 41:32): "And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is proper by God, and God will shortly bring it about." (Still, the commentators argue regarding whether the term "proper" indicates inevitability or proximity.)

[5] In one place, the Ramban speaks in a clear way of the causal connection between Avraham's actions and his children's experiences. Immediately after what we have cited above from *Bereishit*12:10, he goes on to say:
Know that Avraham Avinu sinned greatly, if inadvertently, by involving his righteous wife in the stumbling-block of sin… as well as leaving the land… This is the sin he committed… and for this act, it was decreed upon his seed the exile in the land of Egypt, by the hands of Pharaoh.
However, it appears that there is no link between this matter and the previous issue, the general idea of the experiences of the fathers being an omen for the children. The Ramban simply adds a new element - that in this specific instance, Avraham sinned and brought about, by his actions, a punishment for his children.
[6] See about this at length in Amos Funkenstein's comprehensive essay, "*Parshanuto Ha-Typologit shel Ramban*," *Zion* 45 (5740), pp. 35-59.
[7] "*Al Chorvotayikh Yerushalayim"* (see previous lesson).
[8] The same may be found in his commentary on the Torah (*Bamidbar* 33:53): "And you shall occupy the land and you shall reside in it:"
As I see it, this is a positive commandment, commanding them to reside in the land and settle it, for it is given to them and they must not reject God's portion. Now, they may have a thought of going and conquering the land of Sumer or the land of Assyria or others and to settle there, but this would violate God's command. Indeed, our Rabbis go to extremes to express the commandment of residing in the Land of Israel and that it is forbidden to leave it — by this, we have been bound by this commandment. For this verse is a positive command… However, Rashi explains: "'And you shall occupy the land' — you shall clear it of its inhabitants, and then 'You shall reside in it.' Only then will you be able to survive there, but if you do not do this, you will be unable to survive there." Nevertheless, what I have said is the essence.
[9] See *Vayikra* 18:24-28, 20:21-24.
[10] According to the Ramban, there is a hierarchy of these factors: the fates of the nations are determined directly by heavenly factors (astrology), and the heavenly factors are directed by angels (according to the Ramban, these are the "princes" and "kings" mentioned in the Book of Daniel), who are under God's control. This cosmological hierarchy matches the philosophical views that were commonly held in medieval times, and the Ramban certainly perceives it as a natural system. According to him, it is specifically the situation in the Land of Israel which constitutes a supernatural situation.
[11] See the verses which the Ramban refers to,*Vayikra* 18:24-28.
[12] He includes a similar point in his commentary to *Devarim* 4:5.
[13] However, in his commentary to *Shemot* 20:16, the Ramban explains the *nissayon* in a different manner:
…And according to my view, it is an actual test. He will say that God wanted to test you whether you will keep his commandments, for He removed all doubt from your heart, and now He shall see whether you love Him and if you desire Him and His commandments.
Indeed, any term of testing is examination. [As David says of Shaul's battle dress,] "I cannot go with these, for I have not been tested" (I *Shemuel*17:39) — I have never examined my soul by going in them.
It may be that this testing is for the good, for the master will sometimes test his servant with harsh service to know if he will tolerate it out of his love, and sometimes he will do good to him to know if he will repay him for this good which he has received, to enhance his master's service and honor.
This is just as the Sages said (*Shemot Rabba*31:20): "Fortunate is the man who withstands his tests, for there is no creature whom the Holy One, Blessed be He does not test: the rich one He tests to see if his hand will be open to the poor; and the poor He tests if he can accept the suffering," etc.
Therefore, the verse says that God has been good to you to show you His glory, which He did not do for any nation, to test you. Will you repay Him the good which he has bestowed upon you, as His allotted nation, as it says, "Shall you repay God with this?" (*Devarim* 32:6).
Moreover, it says, "Only you have I known from all the families of the earth; therefore I will take account of you for your sins" (*Amos* 3:2); the nations are not obligated to Me as you are, for I have known you face-to-face.

Lecture #19:
Ramban, Part III

In the previous lecture, we dealt with the philosophical aspects of the Ramban's writings. In this lesson, we will deal with additional characteristics of the Ramban's commentary on the Torah.

A. The Secret Torah — "*Al DerekhHa-Emet*"

One of the hallmarks of the Ramban's commentary on the Torah is the use of the words "*al derekh ha-emet*."[1] *Derekh ha-emet* is literally the "way" or "path of truth;" although it contrasts with *derekh ha-peshat*, it certainly does not indicate that "the simple way" or "the path of simplicity" is untrue. When the Ramban prefaces an explanation with these words, his intent is to cite a commentary based on *sod* (literally, secret), the hidden, mystical elements of Jewish tradition.[2] The *peshat*explanations of the Ramban do not require a special background; one need only be familiar with the text of the Torah. His Kabbalistic commentaries, on the other hand, cannot be understood by a reader unschooled in fundamental Kabbalistic concepts, [3] and it seems that the Ramban indeed intends that only individuals with a background in Kabbala will understand his words:[4]

> Behold, I come with a faithful covenant, and it is what gives appropriate counsel for everyone who looks at this book. **Do not formulate an approach or conceptualize a matter based on the allusions that I write of the secrets of the Torah! I make it known unequivocally that one cannot conceive a matter, nor know it at all by any view or understanding, save by the mouth of a wise Kabbalist to the ear of an educated Kabbalist…** (Ramban, Introduction to the Torah)

Thus, the Ramban formulates or employs a type of code. This allows him to disseminate his words while concealing them from anyone who is not an expert in the discipline of Kabbala, anyone who did not learn it "by the mouth of a wise Kabbalist."

A commentary by way of *sod* appears as an alternative after the Ramban brings the commentary of *peshat*, and generally the Kabbalistic explanation will not be advanced as the sole explanation.

One example of this may be found in*Shemot* 2:23-25. The verse there describes the difficulty of the enslavement in Egypt and the cry of the Israelites. Verse 25 notes, "And God saw the Israelites, and God knew." The biblical exegetes deal with the question of the meaning of God's knowledge at this point. Does God, as it were, discover something, alerted by the cry of the Israelites, which He had not known earlier? This flies in the face of God's omniscience! Therefore, the Ramban writes:

> This is correct ***al derekh ha-peshat***, for at first He was hiding His face from them, and they were devoured,[5] but at this point God hears their cry and sees them. This means that He did not hide His face anymore; He acknowledges their pain, everything done to them and everything needed for them…

After this commentary *al derekh ha-peshat*, the Ramban adds an explanation according to *sod*, in which the Ramban coyly alludes to the mystical elements of the Torah:

> Al *derekh ha-emet*, this verse has one of the greatest secrets of the mysteries of the Torah… and this verse is explained in the Midrash of Rabbi Nechunya ben Ha-kaneh (*Sefer Ha-Bahir*, no. 76). You will understand it from there.

B. Citation and Incorporation in the Commentary of the Ramban

At this point, it is worth dedicating a number of lines to the Ramban's method of citing verses and Jewish sources. In his essay on the topic, Ephraim Hazan differentiates between citation and incorporation in the Ramban's commentary.[6] The Ramban often brings sources from the Sages and Scripture in order to prove and strengthen his words. In these cases, the citation is introduced with one of the following phrases: "As it is written," "As is written," "As it says," etc. In addition to citation, the Ramban often use the technique of incorporation, a style of writing in which the author integrates into his text a verse or a statement of the Sages, in full or in part, without notifying the reader that this is a quote.

Granted, this technique predates the Ramban considerably; nevertheless, in the Ramban's writings it becomes amazingly frequent, giving a unique significance to his words. Sometimes, the Ramban relies on the reader's expertise and does not even exert himself to interweave the entire verse; instead, he only writes out the beginning. However, in order to understand the idea completely, one needs to be familiar with the entire verse.

In order to demonstrate this, we will look at the Ramban's incorporation in his commentary to the verse referred to earlier (*Shemot* 2:25).

> This is correct ***al derekh ha-peshat*****,** for at first He was hiding His face from them, and they were devoured.

The Ramban is referring to the following verse (*Devarim* 31:17):

> Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they will be devoured. And many evils and troubles will come upon them, so that they will say in that day, "Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?"

This incorporation allows us to descend to the depths of the Ramban's commentary: the troubles of the Jewish nation are an expression of God's distance from them, and thus the Ramban can explain "And God knew" as noting that God stops hiding His fac**e**.

C. Psychological Sensitivity

An additional important characteristic of the Ramban's commentary is its psychological sensitivity. The Ramban explains the verses using an analysis of the motivations of the dominant personalities, based on his reasoned assessment of the characters and the situations in which they find themselves. One of the most famous examples appears in the emotional encounter between Yaakov and Yosef in Egypt, after more than two decades of separation:

> Then Yosef prepared his chariot and went up to meet his father Yisrael in Goshen. He presented himself to him, and he fell on his neck and he wept on his neck exceedingly. (*Bereishit* 46:29)

The pronouns of the second half of the verse are excruciatingly abstruse. Who presents himself to whom? Who falls on whose neck? Who weeps on whose neck? In each case, the singular pronoun is used, so that the verse must be referring either to Yosef or to Yaakov in each case, but who is who?

The Ramban explains this in the following way: [7]

> The verse mentions that when he presented himself to his father, who looked at him and recognized him, his father fell on his neck and wept on his neck excessively, **just as he would cry over him constantly until this very day, when he could not see him.** After this, he said (v. 30), "Now let me die, since I have seen your face." **It is**

well-known who is prone to tears: is it the aged father who finds his son alive after hopelessness and mourning, or the youthful ruling son?

According to the Ramban, it is more logical to assume that the elderly Yaakov cries upon encountering his lost son, not "the youthful ruling son" who does so.

An additional example of the use of psychology in the Ramban's commentary can be found in the Ramban's explanation of Pharaoh's decrees. Pharaoh turns to his people with the words, "Come, let us outsmart them" (*Shemot*1:10), and the Ramban relates to the question of why Egypt's ruler has to "outsmart" his Hebrew subjects. Why does he not simply kill the ones whom he wants to kill? What is the meaning of the different decrees, culminating in the final solution of throwing the boys into the Nile (ibid. v. 22)?

This how the Ramban responds to this question:

> Pharaoh and his wise counselors did not consider striking them down by the sword, for this would be a profound betrayal – to unjustifiably exterminate a nation which came to the land by the command of a preceding monarch. Furthermore, the common people would not allow the king to commit such violence, for he consulted them, even though the Israelites were a great and mighty nation who might wage a great war against them. Rather, he said that they should do it in a wise way, that the Israelites would not feel that they did it with enmity, and therefore he put work levies upon them…
>
> Afterwards, in secret, he commanded the midwives to kill the males upon the birthstones, and even the mothers would not perceive it. Finally, he commanded his nation, "You shall cast every male born into the Nile" — you yourselves. The issue is that that he did not wish to command the executioners to kill them by Pharaoh's sword or to throw them into the Nile; rather, he said to the nation that when each of them might find a Jewish boy, he should cast him into the Nile. Should the boy's father cry to the king or the municipal authorities, they would say that he must bring witnesses, and they would then avenge him. However, when the king loosed the reins, the Egyptians would search the houses and enter there at night in disguise and remove the boys from there. This is why it says, "And she could no longer hide him" (ibid. 2:3).[8] (Ramban,*Shemot* 1:10)

In his commentary, the Ramban explains the psychology that Pharaoh uses in order to convince his people to collaborate in this genocide. Pharaoh needs to "outsmart" Israel because the Israelites will not go like lambs to the slaughter; conversely, the local Egyptians will not consent to the injustice of committing genocide against the Jewish people. By his scheming – by introducing gradual changes in their relationship to the Israelites and creating an environment in which the Egyptians themselves may act against the Israelites – the final goal can be accomplished: exterminating every newborn male.[9]

Let us look at a final example. Rachel turns to Yaakov and dramatically declares, "Give me children; if not, I am dead" (*Bereishit* 30:1). The Ramban plumbs the depths of Rachel's words in order to explain Yaakov's outrage:

> In truth, her intent was for him to pray for her, but that he must pray for her until she would have children **in any case**; otherwise, she would kill herself in pain…
>
> She thought that in his love for her, Yaakov would fast and wear sackcloth and ashes and pray until she would have children, so that she would not die in her pain.
>
> "And Yaakov's anger was kindled" (ibid. v. 2) because the prayer of the righteous is not in their hands, that it may be heard and answered in any case. However, she spoke in the way of longing of beloved wives in order to intimidate him with her death; therefore, his anger was kindled…

According to the words of the Ramban, Yaakov's anger is not about the actual request, but the mistaken view of prayer. Rachel believes that the prayer will be efficacious "in any case," that God will certainly respond to the prayer. The Ramban also points to the emotional situations of Yaakov and Rachel in describing Rachel's desperation and understanding the sharp response of Yaakov.

D. *Serus Ha-Mikra*

Another exegetical tool employed by the Ramban in his commentary is *serus ha-mikra*, the inversion or transposition of the verse. Sometimes, in order to understand the intent of the verse, one should read it as if the sequence of the words is different.[10]

Serus ha-mikra is not the Ramban's invention. This technique already appears in the*beraita* of the thirty-two principles of R. Eliezer ben R. Yosei the Galilean as number thirty-one: "The preceding element which comes later in the text." However, there is no doubt that the Ramban makes broad and significant use of this principle in his commentary on the Torah.

One of the central places in which the Ramban uses *serus ha-mikra* is his commentary to*Bereishitt* 15:13: "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land not theirs, and they will be enslaved and subjugated for four hundred years:"

> "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners" — This is an inverted verse, and it means: "your offspring will be sojourners in a land not theirs for four hundred years, and they will be enslaved and subjugated." However, it does not explain how many days of servitude and affliction there would be…
>
> The point of the verse is that God is declaring that even though He says (ibid. v. 18), "To your seed I have given this land," "Know for certain" that before they receive it, "they will be sojourners in a land not theirs for four hundred years," and they will also be enslaved there and subjugated.

The difficulty in the verse is the statement that the nation of Israel will be sojourners and slaves for four centuries; in actuality, the period of servitude was significantly less than that. Therefore, the Ramban suggests reading the verse in the following way: "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land not theirs for four hundred years, and they will be enslaved and subjugated." In other words, the time period of "four hundred years" relates not to the servitude and affliction mentioned immediately before it, but rather the sojourning described before them.

Since this is the first place in the Torah where the Ramban uses the term "*mikra mesuras*,"[11] the Ramban explains at length the principle of *serus ha-mikra* and he brings a collection of examples of difficult verses from Torah and *Neviim* which may be resolved using this principle:

> **Many inverted verses may be found throughout Scripture. For example, ""**The Hebrew slave came to me, whom you brought to us to laugh at me" (ibid.39:17); similarly, "And all the land came to Egypt to procure to Yosef" (ibid. 41:57); similarly, "For whoever eats leaven, that soul will be cut off from Israel, from the first day until the seventh day" (*Shemot* 12:15)… And many are like this.

The Ramban cites a number of examples, and we will look at the first, taken from the words addressed to Potifar by his wife: "The Hebrew slave came to me, whom you brought to us to laugh at me." It is clear that Potifar did not procure a slave with the aim of making sport of his wife, and the technique of *serus ha-mikra* makes clear the intent of the verse: "He came to me to laugh at me — the Hebrew slave whom you brought to us."[12]

E.

When there is a certain lack of correlation between the initial description of an event and the later recapitulation of the same event, the Ramban explains the lack of correlation using the following rule: **"**It is the way of the verses to abbreviate it in one place and to elaborate in another place."[13]

For example, when Yosef's brothers regret selling him, they say, "In truth, we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us" ((*Bereishit* 42:21). The difficulty of this is that in the description of the sale of Yosef (ibid. ch. 37), the Torah never tells us that Yosef begs his brothers for mercy.

The Ramban (42:21) suggests three answers for this, and the third is, "It is the way of the verses to abbreviate it in one place and to elaborate in another place." The Torah does not see any need to state all of the details of the events twice. Instead, it may tell at the time of the event some of the details and at a later point it may reveal other details, and the student is invited to connect all of the dots. We may add that specifically because the narrative will appear later, the Torah may truncate its initial description.[14]]

*

There are many other exegetical rules that the Ramban cites, but unfortunately, we cannot mention all of them. There is no doubt that the Ramban is one of the most influential figures in terms of shaping the world of biblical exegesis and the Jewish worldview generally.

Let us conclude with some words of the Ramban that are particularly appropriate for this season of the year, celebrating the rebirth of the nation of Israel in its land:

> These words promise that the future redemption will come, a promise more complete than all of Daniel's visions. And this is what it says here (v. 32), "So that your enemies who live there will be desolated" — this is in fact good news, cheering the exiles: our land does not accept our enemies, and this is a great proof and promise for us. For you will not find in civilization a land which is as good and broad, and which was always settled, yet is so devastated… For from the time we left, it has not accepted any nation or state; though all of them try to settle it, they do not succeed… (Ramban, *Vayikra* 26:16)

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

[1] This phrase appears more than a hundred times in his commentary.
[2] The Ramban's philosophy of *sod* is not equivalent to that of what is familiarly called "Kabbala," which began developing at the end of the 12th century.

[3] Moshe Halbertal investigates the Kabbalistic elements of the Ramban's philosophy in his comprehensive essay, "*Al Derekh Ha-Emet: Ramban Vi-Yetzirata shel Masoret*" (Jerusalem, 2006). On p. 11, he writes:

> Between the lines of his rich commentary on the Torah, the Ramban scatters Kabbalistic allusions crowned with the title "*derekh ha-emet*." Thus, he creates an unusual connection, formulating an approach to two different audiences. Most of the students of this commentary, who cannot penetrate the veil of the Ramban's allusions, see in the opening "*al derekh ha-emet*" a sign to skip ahead, until the commentary will return to the level of the revealed. Moreover, in the Ramban's study hall, there were apparently those who drank thirstily his revealed teachings, while studiously avoiding the level of *sod* in his thought.

[4] Sometimes, immediately after the commentary "*alderekh ha-emet*," we may find the terms "*sod*" or "*ha-maskil yavin*," "the educated will comprehend."

[5] This follows the verse in *Devarim* 31:17; we will explain this matter in detail below.

[6] Ephraim Hazan, "*Kavim Achadim Li-Leshono shel Ramban Be-Feirusho La-Torah — Le-Darkhei Ha-Shibbutz Ve-Shilluvei Ha-Mekorot Bi-Khtivato*," *Mechkerei Morashtenu* I (5759), pp. 163-174.

[7] He does this after citing and rejecting Rashi's words.

[8] These words, stated eight hundred years ago, are still applicable to our generation, and they could have been stated equally about the laws of the Third Reich.

[9] We should note that the words of the Ramban do not come to explicate a local problem of a certain word or verse. He is analyzing a complex intellectual issue, explaining the rationale behind Pharaoh's decrees and the progressive nature of Pharaoh's decrees. For this aim, the Ramban uses many verses, all of which come together to form a fabric to resolve the verses. This is an additional example of one of the characteristics of the Ramban's commentary, which we studied in the first lesson dealing with him (#17) — the commentary is a specific and comprehensive work, in which the Ramban uses specific verses as jumping-off points to discuss general issues.

[10] Nechama Leibowitz explains the term *serus ha-mikra*well:

> We should note that the term, "Invert the verse and explicate it," is only a technical term, commonly used by the sages of Israel. Its meaning is the following: this verse should be understood by altering the sequence of the words, thereby making it easy to understand it. **In any case, one should not understand the expression as endorsing textual criticism**[emphasis mine — A.R.], as if the verse is somehow corrupted and requires emendation. In our case, its meaning — as we explained above — is only this: the verse is arranged according to a certain sequence, totally correct and logical, but in order to understand the chronological sequence of events fully, one should rearrange the phrases and read them in an opposite or different direction. (Nechama Leibowitz and Moshe Ahrend, *Peirush Rashi La-Torah* [Tel Aviv, 5750], vol. 1, p. 215)

In her book, *Iyunim Chadashim Le-Sefer Shemot*(Jerusalem, 5756), p. 157, n. 8, Nechama deals with the problematic nature of the requirement of rearranging the verse in order to explain it. Ultimately, she resolves the matter in the following way:

> More than once, the Ramban employs this concept, which is certainly one of the principles of*peshat*. We must remember that the logical order of the words, putting next to each other the phrases which are close to each other logically, is only one of the possible sequences of the words. There is a rhythmic or musical sequence, and there is also a didactic sequence, which lays out that which is important both at the beginning and at the end in order to make it prominent, highlighting what distinguishes them — and psychological and aesthetic factors may sometimes overpower the logical proximity.

Meir Raffeld, *"Ve-Harbeh Mikraot Mesurasot Yesh Ba-Katuv," Pirkei Nechama* (Jerusalem, 5761), pp. 273-275, attempts to understand the aim of the Giver of the Torah in writing the verses in a way differing from the logical sequence.

[11] In his commentary to 8:2, the Ramban uses the terminology "its meaning is as if it were inverted," but this concept is not the same as the concept of "*mikra mesuras*."

[12] Another possibility of inverting the verse is: "The Hebrew slave whom you brought to us came to me to laugh at me."

[13] The Sages put it this way, "The words of the Torah are scant in one place and ample in another place" (Yerushalmi, *Rosh Hashana,* ch. 3, 58).

[14] The first answer of the Ramban is that it is clear that Yosef must have begged for his life, and there is no need to write this:

> …Because it is known naturally that a person will beg for his life when it comes into others' hands to do evil to him, and he will make them swear by the life of their father and do everything in his power to save his soul from death…

In another place, the Ramban expresses this rule in the sentence: "The verse will abbreviate the matter which is understood."

The second answer of the Ramban is that "the verse wishes to abbreviate their iniquity;" in other words, the Torah does not hide the fact that Yosef begs his brothers for his life, but it relates this fact in a later place so as not to emphasize the cruelty of the brothers.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Lecture #20:
The Chizkuni — R. Chizkiya ben Manoach

A. Introduction

Unfortunately, we do not know the details of the Chizkuni's life. Where and when he lived is a matter of much debate. The contemporary critical consensus is that the Chizkuni wrote his work around the middle of the thirteenth century, and apparently he came from Northern France.

The Chizkuni wrote a comprehensive commentary on the Torah, and his style is very clear and accessible. He himself invented the name "Chizkuni," an allusion to his name, Chizkiya. This is what he writes in the introductory poem to the commentary:

I have chosen the name "Chizkuni" amidst Israel
So that its readers will remember me well.

It appears that the Chizkuni had three aims in composing his commentary on the Torah:[1]

1) To collect all the explanations in keeping with the *peshat* from the works of the commentators who preceded him.
2) To explain Rashi's' commentary.
3) To write an independent commentary on the Torah.

We will now explicate and demonstrate these aims.

B. The Chizkuni as a Collector

In his introductory poem, the Chizkuni describes the eclectic character of his composition. At first, he specifies his Midrashic sources, which he calls "the commentaries on the Torah":

And I came to *Bereishit Rabba, Mekhilta*, and *Sifra*
Sifri, Tanchuma, and *Pesikta*, the commentaries on the Torah.

In the next section, R. Chizkiya explains the work of collecting from the various biblical commentators:

To find commentaries of the Five Books, I swam to every port,
And I have found commentaries, twenty of every sort.
I have taken the choicest parts from them, [2]according to my ability,
Their very clear writing and their felicitous utility.
Thus, I have found words of delight and peace to relate;

They are set like emerald, sapphire, and diamond on the breastplate…

This tells us that the Chizkuni journeyed to many countries with the aim of finding different commentaries on the Torah, and he found twenty of them. These commentaries represent a wide array of biblical exegesis: Spanish, Italian, and French scholars, in addition to the Sages' exegesis. From among all of the commentaries that he gathered, he selected the finest explanations in his view. At times, he quotes them verbatim, while at other times, he adapts the commentary using his own words.

When the Chizkuni cites a Midrashic source or later work, he normally omits the name of the commentator, whether because it is not always clear who originally expressed the idea or because of a concern of bias — the reader may prefer the idea of a certain distinguished commentator over the explanation of a less well-known commentator. This is what he writes in his introductory poem (invoking*Kohelet* 12:11):

> Therefore, my kidneys have counseled me and my heart has filled me…
> To cover the source of things, to forestall
> Mentioning them together, glorifying the great with the small,
> Lest the wisdom of the lowly be disdained
> And the utterance of the high before the great be maintained.
> For my words are the wisdom of the wise, unifying the riven;
> Truly, by one Shepherd they have been given…

Frequently, the Chizkuni will cite two or three commentaries that he likes on one verse. Moreover, for the most part, he chooses a comment in which there is some educational message. Thus, for example, the Chizkuni presents three different commentaries for the prohibition of plowing with an ox and donkey together (*Devarim*22:10). These three commentaries are taken from there different sources, some of them slightly adapted for greater clarity:

> For the ox chews its cud, but the donkey does not chew its cud, so this one eats while the other one suffers, and this is animal torture.[3]
>
> Alternatively, because the ox is the king of the domesticated animals and its image is upon[4] the Throne of Glory, while the donkey is a despised animal; thus, they are not complementary.[5]
>
> Alternatively, God's mercies are upon all of His creations, and the donkey does not have the strength of the ox.[6]

C. The Chizkuni as a Supercommentary on Rashi

As we saw above, the Chizkuni has an additional exegetical aim aside from collecting various commentaries; he seeks to explicate Rashi's commentary, and he thus may be seen as a super-commentary. This is what he writes in his introductory poem about his relationship to Rashi's explanation:

I come only to add to the words known as Rabbeinu Shelomo's,
Not to undermine them. May God grant him peace in his repose!

This makes the Chizkuni one of the first of Rashi's super-commentaries. Despite the general rule that the Chizkuni does not quote commentators by name, Rashi is an exception; Rashi's commentaries are quoted by name in hundreds of places throughout the Chizkuni's commentary.

The stated aim of the Chizkuni is that he merely comes "to add" Rashi's commentary, or to answer some difficulty that may arise therein. This is similar to the approach of the Tosafists in their Talmudic commentary; indeed, "*tosafot*" literally means "addenda." Therefore, Rashi's words are always their point of departure.

Sarah Yefet notes this linguistic phenomenon, which developed toward the end of the 12th century:

> In parallel to the appearance of the Tosafot, addressing Rashi's Talmudic commentary, and perhaps influenced by this phenomenon, Rashi's commentary itself become a subject of study. The biblical text and Rashi's commentary became one system, studied as one entity, and the commentator's attention was directed not only to the text and the questions it raises, but Rashi's commentary as well. Do Rashi's words stand up to criticism? Is he consistent? …These and similar questions were raised. [7]

As we shall see in the following examples, the Chizkuni's "addition" to Rashi's commentary is expressed in a number of ways.

1. Explaining by changing or adding.

On the verse, "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land… you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (*Vayikra* 19:33-34), the Chizkuni cites Rashi: "Do not accuse your fellow with your own defect." However, the words of Rashi are unclear, and therefore the Chizkuni adds and explains:

> And in Egypt, the Israelites worshipped idols, as it says in the book of *Yehoshua* (24:14): "Remove the gods which your fathers worshipped on the other side of the river and in Egypt."

In other words, the blemish is not that we were also strangers in a foreign land (Egypt), as one might have understood Rashi, but that we too, as strangers, were idol worshippers.

The Chizkuni sometimes add the psychology behind a certain explanation that Rashi brings. For example, on the words of the chief butler to Pharaoh describing Yosef, "And there was with us a Hebrew youth, a slave" (*Bereishit* 41:12), Rashi explains:

Cursed are the evil, for their good is incomplete; he mentions him with contemptuous terminology.

The Chizkuni adds the motivations of the chief butler in deriding Yosef:

"A youth, a Hebrew slave" — He was afraid that he might be angry at him, that he might hate him for not mentioning as he asked him; therefore, he spoke ill of him.[8]

Alternatively, so that the king would not be angry at him that he did not tell him until this point about such a great sage such as this in his land; therefore, he derided him.

Rashi explains that the butler's words are derogatory, and the Chizkuni enhances this approach by explaining the possible motivations of the chief butler in deriding Yosef.

Another example of explaining Rashi's words and using psychology in order to understand the verses may be found in the Chizkuni's comments on the sale of Yosef. When Yehuda suggests selling Yosef, he says, "What profit is there in killing our brother and concealing his blood?" (*Bereishit* 37:26) This verse is explained by Rashi in the following way:

"What profit" — what money?
❽And concealing his blood?" — hiding his death.

Yehuda claims that the brothers would not gain anything from Yosef's death ("What profit is there in killing our brother?") but what is the meaning of the continuation, "and concealing his blood?" Furthermore, what is the connection between this claim and the claim of "What profit is there"? The Chizkuni explains the intention of Rashi's words so as to present Yehuda's claims as consistent and consecutive:

For we would need to conceal and hide his death, and we cannot glory in it because of Father's distress.[9]The custom of the world is that when a man takes revenge upon his enemy, the vengeance does not count if one does not glory in it.

If so, Yehuda's claim is that not only will they not make money from Yosef's sale ("What profit is there in killing our brother?"), but they will not even be able to savor their vengeance and to glory in this murder, for they must conceal it: "And concealing his blood?"

2. Resolving difficulties in Rashi.

The Chizkuni defends Rashi from many attacks. Generally, he introduces the question with the words, "And if you will say"[10] (a common Tosafist term), and immediately after presenting the question, we find the Chizkuni's answer. For example, on the words, "And Yitzchak entreated God

for his wife, because she was barren, and God was entreated of him, and Rivka his wife conceived" (*Bereishit*25:21), Rashi explains:

> "And God was entreated of him" — He allowed Himself to be entreated, placated and swayed by him. I say that every expression of entreaty is excessive supplication, and similarly we find (*Yechezkel* 8:11): "And a thick cloud of incense arose," indicating the immensity of the ascent of smoke; "And you have multiplied your words against Me" (ibid. 35:13); "Whereas the kisses of an enemy are excessive" (*Mishlei*27:6) — they seem to be too many…

The Chizkuni explains:

> And if you will say, what does Rashi teach us by saying that "I say that every expression of entreaty is excessive supplication,"[11] but you may say that at first Rashi explains what he received from his rabbis — i.e., "And He was entreated" indicates excessive supplication. Afterwards, he explains his own view: that every use of the root refers to supplication and excessiveness.[12]

3. Pointing out inconsistencies in Rashi's commentary.

God asks Moshe (*Shemot* 4:11), "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, God?" Rashi cites the *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Shemot* 10), which explains this verse as relating to Moshe's flight from Egypt:

> Who made Pharaoh dumb, that he was incapable of issuing the order to kill you? And [who made] his servants deaf, so that they did not hear his commandment concerning you? And who made the executioners blind, that they did not see when you fled from the platform and escaped?

However, we find elsewhere (ibid. 2:15), "And Pharaoh heard of this matter,and he sought to slay Moses":

> He delivered him to the executioner to execute him, but the sword had no power over him. This what Moshe refers to when he says, "And He saved me from Pharaoh's sword" (ibid. 18:4).

The Chizkuni (ch. 4) points out the contradiction in Rashi's words:

> "Or blind" — Rashi explains "And who made the executioners blind, that they did not see when you fled?"*Chazak*! For when it said above, "And Pharaoh heard," Rashi explained this: "He delivered him to the executioner to execute him, but the sword had no power over him."

In this context, we should explain the term "*chazak*" as it appears many times (more than seventy) in the Chizkuni's commentary on the Torah. Literally, it means "strong," but it is clearly meant to be some sort of acronym

or abbreviation. The Chizkuni himself does not explain what this term means, but it appears that it alludes to his name, Chizkiya, and he uses this term when he has the desire to express some difficulty which he cannot explain, something along the lines of, “This requires further analysis.” [13]

D. The Chizkuni as an Independent and Original Exegete

Psychological Understanding of the Characters

Despite the fact that the Chizkuni utilizes many commentaries for the purposes of writing his work, there are more than a few original commentaries to be found in its lines, characterized mainly by his attempt to understand reality and the motivations of the characters in each narrative. In this, the influence of Ri Bekhor Shor[14] is noticeable, and the Chizkuni draws more than a few of his explanations from that exegete’s work.

We may see this in his approach to the verse, “And he loved Yosef from among all of his brothers, for he was a child of his old age” (*Bereishit* 37:3). The Chizkuni explains this using psychology, dealing with an obvious question: why should Yaakov love Yosef more than his other children, including Binyamin? Is Binyamin not, in fact, the youngest of his children?

> And if you will say, is Binyamin not a “child of his old age,” consider that his love for Binyamin was not as deep in Yaakov’s heart as his love for Yosef, because their mother died while giving birth to [Binyamin].

Similarly, the Chizkuni uses psychology to understand Yaakov’s reaction to Yosef’s death (ibid. v. 35): “All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, ‘No, I shall go down to the netherworld for my son, mourning.’ Thus his father wept for him.” The Chizkuni makes this dependent on Yaakov’s guilt over sending Yosef to his spiteful brothers:

> “But he refused to be comforted” — He thought he was banished[15] due to his negligence, because he sent him there.
>
> “For my son” — On account of my son, because of the sin which I committed against my son, that I sent him to the place where I knew he was hated to death.

Another example may be found in the Chizkuni’s explanation of the fact that the chief baker is impressed by the interpretation that Yosef offers to the chief butler’s dream (*Bereishit* 40:16):

> Were he truly a liar, he would prevaricate and procrastinate, but he did nothing of the sort; instead, he said (ibid. v. 12), “In another three days…”

Original Interpretations

Even when we are not talking about a psychological interpretation of the motivations of the characters in the story, the Chizkuni has some very original interpretations. One example of this is the Chizkuni's explanation of the prohibition of eating the sciatic nerve (*Bereishit* 32:33) as a punishment for Yaakov's sons, who failed to accompany their father:

> By law, the sons of Yisrael deserved to be penalized and prohibited from eating the sciatic nerve due to their leaving their father alone, as it is written, "And Yaakov remained alone" (ibid. v. 25). Now, they were strong, and they should have waited for their father to assist him, should he need it; however, they did not accompany him, and he was injured because of this. From this point on, this will serve as reminder for them, and they will be alacritous in fulfilling the commandment of accompaniment. For this reason, Yaakov accompanied Yosef.[16]

An additional example is his explanation of the verse, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen, and you shall love your fellow as yourself" (*Vayikra* 19:18). After the Chizkuni explains the nature of the prohibitions of vengeance and bearing a grudge, he explains the conclusion of the verse:

> "And you shall love your fellow as yourself" — If you do so, you will love him.

In other words, according to the Chizkuni, the words, "And you shall love your fellow as yourself" do not constitute a positive command (as the *peshat*indicates), but the aim and the natural result of not taking revenge or bearing a grudge.[17]

Explaining According to Reality

The Chizkuni attempts to explain many verses using by examining the reality of the biblical era. We shall bring a number of examples:

1) The Chizkuni explains Avraham's name change (*Bereishit* 17:5) by putting it in the context of the ancient custom of acquiring new appellations based on one's exalted position:

   The custom is to change the name of a person who ascends to greatness, and this is what we find concerning Sara;[18] Yaakov; [19] Yosef;[20]Yehoshua; Chananya, Mishael and Azarya.[21]

2) When Yaakov comes to prove to Lavan his dedication as a shepherd, he proclaims before Lavan:" These twenty years I have been with you. Your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten the rams of your flocks" (*Bereishit* 31:38). The difficulty is that refraining from eating Lavan's flocks is exactly what is expected from Yaakov. Thus, the Chizkuni explains:

> "And I have not eaten the rams of your flocks" — The custom of the shepherd was that when he would take the sheep to a distant place to find pastureland, and he could not find food to buy because he was far away from civilization, he would take from the rams of the flocks, which are not fit for reproduction, and eat them. However [Yaakov says], "I have not eaten the rams of your flocks."

In other words, the Chizkuni is detailing the standard deal for shepherds of the era: they would eat some of their flock whenever they found themselves in a place where it would be difficult to acquire food. However, Yaakov, going beyond the letter of the law, did not do so.

3) In *Shemot* 11:2, the Israelites are commanded to borrow from the Egyptians silver and gold vessels. The Chizkuni notes:
> In place of the houses and fields and possessions which the Israelites left behind because they could not take them along, for the Israelites had estates in Egypt, as it is written (*Bereishit* 47:27), "And they took possession of it."

In other words, the legal justification for taking the Egyptians' possessions and not returning them is as compensation or a settlement for the fields that the Israelites are leaving in Egypt.[22]

Indeed, it may be that in the final example, the Chizkuni is responding to the Christian claim that the Jewish nation stole from the Egyptians.

*

Let us conclude with the Chizkuni's blessing to his readers:

> I adjure you, by words of delight, each man by his name,
> Not to treat this book lightly,[23] but honestly regard the same,
> Whoever supports and strengthens it is worthy of praise,
> And in the eyes of God, upright he stays.
> May God take account of him and him bless
> And in all his ways, grant him success…

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

[1] As for the other aims of the composition, see Yosef Priel, "*Darko Ha-Parshanit shel R. Chizkiya ben Manoach (Chizkuni) Be-Feirusho La-Torah*" (doctoral dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 5770), pp. 12-14.

[2] In other words, he has chosen the commentaries that seem to be the finest in his view. He is paraphrasing the verse (*Bamidbar*18:30): "And you shall say to them, 'When you lift up the choicest part from it, it will be considered for the Levites like the yield of the threshing-floor and the yield of the wine-press.'" Many other verses use this terminology as well, using the term "*chelev*," which literally means "fat," to indicate the most desirable or prestigious part.

[3] The Tosafists (*ad loc.*) write: "For the ox chews its cud, and the donkey is pained when it hears the ox eat."

[4] According to *Yechezkel* 1:10; the original text is “And upon its image is the Throne of Glory,” and apparently this is a printer’s error.
[5] I have not found a source for this commentary. The idea that the ox is the king of the domesticated animals appears on *Chagiga* 13b.
[6] He is quoting ibn Ezra’s explanation.
[7] “*Chizkuni La-Torah*” in *Sefer Ha-Yovel La-Rav Mordechai Breuer* (Jerusalem, 5752), p. 108.
[8] In other words, the butler tries to doom Yosef’s chances for advancement, for if Yosef were to ascend to greatness, Yosef might punish the butler for failing to mention him and help him before this. Despite Yosef’s specific request (ibid. 40:14), the butler had forgotten him for two years (ibid. v. 23).
[9] In other words, in order not to cause their father pain, they cannot publicize Yosef’s killing.
[10] The expression, “And if you will say” appears dozens of times, not only when the Chizkuni wants to resolve a difficulty in Rashi’s commentary, but even when the Chizkuni has a problem with the verses themselves.
[11] In other words, Rashi explains already at the beginning of his comment that “entreaty” refers to excessive supplication, so what does he add by saying, “I say that every expression of entreaty is excessive supplication”?
[12] In other words, at first Rashi explains that only the formulation, “And God was entreated” means excessive supplication; afterwards, Rashi explains that this is the meaning of other forms of the root *atar*.
[13] It is interesting to note that among the seventy appearances of the word *chazak*, more than forty of them are challenges to Rashi’s explanations, which unequivocally identify the Chizkuni as a super-commentary on Rashi. For a broad discussion of this, see the essay by Yosef Ofer, “*Peirush Chizkuni La-Torah Ve-Gilgulav,” Megadim* 8, pp. 3-4. In my humble opinion, it may be that the meaning of the term is, “And Chizkiya finds it difficult”.
[14] See our lecture on Ri Bekhor Shor.
[15] The version that we have before us has “*nitrad*” (banished), but this may be a printer’s error, and the word should be “*nitraf*” (torn apart). On the other hand, it may be that “*nitrad*” is a reference to a term the Sages use, “banished from the world” (e.g., Sota 4b, *Chagiga* 9b), which is a metaphor for death.
[16] We will see two more examples below.
[17] The letter *vav* in the Torah is the conjunction, “and”. “And you shall love your fellow as yourself” can be understood in one of two ways. If we take it as a separate command, the verse essentially should be translated: “You must not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen; rather, you must love your fellow as yourself.” If it is meant to indicate a result, we should translate it, “You must not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people; then, you will love your fellow as yourself.”
A similar example is v. 23 (ibid.), which literally reads, “And when you shall come into the land, and you shall plant any kind of tree for food, and you shall regard its fruit as forbidden.” “And you shall plant any kind of tree for food” is clearly the continuation of the first clause, setting up the situation, while “And you shall regard its fruit as forbidden” is the command. Thus, we translate the verse: “And when you will come into the land, planting any kind of tree for food, then you must regard its fruit as forbidden.”
A case in which the use of the *vav* is unclear is Yaakov’s vow (*Bereishit* 28:20-22), “If God shall be with me… and I shall return to my father’s house in peace, and Lord shall be my God… And of all that You give me, I shall give a full tenth to You.” Are we to understand “And Lord shall be my God” as the last of the conditions of the vow (“If Lord shall be my God”) or as the first of Yaakov’s commitments (“Then Lord shall be my God”)? See Rashi and Ramban ad loc.
[18] God changes her name for Sarai to Sara (*Bereishit* ibid. 15).
[19] This refers to changing his name to “Yisrael” (ibid. 32:28, 35:10).
[20] Pharaoh changes his name to Tzafenat Pane’ach (ibid. 41:45).
[21] Nevukhadnetzar changes their names to Meishakh, Shadrakh and Aved Nego (*Daniel* 1:7).
[22] On this comment of the Chizkuni, Nechama Leibowitz notes:
In this, the Chizkuni touches on a problem which exists in every mass emigration. It even bothers Herzl, in his book *Der Judenstaat,* as he plans the Jews’ sudden departure from Europe — what can he do with all of the immovable possessions, so that their worth will not plummet? Otherwise, the Jews immigrating to their land will arrive impoverished! This

difficulty of abandoning property has hit us hard in the Expulsion from Spain and all of the departures from the lands of the Diaspora, and we have seen it in our days. Nevertheless, in all of those cases, their neighbors did not lend them silver and gold vessels in exchange for their houses and fields — neither as an outright gift nor as a loan. (*Iyunim Be-sefer Shemot*, p. 133)

[23] The Chizkuni asks his readers not to treat his work with disrespect.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Lecture #21:
R. Yosef Ibn Caspi

A. Introduction

A. Origins[1]

R. Yosef ibn Caspi was born in 1279 in Largentière, Provence, and died sometime after 1340. His last name comes from the name of his city.[2] He dealt extensively with grammar, philosophy and biblical exegesis, and he composed a number of works on these topics. Ibn Caspi began writing at age seventeen, and throughout the remaining years of his life, he wrote close to thirty volumes.

B. Personality

What sets Ibn Caspi apart from his contemporaries is his extensive use of the first person. The way he speaks of himself and his stylistic choices may tell us something about Ibn Caspi's personality. His excessively sardonic words indicate that he sees himself as a lone wolf, bereft of friends and intellectual equals, and the more he seeks out such colleagues, the more disappointed he becomes by his inability to find them.

In the following paragraph, Ibn Caspi describes the phenomenon of his distance from other people. According to Ibn Caspi, he avoids intimacy with others because he has "no desire to juxtapose two opposites," namely the intelligent person (himself) and the fools (other people). He even goes further, describing the masses as animals, "horses and mules":

> My neighbors and acquaintances know that I have never in my life desired to show myself to all people, because I have no desire to juxtapose two opposites, and I know that this is the general rule — there are intelligent people and fools, and the fools are the majority… Therefore, my custom has been to minimize communication with other people, for I am very careful to avoid acting or speaking haughtily… Nevertheless, I do not regret at all my superiority over horses and mules…[3] (*Tirat Kesef*, p. 8)

From the contents of his statements and from the nature of their formulation, it appears that Ibn Caspi sees himself as championing the truth at all costs, and he does not care at all about negativity expressed towards him

or towards his works. It may be that he even believes and hopes that his style will deny those who are “unfit” the appreciation of his words on an intellectual level.

When Ibn Caspi boasts, his words do not only express derision for the hoi polloi, but also for all women, whom Ibn Caspi regularly insults.[4] The following lines are prime examples:

> There is no doubt that the counsel of women is categorically bad, whether inferior or shameful… or fatal, as with the counsel of Chava, who gave to her husband from the tree, and the counsel of Iyov’s wife [see *Iyov*2:9]. Fortunate is he who escapes their clutches! (*Tirat Kesef*, p. 95)

> Behold, our patriarch Yaakov… surpassed him by his superior perception, just as we surpass our wives by superior perception. (Ibid., p. 118)

In other words, just as Yaakov had an intellectual advantage over other people, men have an intellectual advantage over women.

Ibn Caspi also has very few complimentary things to say about non-Jews. An example of his relationship to non-Jews may be found in his comment regarding the issue of Yaakov’s sons killing the men of Shekhem. How, a number of exegetes ask, could such righteous men slaughter the male citizenry of an entire town? Ibn Caspi responds dismissively:

> Why should our commentators complain about this? I would complain only about who is left.[5](*Matzref La-Kesef*, p. 81)

Ibn Caspi takes a great deal of pride in his words, and he repeatedly describes his exegetical abilities, which surpass the skills of his predecessors. Thus, for example, we find:

> My son, take out the silver and gold from your treasuries and put this in them, for this is the royal treasure of the “kingdom of priests and holy nation.” (*Tirat Kesef*, p. 64)

Together with his sharply critical tone, Ibn Caspi is blessed with an excellent sense of humor. For example, in *Matzref La-Kesef*, in the end of his words regarding*Bereishit* 11:10, he remarks about the phenomenon of factionalism in the Jewish nation:

> We are witnesses today to the honor of our ancestress, the wife of Peleg, that she was righteous and did not stray.

In other words, we Hebrews may be certain that our divisive and contentious activity testifies that we are truly descended from Peleg (whose name means “division”), son of Ever.

C. Ibn Caspi's Exegesis

The Audience for Ibn Caspi's Commentary

Ibn Caspi composed two commentaries on the Torah, *Tirat Kesef*("silver battlement," *Shir Ha-shirim* 8:9) and*Matzref La-kesef* ("silver crucible," *Mishlei*17:3, 27:21). The first commentary explains different issues in the Torah, while the second commentary is a running commentary on the Torah. The target audience for these exegetical compositions is clearly the intelligent, educated reader, who knows philosophy and biblical exegesis. Throughout their pages, the reader finds profound concepts interwoven, requiring prior knowledge of philosophy; deep thought is necessary in order to understand his words. Exegetes and exegetical works are used without attribution, with the basic assumption that the reader is familiar with the major works of biblical exegesis. Ibn Caspi even relates to this explicitly in *Matzref La-kesef*(*Shemot* 23:30):

> I will not elaborate, for this is well-explained to those who are intelligent and knowledgeable, who are superior among everyone, even if the fools find it too complex and convoluted. I have no truck with fools [cf. *Kohelet* 5:3]. Now, if I were to elaborate in my commentary, the fools would still not understand, while I have no need to explain it all to the intelligent. Therefore, I will set aside this explanation, and blessed is the one who gives wisdom to the wise [cf. *Daniel* 2:21].

Ibn Caspi's Style

Ibn Caspi writes in a challenging, enigmatic style; it may be that the succinct and mysterious style in his writings is designed specifically in such a way as to dissuade the hoi polloi from perusing his commentaries. Logical and linguistic concepts are employed frequently, making matters difficult for the reader; however, it appears that for Ibn Caspi, it is not important to explain matters to the reader completely; he suffices with allusions, and sometimes even less than that.

Undoubtedly, this phenomenon exists in the works of other medieval exegetes, such as Ibn Ezra and the Ramban, but Ibn Caspi far surpasses them in the frequency with which he reveals a bit while concealing the greater part.[6] This style gives his commentary a mysterious and enigmatic character; sometimes one may divine his intent from his words in other places, and sometimes this is insufficient. Many times, Ibn Caspi does not explain anything; instead, he uses the term "*ke-taam*" ("akin to") and then quotes a verse. The onus is upon the reader to understand the connection between the quoted verse and the commentary.[7]

D. Exegetical Principles

The Aims of Scripture and its Target Audience

Despite his own aims and predilections in his commentary, according to Ibn Caspi's philosophy, the main target audience of the Torah is not the intelligentsia and the elite, but rather specifically the masses, and only in a number of places are there high-minded concepts designated for educated philosophers. Consequently, in the view of Ibn Caspi, the main use of the Torah is as a partial and relative corrective for the masses; providing informed transcendencefor the intellectual elites is a secondary objective. This is what Ibn Caspi determines in *Matzref La-Kesef*, in his introduction to *Parashat Bechukkotai*(*Vayikra* 26):

> Thus, it is self-explanatory that this Torah has been given to the masses in its entirety to meditate on it constantly, and the masses do not understand transcendence, that Moshe would compose for them a book for the soul, or what is behind nature, that they would meditate on it constantly. In order to repair the masses, it is necessary that they have a book that they will study at all times; therefore, he composed this book for them. So that this book would not be devoid of transcendence, he puts in it in separate places wondrous statements of the wisdom of nature and divine insights, so that it would be a complete book…
>
> Thus, it is clear that it is necessary for the public matters[8] to outnumber the transcendent matters, just as those who use the public matters are much more numerous than those who use the transcendent…

The fact that the Torah addresses the masses is not only relevant for grasping the meaning of the verses, but also for understanding the editorial choices of the Torah: which narrative elements are included, and which are omitted?[9]

Despite this, Ibn Caspi claims that sometimes the Torah turns both to the masses and to the intelligentsia, in a stratified manner; in these case, the two groups are supposed to understand the same verse in different ways. [10] In other cases, the Torah even prefers to turn to the intelligentsia, at the cost of the masses' interests.[11]

In the view of the Ibn Caspi, a central aim of the books of the Prophets is to explain the Torah, so that if we understand properly the prophetic books, the biblical commentators are superfluous:

> This honored issue was explained to us by the Prophets — not only this, but all the Torah. Indeed, if we understand them adequately, we will have no need of Ibn Ezra and his ilk. (*Matzref La-Kesef*, *Bereishit* 1:2)

Ibn Caspi's *Peshat*

Ibn Caspi's exegetical methodology in *Matzref La-Kesef* is to explain the verses by way of the *peshat*. Many contemporary philosophers embraced

very extreme allegorical approaches, but Ibn Caspi stresses the need to explain verses according to their *peshat* and to avoid allegorical exegesis.

Sometimes, Ibn Caspi rejects very sharply explanations that do not fit in with the *peshat*, even if they had been previously accepted by the classical exegetes. The most famous example of this is Ibn Caspi's commentary on the words of Miriam and Aharon against Moshe (*Bamidbar* 12:1), in which he accuses the biblical exegetes who preceded him of explaining the verse in an arbitrary manner, in explicit opposition to the intent of the Giver of the Torah. In his blistering diatribe, he even alludes to the fact that some of these explanations verge on Christian exegesis.

The verse states that Miriam and Aharon are speaking "about Moshe, concerning the Cushite woman whom he had taken, for a Cushite woman he had taken." Onkelos, following Midrashic sources, translates "Cushite" as "strikingly beautiful" and renders the final clause: "for he had divorced the strikingly beautiful woman whom he had taken."

> "Concerning the Cushite woman whom he had taken" — Yosef says: I am astounded at my predecessors, though they be more perfect than I, and I cannot reach the soles of their feet.[12] How in the world did it enter their imagination to do this? How can they explain something from the Torah as the reverse of what is written, either by changing a word to its opposite, or adding words which invert its meaning?
>
> Now, it is well known what Onkelos says, and Rabbeinu Moshe[13] says that Onkelos the convert is a great sage, but how can he explain that "Cushite" means "beautiful" when they are antonyms, like "black" and "white"? Indeed, how does he know to add other words which invert the meaning of "for he had taken a Cushite woman," as if it is written in the Torah, rendering it: for he had abandoned or distanced "the Cushite woman whom he had taken"? And if this is the intent of the Giver of the Torah, why was it not written thusly? Why does it write the opposite?
>
> Furthermore, who allows us to do this? Why does Onkelos have the authority to do this? What of the Talmudic sages or the Ibn Ezra, all of whom follow this? Why should we not do so ourselves, each man according to what is right in his eyes? Should we say, instead of "And you shall love Lord your God" (*Devarim* 6:5), God forbid: And you shall hate Lord your God? Alternatively, should we hate whatever is beloved by God?
>
> And if you will say that [Moshe] received the Torah from Sinai and gave it to Yehoshua, telling him orally that this is the explanation of this verse, my answer is that we return to the first claim: why is it not written explicitly according to the facts, instead of using a word that describes the opposite? Can we call it "commentary" if one exchanges a word for the opposite? It can only be called "commentary" when the explanation of the words is according to their meaning, however they may be explained. "You shall not kindle a fire" (*Shemot* 35:3) and "You shall

not eat upon the blood" (*Vayikra*19:26) have profound explanations, but the verses tolerate it; certainly, they are not explained in a contrary way. Anything else may be called "conversion" and "opposition" and "erasing" and "uprooting" and "destroying".

We may say this in every language which one may hear — why should we not say that when it says, "And you God took" (*Devarim* 4:20), it actually means: And you God abandoned? Similarly, "And he and his neighbor shall take" (*Shemot*12:4) — why is this one better than the other?

As God loves, this approach is beyond me, though it is the consensus of all my predecessors, the pillars of the world in the faith and strength of Moshe's Torah. I cannot bear it. God forbid that I should do such a thing, either that I should totally abandon Moshe's Torah and believe in a new Torah, God forbid, as has already been done, or that I should do as these do, Heaven forfend…*(Matzref La-Kesef*, *Bamidbar* 12:1)

Egyptian Reality and Contemporary Reality

Ibn Caspi drew great inspiration from his visit to Egypt, in which he recognized the customs that, according to his view, persisted from the biblical era, and he explains the verses according to them. For example, this is what he writes about the verse (*Bereishit* 41:40): "And by your mouth, my entire nation will be provided for" (literally: "will be kissed"):

The custom of the land is not to kiss on the mouth literally. Rather, the custom is known for all who come here, so that this language is very appropriate. *(Matzref La-Kesef*,*Shemot* 7:15) [14]

The custom helps Ibn Caspi not just in understanding the narrative itself, but the linguistic issues as well.[15]

E. Exegesis and Polemics of Philosophy

In all of his writings, Ibn Caspi displays a remarkable philosophical worldview, profoundly influenced by the Rambam, as indicated by the many citations of the Rambam's writings in his compositions. Ibn Caspi even composed two commentaries on the Rambam's *Moreh Nevukhim*, and his great interest in the Rambam's views brought him, at the age of 35, to wander to Egypt, with the aim of learning from the descendants of the Rambam.[16]

We may find references to contemporary anti-philosophical polemics in Ibn Caspi's many compositions and his exegetical view. From the 13th century until the beginning of the 14th century, a controversy raged in Provence concerning the study of philosophy.[17] Those who opposed studying philosophy issued a ban against all those who studied the discipline, particularly the philosophical writings of the Rambam. Provencal Jewry was not receptive to this ban, and those who studied philosophy continued to do so. The struggle reached its height in the year 1305 with the imposition of the

excommunicative bans in Barcelona, [18]which was essentially directed towards the Jews of Provence,[19]where rationalism was influential and where Ibn Caspi lived. One of these bans was issued against extreme allegorical exegesis.[20]

Both Christians and Jews in Provence used allegorization, even though they naturally reached different results. The Rambam teaches that a literal understanding of the sources may bring one to make far-reaching errors of faith, and because of this, sometimes one needs to explain the sources in an allegorical way. This view of allegorical exegesis continued to expand in far-flung directions, with the aim of finding philosophical contents in Jewish sources. The use of allegorization by Jews stood at the center of the polemics about philosophy in 13th and 14th centuries.

Allegorization was attacked for a number of reasons. First, it appeared to contradict the historicity of the Jewish tradition. Second, the similarity to Christian methodology raised the concern of ratifying and confirming the elements of Christian interpretation, which obviously included statements of the Christian faith. To an extent, there was also concern that allegorization of the *mitzvot* would lead to the result that they would cease to be viewed as binding on the practical level.[21]

Ibn Caspi, as a philosophical exegete, is compelled against his will to deal with these questions. More than once, we find in his commentaries exegetical apologetics, defending the Jewish sages of philosophy from claims raised against them. In this way, Ibn Caspi is consistent in that he identifies with rationalists, praises them, and sees philosophy a compelling tool for understanding the Torah.[22] On the other hand, as a *pashtan* and grammarian, one may see in his writings a certain opposition to allegorization that is not necessary in order to understand the verse and does not arise from *peshat*-oriented methodology.[23]It appears that in the view of Ibn Caspi in a number of places, the essential meaning of the verse is the deeper level, which alludes to the wisdoms of nature and divinity.[24] At the same time, the presumption of the biblical narrative is that of a realistic narrative; only when there is a pressing need may one explain it in an allegoristic way.

F. Connection to the Biblical Yosef

In Ibn Caspi's commentary on the narrative of Yosef and his brothers (*Bereishit* 37-50), there is a clear tendency to elaborate. Ibn Caspi spends more time on these chapters than any other narratives in the Torah, analyzing and evaluating the characters, their motivations, and the nature of their morality. It appears that Yosef's character has special meaning for Ibn Caspi, and for this reason he goes on at length in Yosef's narratives.[25] Ibn Caspi sees Yosef as one of the patriarchs, unlike what the Sages propound,[26] and even surpassing them in his estimation.

According to Ibn Caspi, we may gauge the qualitative importance of an issue in the Torah by quantitative measures.[27] Thus, one may learn the regard of the Torah for a certain person or issue from the quantity of the

verses dealing with that person or issue. The fact is that Yosef has four weekly portions dedicated to his story (more than any other Patriarch). This testifies to Yosef's importance, and only Moshe Rabbeinu's importance is greater.

Indeed, Ibn Caspi gives Yosef a number of positive titles. In his preface to Chapter 37 of *Bereishit* alone, Yosef is called "our premier patriarch, called '*Tzafenat Pane'ach'*… Moreover, this worthy was a great sage." Yosef's sagacity is mentioned explicitly by Ibn Caspi dozens of times, to the point that we may say that Yosef earns the definite article in Ibn Caspi's terminology: "Yosef the sage." Ibn Caspi praises not only the attributes and spiritual level of Yosef, but even his abilities.[28] In addition, according to Ibn Caspi, Yosef is not only an intellectual, but a righteous and sensitive person.[29]

Ibn Caspi also goes on to compare Yosef and his brothers,[30] which results in Yosef's preference, and in any place in which there exists a possibility to level criticism at Yosef's actions, Ibn Caspi always comes to his defense. Thus, for example, while some biblical exegetes criticize Yosef's actions towards his brothers, Ibn Caspi explains them as reflecting a desire to educate them and to actualize his dreams (see *Tirat Kesef*,*Bereishit* 42:9).

From Ibn Caspi's words, it seems that he identifies with Yosef. First, given the many accolades showered on Yosef by Ibn Caspi, it appears that his great regard for Yosef is what brings Ibn Caspi to identify with him. Second, it appears that the fact that they share a name constitutes a basis for identification. A third factor is that apparently Ibn Caspi sees Yosef as his comrade: both are isolated from their environment, and both of them are sages among the foolish masses.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

[1] For his biography, see I. Twersky, "Joseph ibn Kaspi – Portrait of a Medieval Jewish Intellectual," in I. Twersky (ed.), *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* (1979), 231–257; *Shulchan Kesef*, five exegetical and theological essays, ed. H. Kasher (Jerusalem, 1996); Hacohen, *Sugyot*, pp. 99-102; *Gevi'a ha-Kesef*, Introduction, pp. 11-13, ed. B.E. Herring (New York, 1982). The alert reader will note that spellings of his name vary in academic literature.

[2] "*Argentum"* in Latin and "*kesef*" in Hebrew both mean "silver". This is what Ibn Caspi himself writes in *Kevutzat Kesef* (Version A), in *Asarah Kelei Kesef*, ed. I.H. Last, Vol. I (Presburg, 1903), p. XXII. See also Barry Mesch, *Studies in Joseph ibn Caspi: Fourteenth-Century Philosopher and Exegete* (Leiden, 1975), p. 1, n. 1.

[3] See Kalonymus, *Teshuva She-Heshiv*, p. 24, where one may find the sharp criticism Kalonymus b. R. Kalonymus levels against this statement.

[4] See *Tirat Kesef*, p. 84, 114.

[5] See also *Tirat Kesef*, pp. 119-120.

[6] Similarly, when Ibn Ezra and the Ramban use allusions, they generally do not do so in order to explain the simple meaning of the verses. Instead, they primarily delve into issues of *sod* (mainly the Ramban) and linguistic matters (mainly Ibn Ezra).

[7] Thus, for example, in *Matzref La-Kesef* to*Bereishit* 27:45, we find:

> “Why should I be bereaved also of both of you on one day” — this is akin to: “And I will also be built from her” (*Bereishit* 30:3).

The explanation is that the word “why” in the verse means “perhaps”; Rivka’s intent in saying, “Why should I be bereaved also of both of you on one day” is, “Perhaps I will be bereaved of both of you,” just as Rachel’s intent with her words, “And I will also be built from her” is, “Perhaps I will be built also from her.” See also *Shulchan Kesef*, ch. 65 (p. 122), and Kasher’s notes there.

[8] This refers to those things which are simple and understood by everyone.

[9] See, e.g., *Matzref La-Kesef, Shemot* 24:12:

There is no need to mention everything which Moshe did with God during this forty-day meeting — what did God say to him, and what did he respond? — for who can know this? Nevertheless, it will mention what is necessary for the masses…

[10] See, for example, *Matzref La-Kesef, Bereishit*1:2:

We will do all of this to hide it from the masses, so that the masses will take them according to their degree, while some individuals will understand in all of this honored matter two facets, the metaphorical “apples of gold in settings of silver” (*Mishlei* 25:11).

See also Rambam’s introduction to *Moreh Nevukhim*.

[11] This is what Ibn Caspi writes in the continuation to his commentary on *Vayikra* 26:30:

“I will cast your carcasses upon the carcasses of your idols, and my soul shall abhor you…” Now, what would it help the masses — all the more so this thick-headed generation — if he were to say to them: “If you follow my rules,” you will merit the life of the World to Come, and if you do not listen, you will not merit it? This is only like yelling at statutes or playing music among the dead.

Similar things may be found in *Shulchan Kesef*, ch. 64, p. 120:

For our holy books have been composed to be handed over to the entire masses, children and women.

[12] It is not clear to me whether this is a true expression of Ibn Caspi’ regard for the Sages, or a certain lip service because he is about to attack their commentary.

[13] Rambam, *Moreh Nevukhim* 1:27: “Onkelos the convert is very complete in the Hebrew and Aramaic languages.”

[14] See also *Matzref La-kesef*, *Bereishit* 41:40.

[15] Thus, for example, he distinguishes between two biblical verbs for removing shoes, “*shal*” and “*chalatz*”:

The people of the land do not understand what it says of Moshe: “Remove (*shal*) your shoes” (*Shemot* 3:5), as it compares to the issue of Boaz, “A man would remove (*shalaf*) his shoe” (*Ruth* 4:7) and the topic of levirate marriage, “And she shall remove (*chaletza*) his shoe” (*Devarim* 25:9). The matter is as follows: The custom of the land is to wear on one’s feet shoes of hard leather, and the shoes are not tied to anything, and therefore when one wants to remove this shoe, one merely shakes his foot, and the shoe falls off. This is “*shal*,” equivalent to “*nashal*” in *Devarim* 19:1, “And the iron will slip off.” This is why it says, “A man would remove (*shalaf*) his shoe and give it to his fellow.” However, if the shoe is tied and attached to the foot with the straps, then we use the term *chalitza*, similarly to “And they will remove (*chaletzu*) the stones” (*Vayikra* 14:40)… (*Tirat Kesef*, p. 19)

[16] This is what Ibn Caspi writes in *Tirat Kesef*, pp. 18-19; see ibid., p. 42.

[17] For more on the background of these polemics, see Halbertal, *Bein Torah Le-Chokhma,* pp. 11-21.

[18] One ban decreed that no one under the age of 25 could study philosophy; the second ban will be discussed below.

[19] For the background of polemics in Provence, see Benedict, *Ha-Torah Be-Provence;* Lasker*, Natzrut*.

[20] See *Minchat Kena’ot* in *Teshuvot Ha-Rashba*, p. 724.

[21] The view of the Rambam, claiming that biblical anthropomorphization should be seen as an allegory for deeper content, ultimately led to an even more extreme view among radical groups in Spain. While the Rambam utilizes the allegorical approach for issues of anthropomorphizing God alone, there are those who utilize for interpreting practical *mitzvot*. In other words, a school arose which claimed that the intelligent person, who knows the intentions of the *mitzvot*, is not required to fulfill the *mitzvot* practically, and his understanding is enough. See Shalom, *Zeramim Be-Mystica*, p. 391, quoting R. Moshe de León from a manuscript. The Rambam's adherents rejected, of course, the indictment of the Rambam and his philosophy for exegesis of the *mitzvot* along these lines, but the dispute was focused on the essential view leading to these extreme opinions. See Ben Sasson, *Toledot Yisrael*, pp. 220-226.

[22] *Tirat Kesef*, pp. 10-12.

[23] For example, this is what he writes in *Tirat Kesef* (p. 20):

Now listen, my son, to what I say, and it is this: for it is not appropriate in my view to remove a narrative from its simple meaning, unless one is compelled to do so. Therefore, when a narrative appears in Scripture, either a statement said or an action done, it is appropriate that we should follow the presumption and explain it thus: it was a conscious event, employing the senses in their normal way…

See also *Peirush Le-Mishlei,* I, p. 19; *Sefer Ha-Musar*, p. 67; see also Rambam, *Moreh Nevukhim,*I, 8, and *Maskiyot Kesef,* ad loc.

[24] See, for example, *Gevia Kesef*, ch. 15.

[25] Already in the preface to *Bereishit* 37 in *Matzref La-Kesef*, Ibn Caspi dedicates a lengthy, detailed analysis to the ranking of the Patriarchs. We shall bring here part of his words:

Says Yosef ibn Caspi: My intent is to elaborate on the issue of Yosef, for he dominates from here until the end of the Book of *Bereishit*; indeed, he is our premier patriarch, called "*Tzafenat Pane'ach*" (41:45), which means "He reveals the hidden secrets." Moreover, this worthy man was a great sage, as we shall explain, and also Aristotle mentioned him when it comes to interpreting dreams. Indeed, he was the man who ruled longer than all of the rulers who have led our nation, for he stood in his greatness for eighty years.

[26] The Sages declare (*Berakhot* 16b): "Our rabbis taught: Only three may be referred to as Patriarchs, and only four may be referred to as Matriarchs."

[27] Ibn Caspi explains that the length of Yosef's narrative is proportional to the significance of the main character in it, conforming to that which is accepted in the rest of the Torah: Moshe gets an entire book, Yosef gets four Torah portions, Avraham three, Yaakov two, Yitzchak one, and Adam and Noach one each:

See how this part of the Pentateuch, i.e. the Book of *Bereishit*, is the most honored. Now, this book is itself divided into a dozen portions: the first tells the story of Creation, from Adam until Noach; the second, from Noach until Avraham; the third, fourth and fifth deal with Avraham, the pioneer. The sixth concerns Yitzchak, whose quality was weaker than the quality of his father and of his son. The seventh and eighth deal with the honored Yaakov. The ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth deal with the wise Yosef. Afterwards, Moshe flourished, master of all, and to him is dedicated the entire book of *Shemot*.

[28] For example, this is what he writes in *Tirat Kesef* (p. 125):

Interpreting dreams is for the masters of the power of inference, for this is the power which the prophets have in great measure, and therefore Yosef thought and inferred in his mind: how might these dreams come into reality?

[29] See *Tirat Kesef*, p. 127; *Matzref La-Kesef*,*Bereishit* 44:17.

[30] See for example, the following citation:

Even though his brothers were wise and clever, he was more wise and clever than they… Then the mentally deficient responded…

The "mentally deficient" are the brothers, as compared to Yosef.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Lecture #22:
The Ralbag

A. Introduction

R. Levi ben Gershom (1288-1344) lived in Provence, and he was a dominant and famous figure in his era not only in the Jewish community and not only because of his Torah-based writings. He was also known for his contributions to the fields of philosophy, science, [1] mathematics[2] and astronomy,[3] and he even composed a number of academic treatises in these disciplines. Some of the Ralbag's scientific writings were translated from Hebrew to Latin, so that they could serve the non-Jewish intelligentsia.[4] One indication of the great importance of his biblical commentaries is the fact that his commentary was chosen to be one of the first books to be printed in Hebrew.

Like R. Yosef ibn Caspi, whom we dealt with in the previous lesson, the Ralbag dedicates a significant portion of his commentary to *Sefer Bereishit*. A large part of his commentary, mainly the chapters of*Bereishit* which deal with creation, is focused on his philosophical approach. Despite this, there is a great difference between the two exegetes: the Ralbag uses philosophical principles taken from physics and metaphysics, while ibn Caspi uses mainly the discipline of logic.

This is an interesting phenomenon of two scholars exploring *Tanakh*, living in the same time and same area, and having a similar style. However, while one (Ralbag) became famous and accepted, the other (ibn Caspi) was almost unknown, and his writings were not studied. It seems to me that a comparison of the two personalities yields the following explanation. The Ralbag was a scholar who was not only expert in the Written Torah, but also in the Oral Torah, and was a well-known halakhic authority. This is not true of ibn Caspi, who declares that he is not a halakhic expert;[5]in his compositions, he conspicuously avoids delving into halakhic topics. In addition, understanding the Ralbag's commentaries generally does not require prior knowledge, while understanding ibn Caspi's commentaries requires prior knowledge not only in philosophical logic, but also in biblical exegesis. While a reader who is not totally well-versed in the philosophical world of the Middle Ages will have some difficulty in understanding the commentary of the Ralbag as well, there is no doubt that understanding his commentaries is a much simpler task than understanding ibn Caspi.

B. Structure of the Commentary

The Ralbag divides the portion into a number of subtopics: each subtopic is considered an independent literary unit, which he calls a *parasha*. The Ralbag divides his commentary into three separate parts, each of which deals with another discipline, and together they constitute a comprehensive exegetical system. The three parts are: the lexicon (*bi'ur ha-milot*), the exegesis (*bi'ur ha-parasha*), and the values (*to'alot*).

Bi'ur ha-milot is a short commentary on words that require definition. This commentary is structured according to the standard template, each entry followed by its definition. The lexicon is significant as part of the

comprehensive explication of the entire unit, and is relevant in terms of framing the general context of the unit.

The second part, *bi'ur ha-parasha*, is a comprehensive commentary, which recapitulates the words of the Torah while adding exegetical addenda in the style of a lecture, without dividing it into verses.

The third part, *to'alot*, explains the meanings, morals, and messages that come out of the *parasha*. These values are divided into three segments: metaphysical (*de'ot*), moral (*middot*), and mitzva-related. The first of these relates to philosophical issues that emerge from the unit; the second deals with behavioral and ethical issues that arise from the unit; and in the halakhic portions of the Torah, the third examines the contents and meanings of the commandments. The Ralbag expands on the significance of these three categories in his introduction to his commentary on the Torah:

> It is crucial to divide the Torah, by courtesy, into these three parts, because human perfection cannot be realized without achieving the perfection of *middot*…

According to the view of the Ralbag, these *mitzvot*, *de'ot*, and *middot* are three categories in which human beings must reach for perfection. Perfection, after all, is the aim of creation, as the Ralbag continues to explain, delineating the great gifts God gave to man:

> Indeed, He guided his reality[6] in this wondrously providential way, crafting his limbs and their powers and their instruments, all of which He gave to him to maintain his reality. He did not hesitate to give him direction and guidance towards the true perfection, which is the entirety of man's yield… This He accomplished by giving him this divine Torah, which is the nomos[7]which all may follow, thereby reaching perfection and true success.

In other words, just as God creates the mechanism of the human body in a way in which a person can survive, similarly God creates a mechanism that allows each person to achieve perfection, which is the ultimate goal of man in this world. This manual is the Torah, and those who follow the Torah will reach true perfection. This direction is given both through the commandments of the Torah and through the biblical narrative.[8] Indeed, the Ralbag consistently explains the Torah according to this conception.

Analyzing the entirety of the Ralbag's metaphysical values will give the reader a comprehensive picture of his philosophical world. In these *to'alot*, the Ralbag expands on many topics such as prophecy, providence, reward and punishment, etc. In his commentary on *Tanakh*, the Ralbag reveals that he is, on the one hand, as a man of faith who sees himself as bound by what he perceives as basic beliefs of the Jewish religious tradition, and on the other hand as a man of science and philosophy who tries to enhance these beliefs with explanations in the philosophical and scientific frameworks, based on Aristotelian thought.

An example of ethical values may be seen in *Bereishit* 43:11-14. In these verses, the Torah describes Yaakov's preparations for sending Binyamin to Egypt with the brothers:

> Then their father Yisrael said to them, "If it must be so, then do this: Take some of the choice fruits of the land in your bags, and carry a present down to the man, a little balm and a little honey… Take double the money with you… Take also your brother, and arise, go again to the man. May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man…"

These verses are clear and understandable, requiring no explanation, but the Ralbag's view is that the details in the story come to teach us rules of behavior (not only ethical behavior, but intelligent and socially acceptable behavior):

> The fifteenth value is in *middot*. It is not appropriate for someone whose master suspects him of a bad thing to be excessive in offering a generous gift, because this will seem to indicate that the suspicion is actually true. Thus, one will find that Yaakov does not act excessively at this point by offering a generous tribute, while one may see that he gave a generous tribute to Esav. Rather, it was a minimal amount that he sent to him: "a little balm and a little honey…"

We learn from this that Yaakov prefers to give a mistrustful person a small gift, as exaggeration in this realm will only serve to bolster the other's concerns.

From these same verses, the Ralbag also extracts a metaphysical value:

> The sixteenth value is in *de'ot*. This informs us that when a person is concerned about some evil, he should not rely solely on praying to God; rather, it is worthwhile to exert efforts according to all the reasons[9]that are feasible in order to save himself, and he should juxtapose this to his prayer to God Almighty. God Almighty will assist those who attach themselves to him and He will show them providence, but His desire is that they juxtapose this with the appropriate reasons… Furthermore, if the perfect one will rely only on praying to God, this may result in an irreplaceable loss; should this perfect one not receive his heart's desire, his faith will be reduced, which is in itself the reason for a lack of achievement…[10]

We learn here of the relationship of the Torah to a person's effort and initiative. Yaakov does not suffice himself with prayer alone; in addition, he also uses natural tools, namely, the gift which he sends to the viceroy.[11] The importance of the natural effort is twofold: God's desire is to show providence using natural tools ("the appropriate reasons"), not miracles; furthermore, the person who relies on prayer alone can be damaged theologically if his prayer is not accepted.

C. Innovative Explanations

In light of his view that one must learn rules of behavior from biblical narrative, the Ralbag believes that the story of Avraham going down to Egypt (*Bereishit*12) portrays him as a positive role model. The Ralbag praises Avraham for leaving the Land of Israel in light of the famine and not staying put in obstinacy:

> The first value is in *middot*. This teaches us the diligence required for one to maintain his body and give it all that it needs. One may see this in Avraham; despite the fact that God Almighty had already ensured that he would succeed financially, he arose, because of the famine which occurred in the Land of Canaan, to go to the Land of Egypt. He did not hold himself back because God Almighty commanded him to settle in the Land of Canaan. God Almighty's command is solely designed to benefit man, not to bring about his death. Therefore, Avraham knew that it was God Almighty's will that he should depart from there in order to seek sustenance…[12]

D. Attitude towards Miracles

The Ralbag has a complex approach to the limitations of miracles. In accordance with philosophical considerations — although this is not the forum to elaborate on them — in his book *Milchamot Hashem*(VI, 2:12), he determines three principles relating to miracles:

> A) There are no constant miracles. Exceptions to the rules of nature can exist in a miraculous way temporarily, but not in a permanent way.
>
> B) The magnitude of the miracle correlates to the greatness of the prophet. Miracles happen only by way of prophets, and their scope is dependent on the prophet's level.
>
> C) Miracles cannot happen for heavenly reasons. This principle compels the Ralbag to explain that miracles which appear ostensibly to be based in cosmic causes in fact happen without any intervention of heavenly reasons.

An additional principle appears in a number of places in the Torah commentary of the Ralbag:

> D) The miracles are done "with the appropriate reasons": God minimizes His interference in the order of the natural world.Exceptions to the rules of naturetake place only if they are required to achieve the relevant benefit.[13]

For example, as an instance of the third rule, one may note the original explanation of the Ralbag for the miracle of the sun's standing still at Givon

(*Yehoshua*10:13), which appears to directly contradict this principle. The Ralbag explains that the verses are not describing a change in the natural position of the sun, but rather describe the dramatic success of the Jewish army; in a very small amount of time, even before dark, they achieve victory in combat.

> What Yehoshua's statement means is that before the sun could pass over Givon, and the moon arrive in the Ayalon Valley, the nation took its vengeance from its enemies…
> Now, this was a wondrous matter: not only did Israel manage to avenge themselves of their foes, but they managed to avenge themselves of their foes completely and conclusively in a relative short amount of time.[14]

As an example of the fourth principle, we may turn to the Ralbag's commentary on the following verse (*Devarim* 7:22):

> Lord your God will clear away these nations before you little by little. You cannot make an end of them at once, lest the wild beasts grow too numerous for you.

The Ralbag explains:

> Even though God Almighty is in control of doing whatever He wants and whatever He desires, He will seek the reasons which are as appropriate as possible. Moreover, He will not innovate a wonder unless the situation compels it. For He does not hate nature; indeed, He made it!
>
> Therefore, He does not subvert it except in a time of need and in the most minimal way that it is possible to do so. This is why it says, "Lord your God will clear away these nations before you little by little. You may not make an end of them at once, lest the wild beasts grow too numerous for you." Indubitably, God Almighty could destroy them quickly and guard Israel against the wild beasts, so that they could not overwhelm them; nevertheless, He chose not do this, because it was possible for Israel to achieve the goal without this.

In other words, God could have helped the Jewish nation to conquer the Land of Canaan swiftly, but He holds Himself back from doing so because there was no essential need for a miracle of this sort. God avoids subverting the natural law because "He does not hate nature" — He loves His world as He created it, and therefore His interference in the laws of nature will be as minimal as possible.

E. Attitude towards Halakhic Midrash

In the halakhic portion of the Torah, the Ralbag has an innovative approach to studying the laws of the Oral Torah. Up to his time, biblical exegetes fall into one of two groups. One group (Rashi, Ramban, et al.) cites

Midrashic material dealing with halakhic topics and (generally) explains the verses in keeping with these sources. However, most exegetes are in the second group, dealing only with analyzing the verses, whether in terms of their halakhic content (ibn Ezra) or in an independent way (Rashbam). Regardless, they do not deal with all the details of halakhic Midrash.

The Ralbag, in his introduction to his commentary on the Torah, explains his relationship to halakhic Midrash:

> Now, when we explain the commandments and the roots from which all of the laws emerge, as explained by Talmudic wisdom, do not expect us to juxtapose those roots with the sites utilized by our Talmudic sages, via one of the thirteen attributes, according to their custom. This is for the following reason: they juxtapose these accepted and true things concerning the Torah's commandments to those verses, but only in order to utilize them as allusions and supports; they do not really intend to extract these laws from these sites…
>
> We, on the other hand, will juxtapose them to the simple meaning of the verses, so that it is possible for laws to come out of them, for by this, the soul will be more thoroughly satisfied. This is not veering from the way of our Rabbis, of blessed memory, for as we have said, they never intended that these laws should really be extracted from these sites to which they are juxtaposed. Rather, they have a direct oral tradition, man to man, going back to Moshe Rabbeinu, peace be upon him, so they merely seek an allusion from the verse…

The Ralbag accepts the laws that emerge from halakhic Midrash as genuine and binding, but he believes that the form of studying Halakha is not obligatory; it only serves an *asmakhta*, a support. In other words, when the Sages expound a verse and, as it were, derive laws from there, the verse expounded is not the source of the given law. Rather, the Sages hold it is a legal tradition from Mt. Sinai, and they seek a verse that may serve as an *asmakhta* for some laws — the verses are the frame on which to display the laws.[15] Since this is true, the derivation of any given *asmakhta*is not obligatory; the Ralbag may use an*asmakhta* which differs from that of the Sages, and he uses different tools than what they use.

For example, while the Sages may find allusions or supports using the thirteen attributed by which the Torah is expounded, the Ralbag composes other logical rules for the "sites",[16] which are designed to be a substitute for the thirteen attributes of the Sages. The Ralbag stresses that he does not argue with the Sages, because they themselves never meant for the types of derivation utilized in halakhic Midrash to be obligatory.

The Ralbag sees great significance in his approach for two reasons. First, it is satisfying to the soul — ideas are more acceptable and pleasing if they are studied in a more logical way. The second reason is that the easiest way to commit the laws of the Oral Torah to one's memory is to connect the laws to the verses, as the Written Torah is familiar to all.[17]

Thus, for example, the Ralbag derives the prohibition for one to judge his relative from *Shemot* 32:27-29, wherein Moshe orders the Levites to kill those who have served the Golden Calf:

> "Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and his fellow and his kinsman… You have been set apart to the Lord today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and He has blessed you this day."

Ralbag points out:

> From the fact that he makes a point that today they should not hold back from executing justice upon a sinner who is their son or their brother, it is possible for us to that a judge cannot sit in judgment of his relative.

F. Main Contribution of the Ralbag

We should see the essential contribution of the Ralbag to the Torah as a contribution to the sphere of Jewish thought. However, even in the sphere of biblical exegesis, the Ralbag is very innovative, and most of his innovations are found in his "values." The Ralbag's worldview in terms of the Torah's aim motivates him to find as many relevant messages and morals as possible through the Torah's narrative and laws.

We will conclude with a nice quote from the Ralbag, who characterizes his outlook of Torah study thusly:

> The greatest joy is in the acquisition of spirituality, and this is quite understandable, because we will rejoice more, beyond measure, when we grasp an intellectual matter, than we will rejoice over the acquisition of anything physical.(Commentary to I*Divrei Ha-yamim* 16).

[1] His most famous invention is the "Jacob's Staff," a navigational tool which served sailors for hundreds of years and is even in use today; see, for example,http://ascscientific.stores.yahoo.net/precjacstaf.html.
[2] His innovations in this area were integral to the development of trigonometry.
[3] Due to the Ralbag's great contributions to the discipline of astronomy, a lunar crater is named after him: Rabbi Levi, 34.7°S 23.6°E.
[4] In 1342, Pope Clement VI had the Ralbag's astronomical work, based on the great Arab thinkers, translated into Latin.
[5] *Sefer Ha-Musar*, p. 151.
[6] This refers to the psychology and physiology of man.
[7] This is the Greek term for a system of laws.
[8] The Ralbag expands on the importance of biblical narrative for human perfection in his commentary to *Devarim* 32.
[9] These are the possible causes and factors.

[10] See also his commentary to *Shemot* 1:
The fourth value is in *middot*. This teaches us that a person should not rely on a miracle, because everything that he does should be motivated by fear of God. It is appropriate that one try, to the best of his ability, to distance himself from any evil that may befall him…
[11] This is also mentioned in the *midrash* cited by Rashi (*Bereishit* 32:9)concerning Yaakov's preparations from his encounter with Esav:
He prepared himself for three things: for tribute, for prayer and for battle.
[12] In a similar way, the Ralbag praises Yosef's act of trying to escape the guardhouse by appealing to the chief butler (see Ralbag, *Bereishit* 40) as opposed to Rashi there (following *Bereishit Rabba*89:2-3), who criticizes Yosef.
[13] We may view this principle an expansion of the first principle: not only does God not make miracles happen in a permanent way, but even when He makes them happen in a temporary way, they will happen in a way as minimal as possible.
[14] See also Naava Eckstein's essay, *"Gishat Ralbag Le-Nissim Ba-Mikra: 'Yasad Eretz al Mekhoneha'"* in *Ha-Reneh: Asufat Ma'amarim*(Ulpana AMIT Noga, 5771), pp. 100-107.
[15] See the view of the Rambam about this in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishna*.
[16] These are types of claims.
[17] The Ralbag puts it this way:
There is value in our juxtaposing these laws to the simple meaning of the verses, for the laws may then be more easily recalled in our souls. The verses of the Torah may be easily remembered, because we read them constantly. Thus, if we derive the explanation of these commandments from the simple meaning of the verses, this will be the reason to remember the explanation of the commandment when we recall these verses.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Lecture #23:
Abarbanel

A. Introduction

R. Yitzchak Abarbanel was born in Lisbon, Portugal in 1437 to a prestigious family from Seville, and he died in the year 1508 in Venice (and was buried in Padua). The Abarbanel family had a tradition of being descended from the Davidic dynasty.[1] Abarbanel began at a young age to compose a commentary on the Torah (specifically, the Book of *Devarim*), as well as a philosophical work (*Ateret Zekenim*), but these endeavors were cut short due to familial obligations.

Abarbanel's family had great influence in the royal palace. His father, Yehuda, was the treasurer for Alfonso V, King of Portugal, and in his youth, Abarbanel was forced to set aside his spiritual development and help his father with his business affairs. After his father's death, Abarbanel also served in the royal court; he was in charge of the treasury. This period is described as the happiest period of his life, a period in which Torah and greatness resided in the same place.[2]

This period ended with the reign of Alfonso V's son and successor, John or João II (1481-1495). King João was worried about his nobles rebelling against him; in the year 1483, he executed eighty of them. Abarbanel managed to escape over the border to Spain, but he was forced to leave all of his possessions in Portugal. He describes this experience as an extremely

difficult period,[3] in economic as well as theological terms, but Abarbanel overcomes and reaches the conclusion: “God is righteous, for I have rebelled against his word” (*Eikha* 1:18). He makes a spiritual audit, concluding that the loss of his status and wealth is a punishment for spending too much time on physical acquisitions and not investing sufficiently in spiritual acquisitions.[4]

A short time after settling in Spain, while he was still writing his commentary on the Book of *Melakhim* (March of 1484), Abarbanel was summoned to serve “the Catholic Monarchs,” Queen Isabella I of Castile and King Ferdinand II of Aragon. [5]After nine years of faithful service, in 1492, the Alhambra Decree was issued, expelling all Jews from Castile and Aragon. Abarbanel did everything he could to prevent this edict from going into effect, even proposing a prodigious tribute to convince the monarchs to annul it, but to no avail.[6]

The privations and suffering of the expulsion are described by Abarbanel in his commentary on the Haggada**,** *Zevach Pesach,* in which he includes the dramatic sentence: “I have seen God face-to-face, fighting His nation, the lot of His inheritance.”

Abarbanel left Spanish soil together with 300,000 Jews and reached Naples. King Alfonso II of Naples assumed the throne in early 1494 and recruited Abarbanel as a royal adviser. In the beginning of 1495, King Charles VIII of France invaded, deeply affecting the Jews of the city; Abarbanel explains that many of them lost everything and became paupers and captives, many others were forced into apostasy, and others died.[7]

After the French invasion, King Alfonso II fled to Sicily, and Abarbanel accompanied him as a counselor. A year after the king’s death, Abarbanel left Sicily and settled for a short time on the island of Corfu, and afterwards in the port town of Monopoli on the Adriatic. While he was in Monopoli, Abarbanel was preoccupied with the overwhelming sense of hopelessness in the wake of the Expulsion from Spain; he was concerned about his fellow Jews despairing of the redemption, and he witnessed that many abandoned Judaism totally. In response, Abarbanel wrote a number of compositions dealing with the redemption: an explanation of the Book of*Daniel* (*Ma’aynei Ha-Yeshua*), a commentary on certain prophecies of*Yeshayahu* (*Mashmia Yeshua*[8]), and an explanation of Talmudic lore dealing with the Messiah and the redemption (*Yeshuot Meshicho*).

Abarbanel explains his motive in writing these books:

> I have said to myself that there is a time to act for God, to grasp weak hands and to bolster weak knees, to give consolation to those who stumble in exile…(Introduction to*Ma’aynei Ha-Yeshua*)

In 1503, Abarbanel settled in Venice, where he lived until his death.

B. Biblical Commentary

Structure

Abarbanel wrote a commentary on most of the books of *Tanakh*. He generally opens his commentary on each book with a preface dealing with questions of the "Intro to Bible" nature. Thus, for example, in his introduction to the Book of *Yirmiyahu,* Abarbanel deals expansively with the question of the relationship between the Masoretic text and the traditional reading. In the introduction to the Book of *Shmuel*, he deals with identifying the author of the book. In the introduction to the Book of *Yehoshua*, he deals with the arrangement of the books of *Nevi'im* and the nature of the distinction between *Torah*, *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim*. In the introduction to *Melakhim*, he defines the relationship between it and *Divrei Ha-Yamim*.

Like the Ralbag, and following the *Akeidat Yitzchak* of R. Yitzchak Arama,[9] Abarbanel does not explain the verses using a running commentary for every verse; instead, he divides the portion into topics, and he explains the unit with a comprehensive explanation. Sometimes, he relates also to individual verses and difficult words.

Abarbanel's trademark is presenting questions at the beginning of each unit of study. (This also follows in the footsteps of R. Yitzchak Arama, who introduces every chapter with a list of "doubts".) Sometimes, Abarbanel brings more than forty questions at the beginning of a given unit.[10] In the beginning of every passage, Abarbanel sets out the questions and difficulties raised by reading it, and afterwards he presents at length his solutions, noting at the end of each one, "By this, we have resolved question number X."

Characteristics of the Commentary

Abarbanel's style is direct and clear. He will generally base his explanation on *peshat*, but sometimes he notes elements of *derash* as well. Abarbanel aims to understand the biblical narrative, the motivations of the characters, and the structure of the passages. For example, Abarbanel expands on the question of the order of the Ten Plagues and the Ten Commandments. Similarly, he deals in a very broad way with the reasons for the *mitzvot*, and he is precise about the meaning of the *mitzva* in all of its details.[11] Abarbanel deals also with matters of philosophy, but he avoids dealing with questions of grammar and linguistics. Here, we will present a number of questions of the Abarbanel for *Parashat Korach* (*Bamidbar* 16), questions from different disciplines:

> The first question is that it says, "And Korach took," without the verse explaining what he took. The Sages have expounded it in this way (*Sanhedrin* 109b): "He took for himself a bad purchase." In *Midrash Tanchuma*, we have: "He took himself to one side," as Rashi explains. R. Avraham ibn Ezra, on the other hand, explains that he took people with him. Ultimately, according to all of these views, the essential element has been omitted from the text…
>
> This is a question about understanding the *peshat* of the verse.

> The sixth question is how Korachand his company agreed to the test of the incense and did not think of the wonders which they had seen. Did they not know that Nadav and Avihu were incinerated when they brought incense? How did they not fear for their lives?
>
> This is a question about the characters' motivations.
>
> The fifteenth question is about the statement, "And if God creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth" (*Bamidbar* 16:30). Why did Moshe pray that the earth's mouth would open and swallow them, and not pray that the fire would consume them? What did he see to ask for the earth to open its mouth to swallow them, and what is the connection to the punishment for their transgression? The burning was a punishment corresponding to their intruding to perform the service and to offer incense against God's law, but the swallowing [by the earth] is not so.
>
> This is a philosophical question.

In his commentary, Abarbanel displays a comprehensive knowledge of the biblical exegesis preceding him, and similarly demonstrates that has a thorough knowledge of philosophy, history, and geography. Many times, Abarbanel relates to the commentaries of his predecessors; sometimes he accepts their views, and sometimes he rejects them with clear evidence. Oftentimes, Abarbanel brings the explanations of his predecessors without letting his readers know that the explanation is not his own.[12]

Interpolations

Abarbanel's commentary is full of biblical and Midrashic interpolations[13] — there is almost no piece free from them. For example, in the following paragraph, from his introduction to the Book of *Devarim*, Abarbanel deals with the question of whether *Devarim* is the direct word of God or Moshe's composition. Note the great number of biblical interpolations that appear in this short paragraph:

> "My petition and my request" (*Esther* 5:7): was the digest of "the Torah which Moshe put before the Israelites" (*Devarim* 4:44) — I mean to say, the Book of *Devarim* — "from God, from the heavens" (*Bereishit* 19:24), and were the things which are in it said by Moshe from God's own mouth, as with all the words of the Torah, from "In the beginning" until "before the eyes of all Israel"? Or was this book, this digest of the Torah, said by Moshe, composing and voicing it on his own, explaining what he understood… according to the way of "showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed" (*Daniel* 1:4)? Did he compose a whole book dedicated to "the difficult matter" (*Shemot* 18:26), to those things (cf. *Yeshayahu* 23:18 and *Daniel* 7:9) which were covered up by the Ancient of Days?

Juxtaposition of Passages

Abarbanel spends a great deal of time dealing with the significance of the order of the passages and commandments; he even takes a wider look in the structure of the entire Pentateuch. For example, Abarbanel relates to the order of passages in *Parashat Re'eh*, chapters 13-15 of*Devarim*. In the first part (13:2-19), we find the prohibitions of idolatry, such as the laws of the inciter and of the straying city; in the second part (14:3-21), we find the laws of forbidden foods; in the third part (14:22-15:23), we find the laws of tithes, charity, severance, etc.[14] Apparently, there is no link between the passages, but Abarbanel writes:

> In the first passages, Moshe Rabbeinu warns the Israelites that they must serve God in matters of faith and the soul; afterwards, he turns to foods and bodily matters. This fulfills what it says: "You shall love Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (*Devarim* 6:5). Now, in this passage, it comes to teach us how to serve Him with one's money and crops (*ibid.*): "and with all your might."

In other words, these units parallel the verse, "You shall love Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (a verse which appears earlier, in the beginning of the Book of*Devarim*). "Your heart" corresponds to the ritual commandments, the prohibitions of idolatry, which appear in the first unit; "your soul" corresponds to the prohibitions of forbidden foods, which appear in the second unit; "your might" (understood by the Sages in *Berakhot* 54a and elsewhere as a reference to "your property"[15]) corresponds to the commandments which relate to monetary matters, which appear in the third unit.

Original Interpretations

In Abarbanel's commentary, one may find countless original interpretations. For example, explaining *Shemot* 7, Abarbanel establishes via a number of convincing proofs that the *tzefardei'a*plague in Egypt consisted not of frogs,[16]as is usually assumed, but rather crocodiles:

> Concerning what is written here, we have many proofs. One of them is that it says (7:27), "If you refuse to let them go, behold, I will plague all your borders with *tzefarde'im*." The term "plague" is reserved for lethal strikes…
>
> All of this proves that these*tzefarde'im* are not small, croaking aquatic creatures, but rather the gigantic aquatic reptile which is known as *al-timsāḥ*, which has a form similar to that of a *tannin*, and a mouth that opens by the movement of the upper jaw. This creature is a great predator, able to consume a whole calf or human child…
>
> These creatures came out of the Nile to seek food due to the contamination of the river, when they were unable to sustain

> themselves from the fish that died and were decomposing (*ibid.* v. 18), so they went out to the dry land to find food…
>
> The only question that remains is whether these *tzefarde'im* were in the Egyptian Nile previously, or if they came there by way of miracle from another source.

This is only a small part of his commentary, but we may observe not only his great knowledge of many disciplines, but also his comprehensive view; after the claim that these are crocodiles, Abarbanel deals with the question of whether crocodiles existed in the Nile before this or they were transported miraculously.

An additional original explanation, also based on the verses, is his explanation of the severe punishment decreed against Moshe and Aharon in light of the sin of Mei Meriva (*Bamidbar* 20:1-13). Abarbanel cites ten different approaches and rejects them all, and afterwards he writes that the sin of Moshe and Aharon at Mei Meriva was not a complete sin; the severity of the punishment is based on their culpability for other sins. Thus, Aharon is punished for the sin of the Golden Calf, and Moshe is punished for the sin of the Spies. In these two sins, their involvement was significant, but for the sake of their honor, their punishment is not mentioned at the time of the people's punishment. Here, at the sin of Mei Meriva, God finally calls in the debt.

C. Response to the Expulsion

Abarbanel cannot be removed from his era. Abarbanel, as a spiritual and national leader in a time of crisis, uses sources from *Tanakh* in order to encourage his contemporaries, both those who were expelled and those who converted under duress, the *conversos*. For example, he expounds *Devarim* 4:28, "And you shall serve there human handiwork, wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell." As a witness to the awful atrocities of the Inquisition, Abarbanel explains:

> Due to the horrible troubles, many of them will leave their faith and worship forms of the stars of the heavens, "human handiwork." They do not believe them, because they know that in their knowledge and their recognition they are "wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell." They will only perform this service in order to escape death… and they will keep God's Torah in their midst, while they serve the nations' gods out of fear.[17] This is not mentioned here to portray a sin, but rather a punishment:[18] this was the greatest of evils, recognizing and feeling the belief of the true God in their hearts while they serve idols with their mouths, and their tongues will betray them, and they will be killed for this. About this it is said (*Devarim*28:64[19]), "And you shall serve there other gods."

Abarbanel also relates to the question of the status of the *conversos* from a theological standpoint. Some believed that the *conversos* had no option to return and repent, but Abarbanel explains his

view in his commentary to *Devarim* 30:2-3, the passage dealing with repentance:

> Because faith in exile is divided into two parts: the small part of them who keep the faith and follow the Torah of God, and they are called by the name of Israel, and they are a special few left of many. The other part is the majority of the people; they change their religion out of distress and the weight of the exile…
>
> Therefore, it was said corresponding to the two parts of the people (30:1-2): "And you shall call them to mind among all the nations where Lordyour God has driven you, and return to Lord your God…" The first statement is said about those compelled to leave the faith. It says "among all the nations where theLord your God has driven you," meaning that they are mixed in with them and considered like them, but in their heart they will return to God… And when they return to God and go after Him… everyone according to his status and his ability, he promises that Exalted God will bring them close to Him…

In other words, in the view of Abarbanel, the verses talk specifically about the status of the *converses*. They cannot serve God openly, but only in their hearts; even so, they are included in the passage of repentance, and they are considered to be penitents.

D. **Relationship to Monarchy**

Abarbanel's attitude toward the institution of monarchy is directly influenced by his life experience with monarchs. For example, the passage of the king (*Devarim*17:14-20) may lead the reader to understand that there is a *mitzva* to appoint a king. Abarbanel explains that there is no*mitzva* to appoint a king, but if the nation wants a king, there are a number of conditions (specified in that passage). This is comparable to the paragraph of the "woman of beautiful form" *(eshet yefat to'ar)*which appears in the Torah at the beginning of *Parashat Ki Teitzei* (*Devarim*21:10-14). There is no *mitzva* to take a captive for a wife, but if one wants to do this, he has limitations put on him, as enumerated there.

Similarly, in his explanation of I*Shmuel*, ch. 8, Abarbanel explains at great length the reason for Shmuel's opposition to the monarchy. Abarbanel is well aware of the dangers for the country when it is led by a hereditary power structure, when all of the powers are centralized in the hands of one man who answers to no one - tyranny and bloodshed. According to Abarbanel, the king is never satisfied with the legitimate power given to him by the people; he will go further and further beyond the accepted legal norms, until he establishes an authority of tyrannical despotism.[20]

After the Expulsion from Spain, Abarbanel became familiar with the aristocratic republics of Italy. Abarbanel praised this form of government (see continuation of his commentary on*Shmuel*), and he prefers it to a monarchy.

In his view, the ideal government is a republican form of government, in which the people choose the leaders for short, predetermined times.

*

Abarbanel died penniless and alone in the year 1508, and he was buried in Padua, in an unmarked grave. In the year 1893, the local Jewish community erected a monument to his memory in the cemetery. On one of the sides of the monument, the following epitaph appears in Italian:

> Philosopher and linguist, a pioneer of exegesis, spreading his wings over the Jewish spirit, in matters of ethics, in issues of society, in matters of faith, he revealed them all in the holy books. He leaves blessing to the coming generations in his many works, a treasury of wisdom and faith.
>
> On the other side is engraved:
>
> In this graveyard rests eternally Don Yitzchak Abarbanel…

[1] Thus, for example, Abarbanel writes in his introduction to the Book of *Yehoshua*:
I am the man, Yitzchak, son of a vital man, of great exploits in Israel; his name is renowned, Lord Yehuda ben Yosef ben Yehuda of the Sons of Abarbanel, all of whom were people at the heads of the Israelites, scions of the Davidic dynasty. He was a national prince and commander, *zt"l*.
We should note that in academic research, this fact is in doubt; see, for example, Ephraim Shmuel, *Don Yitzchak Abarbanel ve-gerush Sefarad* (Jerusalem, 5723).

[2] These are his words:
Once I was in my home, with the estate and wealth that I inherited from my ancestors, an abode filled with God's blessing in illustrious Lisbon, metropolis and capital of the Kingdom of Portugal… I built myself houses with wide porticoes, and I made my home a meeting-house for scholars… In my house and in my walls, there was great abundance and charity… Torah and greatness… I was luxuriant in the court of the mighty and noble King Don Alfonso… When he grew strong in his wealth, God took account of his people to give them bread. Deliverance and salvation arose for the Jews. I delighted to sit in his shade; I was close to him, and he relied upon me.(Introduction to the Book of*Yehoshua*)

[3] With the passage of time, it became clear to Abarbanel that this era was really a short period in relation to other events which he experienced over the course of his life.

[4] This is what he writes (*loc. cit.*):
You have not sought beyond God's book to hear of learning… You have been moved by words of falsehood among kings and counselors of the land, which are lost at the time of their accounting… You have put your confidence in gold… You have gone after the great vanity and the might and the glory, but if you have forgotten your God's name, these will be forgotten as well.
In the end, Abarbanel comforts and strengthens himself with the following message:
If you will only seek God early and meditate in His law day and night… God will return to rejoice over you for good… Indeed, I have shaken out my lap, and I arise to perform the labor of the King, God of Hosts is His name: the explication of these books…

[5] This arises from the introduction of Abarbanel to*Melakhim*.

[6] Abarbanel very creatively describes this year based on *Yirmiyahu* 31:9, "the Disperser (*mezareh*) of Israel will gather it up." The word *mezareh* (*mem-zayin-reish-heh*) in *gematria* is 40 + 7 + 200 + 5, totaling 252. He also refers to the famous phrase "For you have been

strangers (*gerim*) in the land of Egypt" (*Shemot* 22:20, 23:9; *Vayikra* 19:34;*Bamidbar* 10:19), as the word *gerim* (*gimmel-reish-yud-mem*) in *gematria* is 3 + 200 + 10 + 40, totaling 253. The year 1492 began in the Jewish year 5252 and concluded in 5253.

And in the ninth year, the year of the Disperser of Israel, the King of Spain captured the entire realm of Granada… "And Esav said in his heart" (*Bereishit* 27:41), how shall I achieve God's favor to give me strength in victory… if not by bringing in under his wings the people who go in darkness, the scattered flock of Israel, and by returning to his faith and belief the wayward daughter. Otherwise, I shall cast them to another land, from upon my face; they will no longer reside in my land… "Get up, leave from among my people" (*Shemot* 12:31), from the lands of Spain and Sicily, Majorca, and Sardinia which is under my rule and over the course of three months. "Not one hoof will remain" (*ibid.* 10:26) from whatever is called by the name of Yaakov or by the name of Yisrael in all of the provinces of my kingship…

When I was there in the king's court, I expended every effort by calling… to the king three times… to say, "Save us, O King, why should you do so to your servants?" (II *Shmuel* 14:4; *Shemot* 5:15). Like the deaf adder that stops its ear (*Tehillim* 58:5), he would not respond to me at all. The queen "was standing at his right hand as an adversary" (*Zekharya* 3:1)…

"And I was in the midst of the exile" (*Yechezkel*1:1). I have come with all the members of my household; "the children are my children and the flocks are my flocks" (*Bereishit* 31:43). I have come here to the illustrious city of Naples, the kings of which are kings of kindness.

This year, the year of "You have been strangers," I have spoken to my heart, "What I have vowed, I will fulfill" (*Yona* 2:10) to write a commentary on the Book of *Melakhim*, which I have not done up until this point.(Introduction to the Book of *Melakhim*)

[7] See his Introduction to the Book of *Devarim*.

[8] In this composition, Abarbanel claims that some of the prophecies of redemption and consolation in*Yeshayahu* do not relate to the Return to Zion during the Second Temple Era, but to a later period.

[9] R. Yitzchak Arama (1420-1494) was one of the Spanish sages of the generation of the Expulsion, and he has become known as one of the great medieval exegetes. He served as a rabbi and rosh yeshiva in Zamora, in northern Spain, and from there he became a rabbi in Tarragona in southern Catalonia. At the time, Spanish Jews were compelled to attend churches and to listen to propaganda speeches by priests, which were delivered in an impressive philosophical style. In light of this, R. Yitzchak Arama saw a need to organize and deliver his lecture according to philosophical style. After some time, he gathered these homilies and compiled his famous book,*Akeidat Yitzchak*, and that is how he earned the title *Ba'al Ha-Akeida*.

[10] The challenging questions of Abarbanel are no less important, and perhaps more so, than his answers. For example, Nechama Leibowitz, in dozens of places in her works, presents the question of Abarbanel and afterwards demands: "Answer his question!"

[11] An excellent example of this is his explanation of the portions dealing with the Tabernacle.

[12] It is difficult to argue in Abarbanel's defense that he is not aware that these ideas were said by others, since we are talking at times about full quotations of lengthy interpretations. R. Meir Arama, the son of R. Yitzchak Arama, describes in a furious letter the relationship between his father and Abarbanel. R. Yitzchak Arama and Abarbanel were friends, and Abarbanel even had the custom to visit R. Yitzchak Arama and to study with him. Afterwards, however, Abarbanel took advantage of these study sessions, and he published R. Arama's interpretations under his own name without citing his father at all.

It happened to befall us that God led us to the house of a man of authority and Torah, of the greatest caliber, towering above the peaks, tall as God's mountains. Known to the kings and counselors of the land… his name is Don Yitzchak Abarbanel…

Over the course of many days, his heart grew haughty in God's ways… He made books and composed works to make it heard outside, streets and markets… He has called them new, sweet and deep — but these words are *attikim*!

The concluding phrase comes from I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 4:22; it means that they are not novellae, but rather taken from others. The term "*attikim*" can mean "ancient," but it can also mean "relocated", "transferred" or "copied."

Yair Hass, in his essay, "*Le-Va'ayat Himutzut Divrei Rabbi Yitzchak Arama Be-Khitvei Rabbi Yitzchak Abarbanel*," *Sinai* 134 (5767), pp. 154-9, argues and works hard to prove that Abarbanel does not attempt to "steal" the ideas of R. Yitzchak Arama. Instead, it is

characteristic of Abarbanel's style to interpolate the words of the exegetes into his commentaries, either to preserve the beauty of language or perhaps to add emphasis to his words as well.

[13] An interpolation is the use of partial or full quote, without mentioning explicitly that it is a quote or noting its source.

[14] Abarbanel even explains the order of the law in the unit itself, and he claims that these laws deal with the generosity a person is supposed to exhibit as regards his property:
It started with the easier one, and it went on to the more difficult one. Whatever comes later in these passages is harder, in terms of the amount of generosity required, than that which precedes it.

[15] See Rashi*, Devarim* 6:5..

[16] Rabbeinu Chananel raises this possibility, but Abarbanel proves it conclusively.
Translator's note: In Modern Hebrew, *tzefardeia* is the word for frog, while *tannin* is the word for crocodile. Both terms appear in the Torah, but their definition is unclear. Abarbanel argues that*tzefardeia* in the Torah is the species known as*Crocodlyus niloticus*, and he uses the Arabic term*timsāḥ* to make the reference clear.

[17] This appears to be a cynical allusion to the Cutheans, "the lion converts" (see II *Melakhim*17:24-41), who convert and worship God out of fear of lions, but continue to serve their own gods. Jews in exile, on the other hand, may serve idols (at least before the naked eye) out of the fear of non-Jews, but they will continue to serve God in their hearts.

[18] Many exegetes have difficulty understanding this verse, since the content of the verse appears to be a description of a sin of idolatry, but the context of the verse is a description of the punishment of the Israelites. According to Abarbanel, there is no difficulty: the verse in truth talks about idolatry, but it is part of the people's punishment.

[19] See his commentary to *Devarim* 28:64.

[20] Indeed, this happened to King Ferdinand: his power so corrupted him that he ultimately expelled all the Jews from Spain.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Lecture #24: Seforno

A. Introduction

R. Ovadia Seforno (1475-1550) was born in Cesena, near Bertinoro, Italy, where he acquired most of his Torah-related knowledge. As an adult, he moved to Rome, where he became well-versed in general studies, including philosophy, linguistics, mathematics, and medicine; the last was his main profession. In 1501, he received his medical degree.

Seforno had many financial problems, and in Rome, he was supported by his brother Chananel.[1] To support himself, Seforno taught some students privately in the disciplines with which he was familiar, and he quickly he became a sought-after instructor for both Jews and non-Jews. Educated non-Jews asked him to teach them Hebrew language and grammar.[2]

In Rome, Seforno dedicated himself to community affairs. He taught Torah to the community for close to three decades.In the year 1524, David Reubeni[3] arrived in Rome and met Seforno. In the year 1525, Seforno left Rome and began wandering, until he eventually settled in the city of Bologna (where his brother settled).In this city, he became renowned as a medical expert and a great Torah scholar.[4] Seforno sat on the community's court, and he became the local *rosh yeshiva*. He also invested great efforts in

establishing a Jewish printing house, in which a number of his works were published.

Aside from the commentary he composed on the Pentateuch, Seforno wrote a commentary to additional books: *Yona, Chavakkuk, Zekharya, Shir Ha-Shirim, Kohelet, Iyov*, and *Tehillim*. For the most part, philosophical topics are discussed there.

Two other books by Seforno are *Kavanot Ha-Torah* and *Or Ammim*. *Kavanot Ha-Torah* is essentially an addendum to his commentary on the Torah, in which Seforno explains the aim of the Torah and its narratives. *Or Ammim* is a philosophical composition. These two books were designated to strengthen the fundamentals of faith in the midst of the Jewish nation.Similarly, Seforno wrote a commentary on Tractate *Avot* and a book of Hebrew grammar.

B. Background and Target Audience for the Commentary

In Seforno's introduction to his Torah commentary, he describes his motivations for composing the commentary on the Torah. He rouses himself "to reclaim the honor of the Torah," responding to the various claims of Jews who try to minimize the value of the Torah. Among these claims are the accusations that the Torah is not written in order and that the Torah is explained based on mistaken interpretations.

It may be that the basis for claims of this type was the development of humanism during the Italian Renaissance of the 15thcentury.[5] Following the development of humanism, there was a surge of interest in history, linguistics, and literature. In the domain of literature, the humanists stressed the art of writing, and it was therefore specifically during this period that questions were raised about the supposed lack of chronological sequence and logical structure of the Torah. In addition, there was some criticism of lines that seemed to be incomprehensible.

Later in his introduction, Seforno writes that it was difficult for the Jews of his generation to respond to these claims, since they were preoccupied with making a living and managing their troubles and they did not have the opportunity to study Torah.Because of this, he decided to take upon himself the responsibility of writing a commentary on the Torah which would be accessible for those busy Jews, responding to the questions that contemporaries might ask. According to Seforno, the commentaries of his predecessors are not sufficient for this task, since sometimes their words are not understandable, and sometimes their answers are unsatisfying.These claims against the Torah caused a desecration of God's name, and in order to remedy it, Seforno wrote his commentary.[6]

Thus, the target audience of Seforno's commentary is intelligent Jews who do not have the opportunity for a deep study of the Torah. Therefore, Seforno does not see a need to explain each and every verse; he explains only what he believes will be useful to his contemporaries, when the

commentaries of his predecessors are not sufficient. At the same, he strives to make his explanation clear, devoid of convoluted argumentation and lengthy analysis.[7]

C. The Humanist Thought of Seforno

Seforno is the last of the Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages, but his commentary on the Torah is not a philosophical commentary, but rather a commentary based on *peshat*. Despite this, one may find in his commentary many allusions to his philosophical worldview.

A fine example of this may be seen in his conception of man and his role in the world. It appears that Seforno's attribution of great importance to the status of human beings is firmly grounded in the principles of humanism, which was gaining momentum in the era of Seforno. The guiding principle of humanism in this period is the centrality and the superiority of man in nature, which requires a person to yearn towards human completion. Seforno accepts humanistic thought (as we shall see below), but he gives it a Jewish spin: he concedes that the person is the superior creation, but it stresses that God is sublime above man.Similarly, he agrees that a person must aspire towards self-completion, but this completion is not defined by man, but by God.

One of the places in which Seforno relates to this topic is his explanation of "the image of God" (*Bereishit* 1:27) in which man is created. In his view, the phrase "*tzelem elohim*" does not mean "the image of God;" the term "*elohim*" does not refer to God Himself, but purely spiritual beings, and "*tzelem*" means potential. The unique character of man is his ability to realize his spiritual potential.[8]

In a number of places, Seforno stresses that the entire human race is sublime, not just the nation of Israel (see his commentary to *Shemot* 19:5, *Devarim*33:3). One of the most prominent places in which one may learn the value of every person in the eyes of Seforno is his commentary to the verse, "You may charge a foreigner interest, but you may not charge your brother interest, so that Lord your God may bless you in all that you undertake in the land that you are entering to take possession of it" (*Devarim* 23:21). The accepted understanding of this verse, as we have in fact translated it, is that it is forbidden to lend to a Jew with interest but it is permitted to lend to a non-Jew with interest (see, for example, Rashi ad loc.). God will then bless the Jewish people for avoiding lending to each other with interest.This might imply that the Torah minimizes the value of the non-Jew. However, Seforno explains this verse in an innovative way; his amazing commentary is as follows:

> Pay him his interest if you have committed to do so, and do not deceive him.
>
> "So that Lord your God may bless you" — For you will not deceive the foreigner, and you will not desecrate the Name.

According to the view of Seforno, the verse does not deal with charging non-Jews interest, but the reverse – paying interest to non-Jews. If a Jew borrows from a non-Jew and is obligated to pay interest to him, it is incumbent upon him to fulfill this obligation.Faithfully paying interest will prevent a desecration of God's name; for this reason, God will bless his nation Israel.

Humanism sees the point of the existence of man in this world, and man's aspiration must be to extract the maximum from this world. It appears that this is the basis of Seforno's emphasis in a number of places for the centrality of reward in this world (see his commentary to *Shemot*20:12; *Devarim* 26:19, 31:20).

D. **The Influence of the Spanish Expulsion**

Seforno lived at the height of the Expulsion and the generation after the Expulsion. On the basis of these events, we may understand certain emphases in his commentary and significant deviations fromhis explaining according to the plain sense of *Tanakh*. In the episode of Yaakov's ladder (*Bereishit* 28:10-22), Yaakov receives the blessing (v. 14):

> Your seed shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

Seforno explains the first part of the verse, "Your seed shall be like the dust of the earth," not as the blessing of fecundity – that the nation of Israel will be increased like the numerousness of the dust – but rather as description of lowness - the nation of Israel will be lowered to the dust. It is after this situation that the redemption will come:

> After your seed will be like the dust of the earth… namely, that they will be at the extremity of lowliness, then they will sprout in the land upon which you lie…
>
> For indeed, the salvation of God, which is destined to occur after the great lowliness of Israel, **which is a phenomenon happening today, in their exile, which has no precedent,** as they of blessed memory said (*Sanhedrin* 98a): "R. Yochanan said: When you see a generation overwhelmed by many troubles as by a river, await him, as it is written, 'When the enemy shall come in like a flooding river, God's spirit shall lift up a standard against him;' this is followed by, 'And the Redeemer shall come to Zion' (*Yeshayahu* 59:19-20)."

Seforno's tendency is to comfort the people of his generation after the difficult crisis of the Spanish Expulsion. He sees the current period of exile as more arduous than all other periods of exile; the redemption from it is certain. [9]

We may find an additional allusion to the Inquisition and the Spanish Expulsion in his explanation of the verse (*Bereishit*33:20), "And he set up an

altar, and he called it, 'God, God of Yisrael,'" which Yaakov states when he comes to Shekhem:

> He called Him, the Blessed God, [by the name] "God" in his prayer… This is signified by the name of Yisrael, that the nations of the world cannot compel him to abandon his faith and knowledge of his Creator…

It is clear that Seforno here explains the verse on the basis of his era. It is not logical that Yaakov would request in his prayer that the nations of the world not be able to compel him to change his religion! Apparently, Seforno is referring to the perils familiar to his contemporaries, and on their behalf, he is praying "that the nations of the world cannot compel him to abandon his faith and knowledge of his Creator."

In another place (*Bereishit* 11:4-6), Seforno presents the dangers of religious centralization, which may mask a politicaltakeover. It appears that Seforno alludes to the danger of the Christian faith taking over the political sphere, as occurred in his era:

> "And a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves" — "Let us make a name" refers to idols that would be in the tower. They wanted the entire human race to know of the height of the place and the greatness of its city, in a way that it might be considered the God of Gods for all people, and towards it everyone might turn. The intent of this was that whoever ruled over the city would rule over the entire human race…
>
> Behold, they were one nation in the matter of religion, for all of them would agree to the faith of the Sabians. In this, all of them agreed to the language, "And now it will not be held back from them."
>
> Thus, there is nothing to stop them from realizing their intent that idolatry[10] would be accepted by everyone in the human race, and not one of them would know to turn to the Blessed Creator and to understand that he is the Creator of all. The opposite will happen when there is a dispute about the issue of these foreign gods, for every one of them will consider that there is a God of Gods to whom all of the gods are subservient, and He will arrange their systems and the order of reality, as it says (*Malakhi* 1:11): "For from the rising of the sun to its setting, my name will be great among the nations."

In the process of Yaakov's encounter with Esav after the former returns to the Land of Israel (*Bereishit* 32:3-33:17), Yaakov expends great effort in order to appease Esav. Seforno praises Yaakov's subservience to Esav, and he sees in this a symbol of the future: the nation of Israel will be laid low before the nations of the world, and thus it may survive the exile. In his view, in the days of the Second Temple, had the Jewish People been obsequious and kowtowed to Vespasian, instead of rebelling against Roman rule, the Temple would not have been destroyed:

> His heart was turned[11] in a moment by Yaakov's subservience. This is akin to our situation in exile among the sons of Esav, who says at his height, "Who will bring me down to the ground?" (*Ovadia* 1:3),[12] and he teaches us that we may escape from the reach of his prideful sword by demonstrating subservience and tribute…
>
> Had the brutes of the Second Temple not been so violent, our Temple would not have been destroyed, as R. Yochanan ben Zakkai himself testified… (Seforno,*Bereishit* 33:4)

The Ramban in his commentary to these verses takes the opposite view, criticizing the subservience of Yaakov:

> In my view, this also alludes to the fact that this precipitated our fall into the hands of Edom [the Romans], for the kings of the Second Temple entered a covenant with the Romans (*I Maccabees*, ch. 8) and some came to Rome, and this was the reason that we fell into their hands. (Ramban, *Bereishit* 32:4)

The great distinction between these two views may depend on the changes that occurred in the Jewish nation between the era of the Ramban and the era of Seforno.The Ramban lived two centuries before the Spanish Expulsion. In his time, the Jewish community had an honored status in the midst of the Christian community; indeed, the Ramban himself was close to the monarchy. However, Seforno, who wrote his commentary a few years after the Spanish Expulsion, cannot speak about standing strong and unbowed before Christianity; the singular way to survive in his era was by subservience and obsequiousness.

E. **Ethical Matters**

Seforno learns ethics from many verses, even if they are not the focus of the narrative — in his view, there are no superfluous verses, and therefore if a certain detail is noted, the implication is that we should learn something from it. An additional possible source is the influence of the humanists on Seforno; the stream of humanism stresses the importance of ethical conduct by people. Below, we will examine a number of examples which stress the ethical component of Seforno's commentary:

1. When Yaakov reaches Charan, he turns to the shepherds and says to them (*Bereishit* 29:7), "Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered together…":

> He said, "Behold, it is still high day" — the righteous will reject evil, even towards others…

2. God turns towards Kayin with the question (*Bereishit* 4:6): "Why has your face fallen…" Seforno explains:

> When a mistake can be repaired, it is not fit to be distressed about what has passed; rather, it is appropriate to exert effort to achieve the reparation in the future.

3. The Torah recounts that Yosef supported his brothers in Egypt with "bread according to the children" (*Bereishit* 47:12). Seforno notes:

> Even though he had the power to increase food for them, he gave them a sufficient amount. As they of blessed memory said, when society at large is in distress, a person should not say, "I will go to my home, eat and drink, and my soul will be at peace" (*Taanit* 11a).

F. **The Sins of the National Leaders**

In a consistent way, Seforno avoids criticizing the Patriarchs' actions. One example of this is Sarai's treatment of Hagar, "Sarai mistreated her" (*Bereishit*16:6). Seforno justifies this behavior in the following way:

> So that she will recognize that she is subjugated, and she will no longer despise her mistress, as a sign that this will happen to any despiser of Israel…

In other words, Sarai mistreats Hagar so that Hagar will fully understand her status in Avraham's house and she will avoid being arrogant in the future.

This explanation is in total opposition to that of the Ramban. Not only does he criticize Sarai's conduct, he notes that this conduct has a negative impact on the future of the Jewish nation:

> Our mother sinned in this mistreatment, as did Avraham by letting her do so. God heard her mistreatment, **and He gave her a son who would be a wild man, in order to mistreat the seed of Avraham and Sara in all manners of mistreatment**.

Seforno as well, like the Ramban, believes that Sarai's behavior has ramifications for the future, but in his view, we are talking about a positive impact. This is "a sign that this will happen to any despiser of Israel."

A second and far-reaching example of Seforno's relationship to the heroes of the nation is the positive relationship of Seforno to the act of selling Yosef into slavery. It appears that he is the first among the biblical exegetes who justifies the actions of the brothers in Yosef's sale, and he returns to this idea in a number of places. One example of this is the difficult phrase, "*va-yitnakkelu oto*":

> They suspected Yosef of plotting to kill them; they thought that he came to them not to seek their peace, but in order to hatch a plot against them or to make them sin so that their father would curse them or Blessed God would kill them, and he himself would remain blessed among the sons…

> This tells us what they are: they must be totally righteous, for their names were before God for remembrance,[13] so how could it be that they united to kill their brother or to sell him and they did not repent of the evil?[14]…
>
> Behold, the verse tells us that they imagined in their hearts and thought that Yosef was a schemer and attempting to kill them, either in this world or the next world or both of them. Now, the Torah says, "If someone comes to kill you," etc. (*Sanhedrin* 72a). (Seforno, *Bereishit*37:18)

At the beginning of his words, Seforno resolves the linguistic issue in the verse. If the verse is describing the brothers as plotting against Yosef, the direct pronoun (*oto*) is not appropriate; rather, it should be "*elav*," "to him" (see Rashi, ad loc.). According to Seforno, "*va-yitnakkelu oto*" does not mean that Yosef's brothers were plotting against him, but they thought that he was plotting against them to kill them, or at least to make them sin so that Yaakov or God might punish them. If so, in their view, they were required to kill Yosef because of the principle, "If someone comes to kill you, kill him first."

According to Seforno, an additional proof that the brothers act out of self-defense is found in the verse "And they sat to eat bread" (*Bereishit* 37:25), which appears immediately after Yosef is cast into the pit:

> They did not see this as an obstacle or disaster which would prevent them from sitting down to their meal, as would be appropriate for those who are righteous as they, when some disaster came by their hand, as Israel did after killing the tribe of Binyamin…
>
> **This occurred to them because they thought that Yosef was a pursuer; in such a case, whoever kills him first is praiseworthy when there is no other way to save the pursued otherwise.**

G. Original Interpretations

In Seforno's commentary, one may find numerous original interpretations. We have already seen two of them above – the explanation of interest and non-Jews and the explanation of the sale of Yosef. We will bring two more original explanations below.

1) On his way to Charan, Yaakov dreams of a heavenly ladder (*Bereishit* 28:10-16), and in light of this, he makes a vow:

   > Then Yaakov made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and if He will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, and Lordshall be God for me, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that You give me, I will give a full tenth to You."

It is clear that Ya'akov's words until the first part of verse 21 ("so that I come again to my father's house in peace") are a description of the terms of the vow: "**If** God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and **if** He will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and **if** I come again to my father's house in peace…" Similarly, it is clear that verse 22 ("and this stone…") is the obligation of the vow: "**Then** this stone, which I have set up for a pillar…"

However, it is not clear how we should relate to the clause at the second part of verse 21, "And Lord will be my God." Is this one of the conditions of the vow, or are we perhaps talking about the first of the vow's obligations? Many exegetes struggle with this question (see, for example, Rashi and Ramban, ad loc.[15]). The commentary of Seforno on this issue is interesting and original. Seforno distinguishes between the names "God" and "Lord," which express the different divine orientations towards the world. "God" expresses the Attribute of Justice, while "Lord" expresses the Attribute of Mercy. According to the view of Seforno, this verse is part of the obligation to the vow. Its meaning is that Yaakov accepts upon himself that God will relate to him with the Attribute of Justice instead of the Attribute of Mercy if he will not serve God with all of his might: "And Lord shall be," Lord's Attribute of Mercy, "God for me," it will turn into the Attribute of Justice.

2) Seforno offers an interpretation, surprising in its originality, to the verses in*Shemot* 16:6-7:

> So Moshe and Aharon said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you will know that it was God Who brought you out of Egypt. And in the morning you will see the glory of God,because He has heard your grumbling against Him. Who are we that you should grumble against us?"

The simple understanding of these verses is as follows: In verse 6, Moshe says to the Israelites that in the evening they will know that God took them out of Egypt, and in verse 7, he says that in the morning, they will see the glory of God. However, Seforno explains these verses in opposition to the division of the verses. In his view, they should be read in this way:

> So Moshe and Aharon said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you will know that it was God Who brought you out of Egypt, as well as in the morning. You will see the glory of God, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we that you should grumble against us?"

In his view, in verse 6, Moshe says to the Israelites that by feeding the Israelites at certain times, in the evening and in the morning, they will understand and know that God took them out totally from slavery in the land of Egypt, because slaves cannot eat at a set time; rather they eat at any time they can.[16] In verse 7, Moshe says to them that they will witness the glory of God.[17]

*

We will end with the concluding blessing of Seforno in his *Kavanot Ha-Torah*:

> Behold, our God has given to us all of this! Aside from them, in His great kindnesses, is He not our father, in whom we put our hope that He will save us, He will make us hear jubilation, satisfied and full of God's blessing. His kindness will overwhelm us, and His glory will fill the entire land, amen and amen.

[1] The Zevulun-Yissakhar relationship which existed between the brothers may be the basis of Seforno's expansive comment to *Bereishit* 49:13, "Zevulun will dwell at the shore of the seas":

> Zevulun, who deals with business, precedes Yissakhar, who delves into the Torah… for indeed it is impossible for a person to delve into the Torah without first acquiring what he needs, as they have said (*Avot* 3:17): "If there is no flour, there is no Torah." When one provides for his fellow, so that his fellow may delve into the Torah, as is said of Zevulun, behold the worship of Blessed God in the enterprise of the Torah scholar will be attributed to both of them.This is the intention of the Torah when it comes to the gifts for Priests and Levites; the entire people may help those who grab hold of the Torah…

[2] One of his most famous students was Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522), a Christian humanist who excelled in the study of the Hebrew language. Reuchlin was the first to disseminate the study of Hebrew among the Christian scholars in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, and he endowed chairs for studying Hebrew in a number of institutions of higher learning. Reuchlin recognized that the essential source for all religions is the Torah of the Jews, from which all the Church fathers drew. Similarly, he understood that the Latin translations of *Tanakh* contained many errors, and in order to repair them, he decided to study Hebrew and Aramaic. We should note that Reuchlin was a zealot for Christianity, and his study of the Hebrew language and the literature of the sages of Israel was not motivated by a love of the Jews, but a desire to develop his religious investigations.

[3] David Reubeni travelled from the Arabian Peninsula to Europe in order to convince Pope Clement VII and King João III of Portugal to organize an army and navy, paid for by European Jewry, to fight the Muslims in India, and thereby to free the Holy Land from the Muslims and to allow the Jewish nation to return to its land.

[4] For example, Maharam Padua, in his responsa (48-49), describes Seforno in this way:

> A great man and a shining light is the sage whose name is widely known as our honored teacher, Rabbi Ovadia, man of Seforno. May God protect him, peace be upon the master and his Torah. One of the angels flew to me, carrying a scroll of secrets, set with marble, bedecked with sapphires. These are the words of the living God, and from behind the veil I have heard that you are the source of greatness, the wellspring of waters, sweet and cold, to saturate a weary soul, which is thirsty for Torah, for everything our honored master has written is built on stones of marble…

[5] Below, we will explain briefly the principles of this movement, and we will expand our description of the influence of Seforno.

[6] These are his words:

> I am the young one, Ovadia, may God protect me and keep me alive, son of the honored master, lord and teacher, Yaakov Seforno, of blessed eternal memory, by the sound of the words of the honored master, Chananel, my brother, may God protect him and keep him alive.
>
> He has great zeal to reclaim the honor of the Torah from "the unfaithful children" (*Devarim* 32:20), who impart a bitter taste in the explication of its words, narratives and order. It is a treasure that is wholly desirable, correct for those who understand it, with no one to say, "Send them back."

So I have said that I will tell the bit of a matter I may hear of it, for my hand has found a bit of success in it. The small measure which I may surmise may arouse to give pleasant words honorably and inscribe a remembrance in the book — may the Torah be great and glorious!

For indeed, my toil amid my current circumstances each day surrounds me like bees, until there is no place and proper time to see the wonders of our Torah…

Sometimes, the statement of the early ones is not well-understood, and sometimes they provide an answer insufficient to resolve the doubt, and it is shame to them…

And we, how can we justify ourselves, when God will arise and take account of the matter of His Name's glory? Is it not in the telling of wonders from His Torah, to enlighten every eye and broaden every mind as to its narrative and its order, which teach of the righteousness and of the greatness of the Blessed Name, as well as His good reason in dividing and concluding the books…

[7] This position stands in totally opposition to that of Abarbanel's commentary.

[8] An additional place in *Bereishit* in which Seforno deals with human superiority is his commentary on 9:5-6.

[9] Words of encouragement concerning the future redemption can also be found in his commentary to *Bereishit* 41:14.

[10] They wanted all people to worship one false God.

[11] This means that Esav was persuaded.

[12] The verses in *Ovadia* are dealing with Edom and Esav; Edom, in *Tanakh,* is a synonym for Esav's descendants (see, for example, *Bereishit*36:1).

[13] He is referring to the verses describing the onyx stones on the breastplate:

You shall take two onyx stones, and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel, six of their names on the one stone, and the names of the remaining six on the other stone, in the order of their birth… so shall you engrave the two stones with the names of the sons of Israel… And you shall set the two stones on the shoulder pieces of the ephod, as stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel. And Aharon shall bear their names before Lord on his two shoulders for remembrance. (*Shemot* 28:9-12)

[14] Here, Seforno says explicitly that the motivation for a forgiving interpretation of the brothers' actions is the general evaluation of them as positive characters.

[15] In fact, we are talking about a double question: whether this sentence is part of the conditions of the vow or part of the obligations of the vow, and how one may understand it according to each of the possibilities. Rashi and the Rashbam, for example, agree that we are talking about the continuation of the condition, but they argue about the question of the understanding of the sentence, while the Ramban maintains that this is an obligation of the vow.

[16] Reading these verses such that "morning" is the end of verse 6 creates the problem of a deficient sentence, because the word "evening" has a continuation: "And you shall know that God took you out of the land of Egypt," but for "morning" the continuation is deficient — what will happen in the morning?

This problem may be solved in one of two ways. One is that one may rearrange the verse and read it in the following way: "In the evening and in the morning, you shall know that God took you out of the land of Egypt." The second is that the verse is tobe read as having two parallel clauses: "And you shall know that God took you out of Egypt" also relates to the word "evening" and one should read the verse thusly: "In the evening, you shall know that God took you out of Egypt, and in the morning you shall know that God took you out of Egypt."

[17] These are his words:

6) "In the evening you will know" — May it be His will that what He said to me, that He will give you food, will be in such as a way that He will give you in the evening your evening needs, in a way that you shall know that Blessed God took you out totally from the land of Egypt. He will take you out also from its customs, for you would reside there on the pot of meat, without a set mealtime, like animals, as they of blessed memory said that at first Israel were like chickens pecking in a garbage heap, until Moshe came and set mealtimes for them (*Yoma* 75b).

7) "And in the morning" — you will have bread in the morning.

"You shall see the glory of God" — thus may it be His will that you will see God's glory, which will come to delimit the times, so that you shall know that your complaints are upon Him, and He will be the one to appear to remove them from upon Him.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Lecture #25:
R. Hirsch

A. Introduction — The New Era

The new era presented new interpretive challenges for Jewish biblical exegetes. Due to the Enlightenment, which began at the end of the 17th century, and the Emancipation, which began at the end of the 18th century, the Jewish community in Europe underwent many changes during the 19th century. Jewish emancipation allowed Jews to leave the ghetto and to integrate in all of the domains of non-Jewish life, including culture, academia, and finance, fields which they had been barred from previously.

There is no doubt that the Emancipation brought much benefit to the Jews of Europe, who, for the first time in centuries, were able to speak of equal rights. At the same time, the Emancipation held within it an existential danger for the future of Judaism. The idea of the equal rights for European Jewry enchanted the Jews, some of whom wanted to give up the Jewish characteristics of religion, dress, language and Jewish community, in order to be fully equal to the rest of the population. Thus, for the first time since the period of Ezra, Orthodox Jewry had to compete with a widespread phenomenon of willing assimilation.

The Reform movement was a direct result of the Emancipation. At the beginning of the 19th century, the Jewish spin-off of the Enlightenment, the Haskalah, began; its adherents, the *Maskilim*, had the intent of emending the Jewish religion. These*Maskilim* saw abstract Jewish principles — monotheism and pure morality — as worth saving, but other fundamentals unique to Judaism (for example, practical commandments and characteristic dress) were seen as expressions of Jewish isolation and clannishness. Thus, they maintained, the modern Jew must give them up. (The distinction between abstract principles and practical commands is based on, apparently, Christian influence). In practice, these alterations were designed to uproot the national fundamentals of Judaism. Judaism was seen as a religious affiliation alone; those who believe in it were seen as having only a faith in common, without any national identity.

An additional phenomenon at this time was the appearance of biblical criticism. This view was developed by Baruch Spinoza at the end of the 17thcentury, and it acquired Jewish supporters in the 18th and 19th centuries. According to this view, the Torah was not given by God at Sinai; rather, the Pentateuch is a literary creation which was written in a later time than the era of the Torah, composed of the works of different authors in different periods.

These literary creations were brought together, through the years and by later editors, into the Torah which we have in our time.[1] The view of biblical criticism in the new era was considered the most enlightened view of understanding *Tanakh*, as opposed to the traditional view; naturally, it influenced one's relationship to the fulfillment of Torah and *mitzvot* and the belief in a God-given Torah.

In the following lessons, we will look at the biblical commentators of the new era, and we will see how their commentaries are influenced by the phenomena we have mentioned: the Haskala, the Emancipation, the Reform movement, assimilation, and biblical criticism.

I have chosen to begin with the commentary of R. Shimshon ben Refael Hirsch. R. Hirsch is not the first of those opposed to these phenomena, but his commentary is one of the most prominent representatives of contending with the spirit of his generation. About R. Hirsch's commentary, his great-grandson, R. Mordechai Breuer, *z"l*, writes the following:

> One may say that, without any concern of exaggeration, R. Hirsch's commentary on the Torah was, in its time and in its era, akin to Rashi's commentary for the Jews of Germany. Men, women, and youths who wanted to study the weekly Torah portion would skip all of the classic Torah commentaries, including Rashi's commentary, in order to study R. Hirsch's commentary…

Below, we will attempt to clarify the singular nature of his commentary and to explain the firstborn status it earned in his generation.

B. Biography

R. Shimshon ben Refael Hirsch (1808-1888) was born in Hamburg, Germany. R. Hirsch studied in his youth in the Gymnasia of R. Yitzchak Bernays, Hamburg's chief rabbi, and he was greatly influenced by him. R. Yitzchak Bernays had a modern approach, and he was interested in general philosophy. On the other hand, he was one of the great warriors against the Reform movement. His student, R. Hirsch, also followed this approach, integrating secular and religious studies while struggling against Reform Judaism. While engaged in his studies, R. Hirsch also worked as a clerk in a commercial enterprise.

At the age of twenty, R. Hirsch travelled to the yeshiva of R. Yaakov Ettlinger, one of the Torah greats of that period, and after two-and-a-half years of study, he received his ordination. In the year 1829, R. Hirsch began studying in the University of Bonn, where he studied theology (apparently, he did not complete his studies there).

In 1830, with the retirement of the rabbi of Oldenburg, R. Hirsch was appointed rabbi of the city. The young age of the new rabbi (he was 22) testified to his great skill. A year after this, he sharply polemicized against Reform leaders and against biblical critics.[2]

It was during this time that he composed his famous book *Horeb*, in which he explained with scientific tools that serving God according to the Torah is not old-fashioned, and he published his famous *Nineteen Letters on Judaism*. Both of these were written in German (the latter as *Neunzehn Briefe über Judenthum).*[3]

In the year 1841, he left Oldenburg and moved to Emden for six years. In Emden, he continued his polemical activities against the Reform movement, using the slogan: "Truth lasts, but falsehood does not." He dealt at length with education and social welfare.

In the year 1847, he became the rabbi of Nikolsburg. His appointment as rabbi was something of a compromise: the *Maskilim* accepted him as the most "enlightened" rabbi whom they could appoint, and the Charedi[4] community accepted him as the most "traditional" rabbi whom they could succeed in appointing. The result was that the two sides accepted this as the least objectionable option, and his time in this office was characterized by a series of polemical exchanges with both Charedi and Reform elements.

In the year 1850, eleven Orthodox families in Frankfurt am Main received the license to establish a separate congregation with its own rabbi, because of the dominance of the *Maskilim* in the city. This congregation identified itself as Adat Yeshurun. R. Hirsch decided to leave his well-established post for this tiny community, the members of which had a worldview similar to his own. His success in this community was massive — many joined his community within a short amount of time, and similar congregations were established in different cities all over Germany.[5] This, in fact, was the beginning of the movement known as Neo-Orthodoxy.[6]

In Frankfurt, R. Hirsh wrote his commentary on and translation of the Pentateuch in German,[7] and he also composed a commentary on the *Siddur* and the Book of *Tehillim*. His Torah commentary, as we shall see below, was influenced greatly by processes in the Jewish community in the 19th century. In addition, R. Hirsch tried to update and rejuvenate traditional Orthodoxy: the synagogue was built in glory and great splendor, featuring an all-male choir; for ritual slaughter, they were careful about rules of hygiene. The most significant innovation was in the high school he headed, where secular and religious studies were integrated. In this school, which he led himself, the ideal was to educate students who would embody "*Torah im derekh eretz*," "Torah with the way of the world."

C. Aim of the Commentary

In his introduction, R. Hirsch explains the aim of writing his commentary on the Torah:

> I seek to explain the biblical verses on their own, to draw this explanation from the literal expression through all of its facets, to pull the explanation of the words from the treasury of the language of the

> Holy Writ, to draw and to describe by way of linguistic research. I will draw from the traditions of law and lore, which have been transmitted to us from the days of our predecessors, together with the biblical text, those truths upon which is based the worldview of Jewish life. These they are the laws of Israel's life forever and ever — behold, this is the burden of his soul of the author, and so long as he does not miss the target totally in this commentary, then this author will not have worked for naught. He hopes to make some small contribution to recognizing the full unity of the spirit which reverberates through the Holy Writ of God's word. Thereby, we may realize that this spirit is not the inheritance of days of yore, now obsolescent; rather, it lives with us in the present, and in it is the future hope of all human aspirations.

According to these words, the main aim of R. Hirsch is to draw from the Torah the worldview of Jewish life. For R. Hirsch, the aim of understanding the *peshat* is to comprehend the Jewish worldview that the Torah comes to teach. That is how the verses shape the spiritual world of each and every person. This aim stands at the center of R. Hirsch's commentary.

D. Educational Topics

R. Hirsch, educator of the generation, expresses his view on many educational topics, and he explains the Torah in terms of the needs of the generation. In this framework, we will address only a minimal number of topics:

Marriage

In the verse which describes Yitzchak's marriage to Rivka, "And Yitzchak brought her to the tent of Sara his mother, and he took Rivka, and she became his wife, and he loved her…" (*Bereishit* 24:67), R. Hirsch points out that the order of the actions in the verse seems unusual — first, "And he took," then "And he loved her":

> The more she was his wife, the more his love grew! The marriage of the first Jewish son is exemplary, and this is how the marriage was established. Most Jewish marriages are based not on lust, but on thejudgment of reason…
>
> One need only peruse the novelistic descriptions taken from life in order to immediately establish how great the gap is between "love" before marriage and the same afterwards…
>
> Not so is the Jewish marriage… for there the wedding is not the apex of blooming, but the taking root of love.

Education

The Torah describes the maturation of Yaakov and Esav in the following way: "And the youths grew up, and Esav was a man who knew

hunting, a man of the field, and Yaakov was a simple man, dwelling in tents" (*Bereishit* 25:27). R. Hirsch tries to answer the question of how the son of Yitzchak and Rivka became the evil Esav. According to R. Hirsch, the main cause was the poor education which Yitzchak and Rivka gave to Esav:

> As for the deep opposition between Avraham's grandchildren, its essential source was not only in their personal qualities but also in their poor education. As long as they were small, they did not pay attention to their hidden inclinations. One Torah and one education were given to both of them, and they forgot a great principle of education: "Educate a youth according to his way" (*Mishlei*22:6). We must direct the disciple in terms of the particular way which is most appropriate for him in the future, which accommodates the latent tendencies of the depth of his soul…
>
> The great Jewish purpose is one and singular in its essence, but the ways of its realization are many and variegated…

R. Hirsch goes on to investigate the psychological explanation of Yitzchak's love for Esav and Rivka's love for Yaakov (*ibid*. v. 28):

> Bearing in mind the power of attraction between opposites, we may understand easily Yitzchak's love for Esav and Rivka's love for Yaakov. Yitzchak, who was "a perfect offering," kept quite distant from the bustle of the world, and he preferred the pleasant quiet of Be'erLa-chai Ro'i in the place of teeming human society. It may be that he loved the characteristics of Esav, who was fearless and proud of his actions, seeing him as capable of leading the house with surpassing skill. On the other hand, Rivka saw Yaakov as the perfect character, very distant from all the concepts of her father's house.

E. R. Hirsch in the Age of Enlightenment

As we said above, R. Hirsch sees in a positive light the era of the Enlightenment and the Emancipation, viewing it as an opportunity to perfect the world in the divine image. Concerning the social ideas which were developed in the new era, R. Hirsch claims that they are not new at all; the Torah originated them. An example of this is human equality: R. Hirsch sees the Emancipation as the phenomenon which could influence the Jews in a positive way, and it expresses the ideas which are already found in the Torah. [8] In his commentary, we can find a number of examples of the idea of human equality and freedom. Thus, for example, in his commentary on one verse in the passage of the Binding of Yitzchak, "And the two of them went together" (*Bereishit* 22:19), R. Hirsch writes:

> In other human societies, they would have done this differently. The experience was one of such elevation and closeness to God, exaltation of a sort beyond any terrestrial border. People such as Avraham and Yitzchak would have been wholly overcome by their own importance and by the matter of the divine. They would no longer have any

> connection to any issue of regular, terrestrial life or regular, terrestrial people…
>
> However, Avraham and Yitzchak differed essentially from this, displaying the spirit of a wondrous nature transmitted through the generations. After they experience the utmost of any human being to walk the earth… there is no great degree of respect they accord themselves more than others. In the eyes of a son of Avraham, all people are equal in their occupation; he does not make any distinction between himself and the woodcutters or servants of a low status…

Another example of the spirit of the Emancipation is R. Hirsch's defense of those commandments which apparently oppose the principle of sexual equality. For example, this is what he writes in his commentary to *Bereishit* 23:19:

> Also, marrying a woman is learnt from the purchase of Efron's field. [9]The Jew acquires his wife — this is what a thoughtless time accuses us of. Verily and truly, he acquires his wife, but on the other hand, she remains his. She is honored as his greatest possession upon this earth…

In the passage of the Hebrew slave, R. Hirsch claims that this passage does not deny human freedom; rather, it comes to help the sinner. This is what he writes in his explanation of *Shemot* 21:6:

> The Torah commands us to bring the sinner into the family…
>
> Moreover, the Torah ordains a number of sets of guidelines to ensure that the status of the slave in the same family will be maintained. Thus, the ethical consciousness in the soul of the sinner will not be depressed, so that despite his low status, he will still feel that honor is accorded him and that they treat him with a custom of brotherhood…
>
> How much inconvenience we subject the master to, in order to maintain the family ties of the servant, so that his family will not be abandoned to sorrow and sighing as a result of his sin…

R. Hirsch continues to explain why the punishment of the Hebrew slave is more enlightened and ethical than the accepted punishment of incarceration:

> The punishment of imprisonment — with its attendant loss of hope andcorruption of morals, residing behind the walls of the prison, with all thesorrow and sighing it brings theprisoner's wife and children — **it has no place in God's Torah**.

Another example of R. Hirsch's relationship to contemporary issues is his opposition to Reform Jews.[10] In *Bereishit*18:19, the verse describes the destiny of Avraham's descendants: "to keep the way of God, to do

righteousness and justice." R. Hirsch relates to the fact that the Torah first mentions, "to keep the way of God," and only afterwards, "to do righteousness and justice":

> Why does "to keep the way of God" appear first and "to do righteousness and justice" afterwards?
>
> Walking with God in the way of the ethical purity; this is the condition and root of relations of justice and rectitude with all creatures. Only a generation conceived, born and raised in the bosom of laws, illuminated and enlightened by these laws — only a generation such as this is prepared "to do righteousness and justice." The commandments between man and God are a precondition, the root for all commandments between man and fellow man.

There is no doubt that this contention is directed against the Reform movement, who claim that there is no need to fulfill ritual commandments between man and God.

In this context, it is worthwhile to note R. Hirsch's attitude towards the reasoning of the commandments. The Reform movement, with its willingness to blur and erase the distinctions between Jews and Christians, sought to annul the fulfillment of active commandments,[11]mainly those which make the nation of Israel unique. One of the claims of the Reform movement was that the commandments of the Torah were given in a certain setting, at a certain time, and for this reason they are not relevant to the modern era. As part of R. Hirsch's war against these views, he claims that the meaning of the *mitzvot* is not only practical; they have a basis in philosophy as well. He dedicates a complete work to the investigation of symbols in general, and he explains the commandments in particular as symbols, and so he shows how the commandments are appropriate also for his era.

A good example of this may be seen in his commentary to *Vayikra* 16:4, "And he will wash in water his flesh," in which R. Hirsch deals with the symbolic significance of the High Priest washing his hands and feet of the on Yom Kippur after every change of clothing:

> We have derived from this that not only the change of wardrobe from holy to holy, but even the change of wardrobe from holy to mundane, requires washing hands and feet…
>
> I would say that even taking off holy garb in order to put on mundane, everyday clothing is part of the service. It turns out that this is the idea, completing the order of this day: the significance of all of the symbolic actions in the Temple lies in the actual life outside the Temple, for the life of the mundane actualizes the spirit, which is drawn from the life in the Temple. **Indeed, the significance of the aspirations in the holy garb lies in the acts done in secular dress.**

It is difficult not to see this as an application of the philosophy of "*Torah im derekh eretz.*" R. Hirsch endorses the intellect and the new culture, and in all of these, there may be an expression of serving the Creator. However, the secular life must emerge from a vector of holiness: "for the life of the mundane actualizes the spirit, which is drawn from the life in the Temple."

F. Etymology

R. Hirsch deals at length with his research into the fundamentals of the Hebrew language. In his view, the root of the word teaches us the philosophical meaning of the word. R. Mordechai Breuer[12] beautifully expresses the theory of the importance of language in R. Hirsch's philosophy:

> Our master determined as a principal and fundamental idea that this language carries in its heart the announcement of the creator to man and to Israel, not only through its content, but through its form. The language of Scripture is the objective language in which the Creator expressed through the forms of language the meaning of the words, as came out in his thought and as the person wanted to relate to them.

R. Hirsch used the idea of phonetic relationships to develop etymological distinctions, as according to him all letters which have the same source[13] are interchangeable. Thus, for example, there is a connection between the similar roots*nun-samekh-ayin*, *nun-sin-alef*, *nun-samekh-heh* and *nun-samekh-chet*; they all indicate a certain movement:

> *Nun-sin-alef,* to lift and take an item from its place;
> *Nun-samekh-heh*, to ascend to a higher level… for this is the essence of the trial;
>
> *Nun-samekh-ayin*, to leave a place consciously and willingly;
>
> *Nun-samekh-chet,* to uproot with the power and strength of the hand. (*Bereishit* 11:2)

Another example may be found in his commentary on *Bereishit* 42:3, on the verse, "Lest a disaster befall him." *Kuf-reish-alef* is close to *kuf-reish-heh*, *kuf-reish-ayin* and *kuf-reish-chet*, and apparently there is no connection between these roots. However, R. Hirsch maintains, as a matter of fact, that these are different manifestations of one basic idea:

> *Kuf-reish-alef*, to bring a person to willingly leave the direction of his way;
>
> *Kuf-reish-ayin*, [to tear] — tearing moves the parts of the material in opposite directions;
>
> *Kuf-reish-chet*, [to make bald] — gathering the parts of the body in a direction that is opposed to the power of adhesion;

> *Kuf-reish-heh* — the events which influence a person or an item, changing the natural direction which one has willingly chosen and turning in another direction, are called circumstance.

This etymological approach is undoubtedly speculative, and for the most part it is not accepted nowadays in linguistic research. Nevertheless, this methodology is undeniably creative, and like all of his other comments on the Torah, via this approach, R. Hirsch adds spirit to the words of the Torah. Concerning the commentary of R. Hirsch, R. Breuer makes the following declaration:

> Every meaning that a man from Israel finds in the Torah is the "true" meaning of the Torah, as it speaks to him, emerging from the unique letter he has in the Torah.
> Know that this is the true, because it is accepted to say this today even about secular literature: the meaning of every creation is not dependent on the writer's intent. Rather, it is given over to the view of the reader; and every meaning that the reader finds in his creation is the "true" meaning.
>
> All the more so, we may say this about God's Torah, the explanation of which is not "in the heavens;" instead, it is given over to the person who reads and studies. Every comment which is "pleasing" in the eyes of the student, which satisfies his mind, serves to steer him towards the truth of the Torah, as it shines for him from his unique letter in the Torah.
>
> Because of this, the commentaries of R. S.R. Hirsch can be neither proven nor disproven; it is impossible to say that they are "correct" or "incorrect". It is possible only to say that they are "pleasing"; **for they express the meaning of the Torah which complements the root of the soul of the reader.**("*Peirush Rabbi Shimshon Refael Hirsch La-Torah*,"*Machanayim* 4B, 5753)

[1] According to their view, the rest of *Tanakh* came together in a similar way: the books of *Nevi'im*, for example, were not prophetically stated from God's mouth; rather, they were written by later authors, and they were edited later still.
[2] Apparently, this struggle failed, because when R. Hirsch left in 1841 (to the city of Emden), the community of Oldenburg appointed a Reform rabbi as his replacement.
[3] This led Shadal to criticize him, in a letter that he wrote to him after R. Hirsch sent him a copy of the work. Shadal questioned R. Hirsch's motivations, wondering, "Has he turned into Geiger?" and condemning his use of German "rather than the language of Judah and Jerusalem."
[4] What is known as the Charedi community today, with all of its various characteristics, did not yet exist at this time, and it certainly did not use the term, and therefore this appellation is certainly anachronistic. Nevertheless, in retrospect, we may identify the ideological characteristics of opposition to Reform, which is similar, at least partially, to the Charedi community of today, and therefore we have used the term.
[5] With Hitler's rise to power and the closing of many synagogues and *yeshivot* throughout Germany, R. Joseph Breuer, grandson of R. S.R. Hirsch and uncle of R. Mordechai Breuer, moved to the United States, and there he founded Khal Adath Jeshurun (KAJ), a

congregation in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. This became a huge community, and similar congregations were founded throughout the United States.
In the last few years, Machon Moreshes Ashkenaz, the Institute for German Jewish Heritage, has spearheaded the founding of a number of congregations in Israel following the path of R. Hirsch in Frankfurt am Main. One of the most prominent is K'hal Adas Yeshurun — Jerusalem (KAYJ), in the capital's Ramot neighborhood. Similar congregations have been established in Bnei Brak, Beitar, and Kiryat Sefer.
[6] The distinction between Orthodoxy and Neo-Orthodoxy was expressed in a number of aspects. First of all, while Orthodoxy sought to maintain the closed nature of the community and saw the Emancipation as a destructive force for Judaism, Neo-Orthodoxy tried to take advantage of modernity because of the opportunities it afforded for the advancement of Jewish life and the Jewish religion. Second, Neo-Orthodoxy believed that European Jewry could make the Jewish faith flourish, while Orthodoxy rejected this idea. Similarly, Neo-Orthodoxy stressed the importance of the texts, customs, and aesthetics of the synagogue, while Orthodoxy did not.
[7] In 1992, his great-grandson, R. Mordechai Breuer, translated this is into Hebrew.
[8] Thus, for example, he writes in Letter #16 of*Nineteen Letters*:
I laud the principle of equal rights, for an onerous load was pressing excessively upon the Nation of Israel, squeezing it out of all walks of and curtailing its opportunities to develop its spiritual possessions. This would minimize the free development of its greater qualities…
Now, I see in this breaking dawn the burgeoning and resurgence of the human race — a corridor in order enter in the great hall of recognizing that God is the Lord of all… for all people are His sons…
[9] *Kiddushin* 3a.
[10] It is worth noting that the Reform Movement in Germany was more dominant than in other countries. The essential reason was that in Germany, the struggle to keep and maintain the Emancipation was particularly difficult, and it culminated in an official way only about a century after the French Revolution, in the year 1869. Throughout R. Hirsch's life, the question of Emancipation in Germany was in some doubt, and it still was necessary to persuade the general community that the Jews were "fit" to be considered German citizens with equal rights. On the basis of this fact, we may understand the great need felt in the Jewish street in the days of R. Hirsch to be "Germans for all purposes" and to try to blur the religious distinctions between each Jew and his German neighbor.
[11] Christianity, of course, annulled the fulfillment of practical commandments at its inception.
[12] This may be found in the introduction to his translation of R. Hirsch's commentary on the Book of *Bereishit*.
[13] This refers to glottal, labial, or dental consonants and the like.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

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This week's shiurim are dedicated by Matt Tambor
in memory of Abraham Tambor z"l

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Lecture #26:
Radatz Hoffmann

A. Biography

R. David Tzvi Hoffmann (1843-1921), whom we will refer to as Radatz, was born and educated in the Hungarian city of Verbó(modern-day Vrbové, Slovakia). Afterwards, he studied in the yeshiva of Maharam Schick,[1]near the city of Bratislava, until the year 1865.

From there, Radatz turned to academic studies at the University of Vienna and the University of Berlin, studying philosophy, history, and Oriental languages, ultimately receiving his doctorate in 1871 from the University of Tübingen. In the same year, he accepted a teaching position in Höchberg, allowing him to form connections with the leaders of Orthodox Judaism in 19th-century Germany. A short time afterwards, he started teaching in R. S. R. Hirsch's *Realschule* in Frankfurt am Main, an experience which undoubtedly had a great influence upon Radatz.[2]

In 1873, with the founding of the Rabbinical Seminary of Berlin by R. Azriel Hildesheimer, Radatz joined the faculty, teaching there for close to three decades. Upon R. Hildesheimer's death in 1899, Radatz became the rector of the Rabbinical Seminary, and he continued his educational work until shortly before his death. His commentaries to the Torah are based on the lectures that he gave over many years in the seminary.

Although he grew up in a traditional Hungarian community (studying under a disciple of the Chatam Sofer, originator of the phrase, "What is new is forbidden by the Torah"!), Radatz was influenced by the openness and the ways of critical teaching and study then in vogue in Germany. Radatz was part of the Judaic Studies (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*[3]) movement, for which R. Hirsch criticized him. Taking the view of scientific criticism which started to develop as part of the Haskalah, Radatz applied it to his study of the Oral Torah and halakhic Midrash, an area of his expertise and a discipline to which he contributed significantly.[4] Another area of his expertise was, of course, biblical exegesis.

B. Background

As we have mentioned, Radatz's commentaries on the Torah began as a series of lectures which he gave in the Rabbinical Seminary of Berlin. Afterwards, a number of lectures were collected and edited into a book of commentary on the Torah. The commentaries were written in German and were later translated into Hebrew.

Originally, commentaries on *Bereishit*,*Vayikra*, and *Devarim* were published; recently, his commentary on *Shemot* was published, based on his lectures, by Mosad Harav Kook. The commentaries on *Vayikra* and *Devarim*were written by Radatz himself, while the commentaries on *Bereishit* and *Shemot* were written by his students, based on the manuscripts of his lectures.

Radatz did not write his commentaries in a vacuum. He explains his motivations for writing his commentary in a clear way in his introduction to *Vayikra*: [5]

> In this commentary, we will grab with both hands the Masoretic version. We will do our utmost to repel the criticism based on texts opposed to the Masoretic grade, seeking to breaks down its walls…

> We will throw off the yoke of high criticism,[6] which appoints itself the lofty judge of our *Tanakh*. We will go in the light of the *mesora*, for we believe in its divinity. According to it and through it we will try to explain the words of the verses. Nevertheless, we will pay attention to explanations which have a point of view different from ours, and we will give them the benefit of the doubt as much as is possible.

So that we may understand these words, we will expand a bit on the topic of biblical criticism in Germany in the 19th century.[7] The accepted view of biblical criticism in the 19thcentury was that of the German critic Julius Wellhausen. According to his view, which was based on the documentary hypothesis which predated his activity, the Torah was based on different documents from different times, composed by different people, so that wide swaths of the first four books of the Torah were actually composed later than *Devarim*(composed, according to his view, during the reign of Yoshiyahu[8]), and they were completed after the Babylonian Exile. [9] Wellhausen's view was accepted among the Christians and Maskilim.

This view posed a two-fold challenge to tradition: first of all, it conflicted with basic belief in "Torah from heaven" — that is, the divine origin of the Torah. In addition, traditional faith was also challenged on account of its faithful adherence to the halakhic conventions of the Sages based on their exegesis of the verses through the Oral Torah; alternative interpretations of the halakhic sections of the Torah undermined this idea. This challenge also emerged from the battles that Orthodoxy waged against the Haskalah and the Reform movement, and it threatened to produce a practical result of abandoning Orthodox Halakha. Alongside this phenomenon, there were anti-Semitic (or anti-rabbinical) attacks launched directly against the alleged illogic of rabbinical Halakha.

As we saw in the previous lesson, the Jewish community in Germany willing exposed itself to these conceptions because of the inclination to assimilate in German society. R. S.R. Hirsch wrote in his commentary against these conceptions in his didactic way. R. S.R. Hirsch stressed[10] the involvement of Moshe Rabbeinu in writing the Torah, as well as the antiquity of Halakha and the authority of the*mesora*. This was an emotional appeal; R. Hirsch turned to the "heart" of the nation, and in this lies the greatness of his commentary.

Radatz took a different tack, turning to the intellect and using scientific proofs. Radatz was aware of all the critical theories and intimately acquainted with the critical literature, and he competed directly with its claims, using the scientific tools he knew well — Oriental languages, linguistics, and history. Together with this, he was a sage, an authority in the halakhic sphere. Using his expertise and skills, he succeeded both in protecting the conceptions of the Torah's antiquity and perfecting an approach respected by Jews who had been captured by the enchantment of criticism, anchoring the Oral Torah in the Written Torah.

Thus, the target audience of the commentary was those intellectual Jews who knew the claims of the bible critics, but as we have seen, Radatz's commentary retains great value even outside of the polemical context.

C. Basic Assumptions

In his introduction to his commentary on *Vayikra* (p. 1) and in other places, Radatz makes clear his basic assumptions, which prevent him from reaching any conclusion which conflicts with one of the Thirteen Principles. These assumptions are for him prior principles; nevertheless, he tries not to rely on them in the interpretation. This is what he writes:

> I willingly admit that because of my principles of faith, I have not been able to reach a conclusion that the Torah was not written by the hands of Moshe Rabbeinu or, all the more so, that it was written after Moshe's time. In order not to leave a place for doubts of that issue, I have explained and clarified with prior notes the principle which has served me as the basis for my explanation in this respect. However, with the aspiration to rely on these "dogmatic principles" from a scientific aspect, I have tried constantly to rely on reasons which may be seen as justified even by those who have a worldview different from mine.

As we have said above, one of the important aims of Radatz was to prove the unity of the Torah — that it was all given by God — as well as its antiquity — that it was written by Moshe. In the continuation of our words, we will see how Radatz competes with a number of problems that proponents of biblical criticism have raised concerning the concepts of the unity and antiquity of *Tanakh*.

D. Radatz's Relationship to Stylistic Variations in the Torah

The Influence of Content on Style

One of the claims of the biblical critics is that stylistic alterations attest to different sources. The fact that the Torah uses at times certain words or a certain style and sometimes uses others demonstrates that every one of the variations is a remainder of a "document" or different source. The answer of Radatz to this claim is that God writes in different styles, based on the content of the section. This is what he writes about the differences between *Bereishit* 1 and *Bereishit* 2-3:

> We must still question whether the variation in language and in the forms of expression in the two descriptions justifies the assumption that there are two authors for these chapters, one for the first chapter, and one for the two chapters afterwards. Here we should note first of all, that even if the contention is correct and it is possible to find different styles in the Torah, this still does not prove that we should relate these styles to different authors…

> Consider this: would a father write to his son in a standard missive about his welfare with the same language which he will use when he comes to lecture him about significant, sublime truths or when he comes to tell him about new scientific discoveries?(*Bereishit*, p. 91)

> In a more succinct formulation, he writes:
> There is naught but the content which determines the style. (*Bereishit* 3:22-24)

In other words, Radatz claims that the Torah uses different styles in keeping with the content of the passage.[11] Now, we shall see how Radatz applies this principle to a number of problems.

God's Names at Creation

One of the classic examples brought by the biblical critics as a basis for the claim that the *Tanakh* is composed of different sources is the multiplicity of names of God, e.g. *Hashem*(the Tetragrammaton) and *Elokim*. (They refer to these authors as J and E respectively.) The most famous example is the dual descriptions of creation in *Bereishit*, in chapter 1 and chapters 2-3.

We will not go into the details in this confined framework, but we will note the problematic nature of these chapters briefly. In the first chapter of *Bereishit*, we find a description of the creation of the universe and its relationship to God. For example, we have "In the beginning God created" (1:1); "and the spirit of God" (1:2); et cetera. Throughout the chapter, we have only the name "*Elokim*," but beginning with 2:4, we find "*Hashem Elokim.*"

Moreover, the details of creation differ in the two accounts.[12] Addressing this phenomenon, Radatz explains that God's different names express different relationships of God to creation, not different authors:

> Now in the first chapter, God is described in the glory of His sublime kingship, when, by His word, chaos and nothingness are banished, while days and continents, flora and fauna, sun and moon and stars are all created, culminating with man, made in His image…
>
> Should we expect to that same style and those same forms of expression in the two following chapters, consisting as they do of a description of Him, Blessed be He, as a merciful father who creates the human being with unique love, worrying about him and nurturing him and dealing with his education? True, He chastises him for his sin, but at the same time, does He not direct him to the school of hard work and toil, by which he will continue to be educated?(*Bereishit*, p. 91)

In other words, the first chapter of*Bereishit* describes a relationship in which God is distant from creation and man, a relationship which is expressed by the harsh name *Elokim*,[13] while the second and third chapters describe a close relationship of God with creation and man, a relationship which is expressed by the tender name *Hashem*.[14]

God's Names at the Binding of Yitzchak

An additional example in which Radatz applies this principle, the changing content dictating a different name of God, may be found in his commentary on the Binding of Yitzchak (*Bereishit* 22).

In the first section of this passage (up to v. 9), we find *Elokim*, while in the second part (v. 11 ff.), *Hashem* appears alone. According to the proponents of biblical criticism, the explanation of the fact is that the narrative of the Binding is composed of two documents.

Radatz, in his commentary on the Binding, notes the change in God's names, but he argues that this reflects a change in Avraham's consciousness. When God asks Avraham to offer his son, this is an act of*Elokim*, the God who commands and demands uncompromising obedience from His servants. However, when a substitute for his son is found, Avraham understands that God is actually *Hashem*, Who asks His worshippers to bring offers not as an expression of service and obedience, but to make man worthy. As a result of man's dedication to his Creator, God will make His presence rest upon humanity.[15]

Yaakov/ Yisrael

Similar to their distinction between the names of God, bible critics believe that the use of the names Yaakov and Yisrael for our third Patriarch reflect different authors.

Radatz explains that the different names reflects a difference in the perspective of the narrative. The name Yisrael appears when we are talking about something having significance for the history of the nation as a whole, while the name Yaakov relates to more personal and intimate issues.[16]

E. Different Contexts

The Sin of the Spies

Radatz relates, of course, to redundancies and contradictions in the content of the Torah as well. We will bring two examples of these.

As is known, the Sin of the Spies as described by Moshe in the Plains of Moav (*Devarim* 1:22-46) differs from the description in *Parashat Shelach* (*Bamidbar* 13-14). The biblical exegetes[17] already address this contradiction, but Radatz relates to this problem from a different direction. In his explanation of*Devarim* 1:22, Radatz determines and applies a consistent methodology which addresses the narrative variations in *Devarim* in a general way:

> Moshe Rabbeinu does not mention all of these details in the Book of *Devarim*, because of the simple reason that they are not applicable to his words of rebuke…

> In light of this, it is certainly understandable that there a number of facts that the historian will not mention; on the other hand, one who gives a speech will mention this specifically, since they add to his speech the power of persuasion…
>
> In other words, the contradictions between *Devarim* and other books do not reflect different authors, but different themes.

Slaughtering Outside the *Mishkan*

We will see here an additional and final example of Radatz's method of resolving a contradiction, using his knowledge of Halakha and giving an elegant solution to one of the difficult problems raised by biblical critics. *Vayikra* forbids any slaughtering (mundane or holy) outside the *Mishkan*:

> If anyone of the house of Israel kills an ox or a lamb or a goat in the camp, or kills it outside the camp, and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it as a gift to God in front of the *Mishkan* of God, bloodguilt shall be imputed to that man. He has shed blood, and that man shall be cut off from among his people. Thus the people of Israel may bring their sacrifices that they sacrifice in the open field, that they may bring them to God, to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and sacrifice them as sacrifices of peace offerings to God…
>
> So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to the hircine, after whom they stray. This shall be a statute forever for them throughout their generations.*(Vayikra* 17:3-7)

However, we find in *Devarim*:

> Rather, you shall seek the place that Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put His name and make His habitation there. There you shall go, and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices…
>
> You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes, for you have not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance that Lord your God is giving you. *(Devarim* 12:5-9)

From these verses, it would appear that already in the desert, the Israelites were allowed to bring offerings outside of the*Mishkan*. When the Israelites inherit the land, they are told, it will be allowed to offer only in one place (vv. 9-11), but in the desert it is allowed to offer in any place, "according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eye" (v. 8).[18]

A number of resolutions are cited by the exegetes for this contradiction. We will bring here the Rashbam's answer:

> In every place where we camp in the desert, we bring in the *Mishkan*, which is moved from one place to another. (Rashbam, *Devarim* 12:9, s.v. "*Ish*")

This means that in the desert, the Israelites brought offerings in the *Mishkan* alone (as commanded in *Vayikra*). However, the *Mishkan*was portable; therefore, despite the fact that offering was allowed only upon its premises, in practice this was done in dozens of places in the wilderness, each time matching the current location of the *Mishkan*. The Book of *Devarim*addresses the situation when the Israelites will reach the land; at that point, the place of permitted offerings will be stationary. At that point, offerings may be brought there exclusively.[19] The problem with this explanation is that the verse (9) says that in the desert, the situation is one of "everyone doing whatever is right in his own eye," and this implies that one offers it in any place where he wants, not only upon the premises of the*Mishkan*.

Now, we will see the commentary of Radatz (*Devarim* 12:8) and his solution:

> It appears to us that Scripture may be explained according to its simple meaning, based on the following assumption:
>
> We have indeed learnt in the end of*Zevachim* (14:5) that only when they came to Gilgal were the private altars allowed, but the Rambam in *Peirush Ha-Mishna* ad loc. explains that the basis of this allowance is because the previous basis for the reason of the prohibition had been rendered null and void.
>
> In *Vayikra* 17, it is stated only that it is forbidden to offer inside or outside the camp, "So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to the hircine, after whom they stray" (v. 7); in their mistaken view, these goat-demons were found in the desert.
>
> However, once Israel entered a settled land and the concern of offering to the hircine is no longer significant, they were no longer bound by the prohibition of slaughtering outside.[20]
>
> According to this, it is self-evident that with the conquest of Transjordan, the prohibition stated in *Vayikra* 17 would be null and void…

In other words, when the Israelites were in the desert, it was allowed to bring in the*Mishkan* only, due to the concern that the Israelites would offer to these goat-demons whom they believed to be in the desert, as is stated explicitly in verses 5-7 of chapter 17: "Thus the people of Israel may bring

their sacrifices that they sacrifice in the open field, that they may bring them to Lord, to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting… So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to the hircine, after whom they stray." However, when the Israelites conquered the East Bank of the Jordan and entered the land, they abandoned the desert, the place in which, in their view, the goat-demons were found, and therefore there was no longer a danger of the Israelites sacrificing to them. The prohibition of bringing outside the *Mishkan* was therefore annulled.

Thus, at the time that *Vayikra*, which is stated in the desert, is taught, it is forbidden to bring outside the *Mishkan*, but at the time that*Devarim* is stated, on the East Bank, it is permitted to bring offerings outside of the*Mishkan*. Radatz, with great originality, uses a halakhic principle (private altars, i.e., offering outside of the *Mishkan*, being prohibited and permitted at different times) and he "stretches" it[21] a bit in order to solve a critical problem of the *peshat* of the text.

F. Proving the Torah's Antiquity

Aside from the question of the authorship of the Torah, biblical critics also challenged the Torah's antiquity, claiming that parts of the Torah were written during the First Temple Era and other parts during Second Temple Era. In a number of places, Radatz brings proofs to the fact that the Torah was written and given over to the generation that left Egypt; in his view, the language of the Torah testifies to this. We will bring a number of examples:

1. In *Bereishit* 23:2, the verse states, "And Sara died in Kiryat Arba, which is Chevron, in the land of Canaan, and Avraham came to mourn Sara and to cry for her." There, Radatz notes:

"In the land of Canaan" — this addition proves… that our chapter was written in particular on behalf of the Israelites in the desert. In front of them, he had to come back and stress that Chevron, the place of the burial of the Patriarchs, sits in the land of Canaan, in the land that they must conquer.

2. In *Devarim* 17:16, the Torah says concerning the king, "Only he may not increase horses for him, so that he will not return the people to Egypt…" There, Radatz writes:

They justifiably point this out, for a later legislator would not use this justification for the prohibition of increasing horses. The concern lest the king return the nation to Egypt was one which was relevant only in the days of Moshe and a short time afterwards…[22]

3. In the commentary to *Bereishit* (p. 205), Radatz writes:

We may ask: how can it be that the Torah does not even allude to the reasons that Avraham is chosen by God? Instead, it immediately

charges into the sequence of events, as God promises Avraham a great reputation and blessing…
We may answer… that the reputation and greatness of Avraham Avinu would have been exceedingly well-known to the generation which received the Torah. Thus, there would have been no need to acquaint them with the descriptions of the days of his youth…

G. Juxtaposition, Structure and Meaning

One of the prominent and significant characteristics of Radatz's commentary is determining the sequence and structure of the Pentateuch, dividing the topics into narrative units and splitting the units into subunits. This classification, without a doubt, helps the student to grasp the meaning of the content.

In this way, Radatz adopts the accepted scientific view of dissecting narrative creations; similarly, he adopts the method of biblical critics for identifying different sources - a precise reading of the Torah while paying attention to expressions of language, structure, order, headings, and the like. The view of biblical teaching accepted today was recognizably influenced by his methodology. Specifically, one may take note of the *Da'at Mikra* project, in which the units are defined and demarcated clearly.

We will show how Radatz uses these techniques to frame the topics in *Devarim* 19-21. In these chapters, the following laws appear according to the order specified below:

1. Cities of refuge and manslaughter (19:1-10)
2. Murder (19:11-13)
3. Moving the boundary marker (19:14)
4. Witnesses and perjury (19:15-21)
5. War (20)
6. Unsolved killing (21:1-9)

What connects these topics? Radatz writes at the beginning of the unit:

After the commandments of national leadership — judges, king, priests and prophets — the verse continues with a number of commandments binding upon the leadership, delineating what the most important ones for the existence of the country are. In other words, how will the people who are under the threat of death protect their lives? How may one prevent the spilling of innocent blood?

When we look at the previously mentioned topics, it is immediately prominent to the eye that the prohibition of moving the boundary marker does not seem to fit with the group of commandments binding on the leadership or the commandments which prevent bloodshed. Radatz explains the relevance of the prohibition; using his explanation, we learn the severity of the prohibition of moving the boundary marker, and we understand how it relates to theft or robbery, which the Torah has already discussed previously:

> Just as bloodshed desecrates the sanctity of the land, so the same is true of moving the boundary marker…
>
> This sin is more serious than the prohibition of "You shall not steal;" in fact, it is close to "You shall not murder." Thus, we have found that the inheritance of the Patriarchs was dear to every man of Israel like his life, and he did not want to sell it.
>
> This is the continuation of the verses:[23]an accidental killer is sent into to exile because this expiates his sin, but it is forbidden to steal the territory and birthright of any other person in Israel, because this defiles the holiness of the land as much as bloodshed.(*Devarim*, p. 376)

H. The Superiority of the Land of Israel

I will conclude this lesson with Radatz's fine words about the superiority of the land of Israel:

> The clime of the Holy Land constantly reminds the inhabitants of the presence of the Creator and His Providence, and it protects them for corruption of traits. For in this land, blessing and curse are so close to each other, without any boundary, until the words of the Torah are, "Behold, I put before you today, blessing and curse." This dictum always hovers before the eyes of each and every one. The nature, climate and territory of the Holy Land are most suitable to accept the flow of blessing like the bitter curse.
>
> When God's eyes are in it, this land is a paradise, but when He withholds his blessing from it or stretches out his hand to punish it, there will be famine, illness, and plagues to make it desolate. Moreover, the wealth of the land and its pleasant geographic situation draw after them often foreign conquerors who were ready to serve as the staff of His Blessed anger, should the people every stray from His path. This indicates that the land is capable, in all of its aspects, to nurture the religion of the Unique One and to direct one towards it and to educate its residents towards a sanctified way of life.(*Bereishit* 12:7)

According to these words, the superiority of Israel is not only in its blessings, but in its curses as well; both blessings and curses are a spiritual-educational tool.

One may apply this approach also to biblical criticism. This phenomenon brought about religious destruction among many Jews, but one must recognize that thanks to the development of the discipline of biblical criticism, the great minds of Israel, led by Radatz, managed to see the verses in a new light, expounding them and investigating them innovatively. Specifically, it was biblical criticism which brought new impetus and new methodsto the study of the Torah, which continue to influence and nurture us until this very day.

[1] R. Moshe Schick was one of the great rabbis of 19th-century Hungary. He was one of the Chatam Sofer's most prominent disciples.
[2] In fact, R. S.R. Hirsch is quoted by Radatz dozens of times.
[3] This movement began in the 19th century, influenced by the Haskala. It began with a group of Jewish critics, led by Leopold Zunz, Abraham Geiger, Heinrich Hirsch Graetz, et al. Members of this movement claimed that the historical analysis of Jewish culture, which they saw as part of human culture, would help Jews to become acquainted with their past, define the characteristics of Judaism in the modern era, and investigate their identity. Beyond this, the critical analysis and the innovative definition of the religion would help in reducing anti-Semitism and restoring the pride of Judaism, since the Christian environment would recognize Judaism and Jews "scientifically," consequently raising their esteem. Consequently, they believed, the movement would contribute to advancing the Emancipation in Germany and to the deepening of the Jews' integration within their environment.
[4] In fact, Radatz discovered the distinction between R. Yishmael's academy and R. Akiva's academy in the development of halakhic Midrash.
[5] Radatz starts his commentary to the Torah with his commentary on the Book of *Vayikra*. In his introduction that book, he explains why he commences his biblical commentary with the third book of the Pentateuch (p. 9):
In the eyes of the Jew, it has always been more important to know what he is obligated to do and to fulfill and what not to do; this is more important than the critical analysis of the creation of the universe and the subsequent generations of creation.
[6] Biblical criticism distinguishes between the terms "high criticism" and "low criticism." High criticism tries to identify the author of the text, the historical-cultural background of the text, its varying levels and its literary forms. Low criticism deals with the biblical text with the aim of restoring the original form of the text.
[7] We will expand here on what was said in the previous lesson.
[8] The claim was first mentioned by the researcher Wilhelm de Wette.
[9] Biblical criticism generally, as a branch of study, maintains that the Torah (indeed, all of *Tanakh*) was written first as different documents by different authors, at least some of which were written long after the events described in them, and afterwards they were edited repeatedly until they became the modern Scripture. This claim is accepted by all the biblical critics, but they argue over the question of which books were written first and which books were written afterwards, what the aims of different documents were, how the editing took place, etc. The view of Wellhausen, presented above, is one of the most prominent discussing this question.
[10] Thus, for example, R. Hirsch writes the following, commenting on *Shemot* 20:16, in which the nation turns to Moshe after the Convocation at Sinai with the request, "You speak with us":
With this statement, they declare that God spoke with them the way a person speaks with his friend. Their personal experience of this phenomenon was the main aim of God's making this event happen. The experience of the entire people made God's speaking to the people a real fact. In this, the truth of the "revelation" was proved, beyond any deceitful attempt to cast doubt, by which some attempt to turn the revelation of God to man into the revelation of God from within man, the revelation of God to Moshe into the revelation of God from within the heart of Moshe, and by this they would turn revelation into non-revelation. The matter of revelation is written clearly and truly on each and every passage of the words of this Torah: "And God spoke to Moshe, saying."
These words are directed against the biblical critics, but in his words, as pleasant as they are, there is no "scientific" proof of the Torah's antiquity.
[11] Radatz concedes that one may not always explain stylistic variances according to the content:
We do not claim that it we are capable of explaining each and every verse in the Scripture, why this name is used specifically or another. However, the truth of the matter is that this is not compelling at all, because it is sufficient if we will prove in a number of prominent places throughout a given narrative that the names*Elokim* and *Hashem* are used together

deliberately in order to demonstrate that, in any case, the difference of names is no proof of different authors, Heaven forbid. (*Bereishit*, p. 57)

In this context, see his instructive words (*loc. cit.*) concerning the names of God in the verse, "Those who come male and female from all flesh came when *Elokim* commanded him, and *Hashem* sealed on his behalf" (*Bereishit* 7:16). Additional examples are cited there.

[12] For example, in the first chapter, the grass is created on the third day before man created on the sixth day, while in the second chapter, it is written that before the creation of man, God had not yet caused the vegetation to sprout. There are additional distinctions, but we will not get into them here.

[13] Explaining "*Elokim*", Radatz writes:

This comes from the term "mighty one," a reference to strength… Thus, this describes God as all-powerful. The plural suffix shows that this name demonstrates the unification a number of powers, indicating that this One rules over all powers of nature and directs them in accordance with His will. Because of this, our Sages of blessed memory described "*Elokim*" as the Attribute of Justice, for indeed He is strong, omnipotent, ruling over nature. He is the One Who demarcates boundaries for all of His creations, preventing one from attacking the other, determining what is right for each one.*(Bereishit*, p. 55)

[14] As for the name "*Hashem*", Radatz writes:

This is the personal name of the Unique God. The accepted explanation of the verse "I will be what I will be" (*Shemot* 3:14), i.e., I am what I am, does not dovetail with the context in which this name appears. The concept of absolute existence will not plant the hope of redemption in the heart of the audience.

However, if we understand this name as referring to "the One Who accompanies man," then we may say that this name complements exactly what was said before this to Moshe from the mouth of God, "For I will be with you" (*ibid*. 12). *Hashem* is with man, and this is the Attribute of Mercy, the nexus of all the terms of love and kindness. Similar to "I will be what I will be," we find in another place, "And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy" (*Shemot* 33:19). In other words: I will be with whom I will be, in order to help him…

Thus, it comes out that the Tetragrammaton is a Jewish concept, the unique aspect of divinity, divinity which is not distant from the world but residing amongst its creatures.

[15] These are his words:

It appears that the motivation for using different holy names is this: it is God Who tests Avraham. Therefore, God, Blessed be He, does not appear as a merciful father Who assists man, but He appears like a powerful lord and commander Who demands unconditional obedience… and the command has been given. Avraham knows and recognizes *Elokim*, and therefore he is identified as being *Elokim*-fearing. He knows very well that he is only the creation of this God and a tool in His hand, and that there is no place for opposition to or rebellion against Him, for only obedience will bring one to happiness…

And as one so God-fearing, he executes His command, Blessed be He, without thinking about it, and he obeys Him as a soldier obeys his commander, with blind obedience. Therefore, he says, "*Elokim* will see to the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son." *Elokim* will choose the offering which He desires, and whatever He will choose of him, one is obligated to draw close to it without any rebellion…

Immediately afterward, the unanticipated salvation comes, and the ram is discovered to be an offering in place of the son given to Avraham anew. Then Avraham names the place using *Hashem*, "*Hashem* will see," when he is convinced that not to *Elokim* do we bring offerings, but to *Hashem*. We are not doing a service for the Blessed God by bringing Him offerings; rather, He commands us to bring offerings so that we may be educated and elevated, so that He may reside among us, in our midst, as a father among His children.

[16] These are his words:

> The use of the name Yisrael demonstrates that the event being related holds great significance in the history of the nation; indeed, this is the reason for the rejection of the tribe of Reuven and the promotion of the tribes of Yosef and Yehuda… (*Bereishit* 35:22)

It is not frivolously that the verse here and below v. 13 uses the name Yisrael, for indeed what is told here is of great significance for the history of the nation in its entirety, because as a result of this, the slavery of Israel in Egypt came about…

As opposed to this, we find the name Yaakov — "And Yaakov tore his garment" (v. 34) — for his act was his personal issue, and there were no ramifications for the descendants. (*Bereishit* 37:3)

[17] See, for example, Rashi and Ramban,*Bamidbar* 13:2.

[18] This contradiction stands at the heart of Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis. This view believes that the Book of *Devarim* (authored by D before the destruction of the First Temple) preceded the Book of *Vayikra*, because the author of *Vayikra*, P, writing, according to them, during the Second Temple Era, had the aim of centralizing the sacrificial service at one site. According to biblical critics, *Vayikra* expresses the religion that the priests gave to the people after the Babylonian exile. Its author had the ritual view, according to which the essential religious obligation is the sacrificial service in the Temple. Thus, *Vayikra*encompasses mainly the sacrificial rites and the specifics of the commandments.

[19] The final sentence does not appear in the Rashbam's commentary, but it is the conclusion of his words based on the verses in *Devarim* 12.

[20] Up to this point is a summary of the Rambam's words; from here on is Radatz's explanation.

[21] The problem with this approach, and Radatz alludes to it, is that the Mishna in *Zevachim* (14:4-8) describes the stages of prohibited and permitted private altars, but it does not mention a period of the private altars being allowed after the construction of the *Mishkan* and before entering the land:
Before the *Mishkan* was set up, the private altars were allowed…
Once the *Mishkan* was set up, the private altars were forbidden…
They came to Gilgal, the private altars were allowed…
They came to Shilo, the private altars were forbidden…
They came to Nov and Givon, the private altars were allowed…
They came to Jerusalem, and they did not have any further allowance…
From the great detail in this chapter, the clear implication is that the *mishna* is detailing every stage of the private altars being forbidden and allowed, and the era which Radatz speaks of does not appear there.

[22] This justification is relevant only for a generation about which there is a concern that it might return to Egypt. In the era of the First or Second Temple, no such concern would exist.

[23] In other words, this is the lesson to be learnt from the sequence of the topics within this unit.

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES

By Dr. Avigail Rock

Lecture #27:

Malbim

A. Biography

R. Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel Weisser (1809-1879) — hereinafter: Malbim — was one of the most prominent figures in Eastern European Jewry in the 19th century, both in the realms of biblical exegesis or rabbinical leadership. Malbim was born and educated in Volochysk in the Volhynia region of what is now western Ukraine. He married at the age of fourteen, but his marriage was unsuccessful, and he got divorced soon after.

Malbim left his city of birth and moved on to Warsaw, where he became known as the "*Illui* of Volhynia." From there he moved to ??czyca, Poland, where he married the daughter of the town's rabbi, R. Chayim Auerbach. At this time, Malbim wrote *Artzot Ha-Chayim*, his commentary on the *Orach Chayim* section of *Shulchan Arukh*, and upon its completion, he set out on a journey in order to receive the approbations of prominent rabbis for his book. After a multi-year journey, he became the rabbi of the town of Wrze?nia in the Pozna? district of Poland, and he lived in the city for seven years. In 1845, he became the rabbi of Kempen. [1]

In 1858, Malbim was invited to become the rabbi of the Jewish community in Bucharest, and in the year 1860, he was appointed as the chief rabbi of Romania. Malbim was accepted graciously, both by haredi Jews who saw him as a rabbinical figure of great renown and by Maskilim who saw him as a rabbinical figure endorsing a modern intellectual approach. However, this high position quickly became the source of many troubles; at a later point, it even endangered Malbim's life.

In the second half of the 19th century, the spirit of the Reform movement blew from Western Europe to Eastern Europe. Malbim, who became acquainted, during his travels, with the destructive influences of Reform Judaism upon Orthodox Judaism, came out sharply against the leaders of the Reform movement in Romania and against certain developments that the heads of the community supported in order to modernize and reshape the Jewish community of Romania. His main opposition was to the relationship of Reform Judaism towards Written Torah and Oral Torah.

One of the struggles against Reform Jews came to a head in 1858, after great efforts by the leader of the Haskalah community to build a synagogue in the style of a Christian church, with a choir and organ. This Templul Coral (Choral Temple) was authorized by the Prince of Moldavia, Grigore Alexandru Ghica. Malbim opposed the style of this synagogue forcefully; he was concerned with its imitation of both Christian architecture and the Reform synagogues of Western Europe. Similarly, Malbim sharply opposed the modern Jewish schools established in the city, criticizing them for putting too great an emphasis, in his view, on secular studies, and making holy studies ancillary. Malbim even complained about the biblical translations which came out in different languages, except for those in Yiddish.

An additional source of conflict between him and the "modern" Jewish community was his passionate support of punctilious standards in the halakhic realm; for example, he inspected each morning the knives of the kosher butchers. Thus, Malbim earned the reputation of being a zealot among the "modern" Jews of Romania.

However, Malbim faced criticism from the traditional wing as well. Hasidim, incensed by his support for reviving the Hebrew language,[2]viewed him as irredeemably progressive, and he was targeted with sharp criticism.

Ultimately, the arguments with the "modern" community, coupled with Malbim's powerful sermons against Reform Judaism, led to a proposed compromise, in which Malbim would be offered monetary compensation for relinquishing his rabbinical position, but he demurred. Because of this refusal, his opponents turned to the local rulers and accused him of treason. As a result of this, Malbim was thrown into prison and sentenced to death. He was released only due to the involvement of Sir Moses Montefiore.[3] The condition of his being freed to leave the soil of Romania.

Malbim then set out on a grand journey in order to purify his name and to have his decree of banishment rescinded. At one point, he reached Constantinople (Istanbul) in order to appeal to the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, which controlled Romania at the time, but this did not help. He also travelled to Paris,[4] but there as well his efforts were unsuccessful.

Without any other options, Malbim accepted his decree of banishment, and he wandered to many places. Among other locations, he served in the community of his father-in-law, ??

czyca, and from there he moved on to Kherson, Ukraine and Mogilev, Belarus. Even in these places, Malbim suffered the persecution and slander of the Maskilim and assimilationists on one hand and the Hasidim on the other. Despite Malbim's opponents, he succeeded in drawing many attendees to his sermons, but in the end, he was compelled to leave the area by the local governor, apparently due to the activities of informers.

He had to leave the Russian Empire, and he moved on to Prussia and its capital, K?nigsberg, where he took over the rabbinical position of R. Yaakov Mecklenburg (author of *Ha-Ketav ve-ha-kabbala*) for four years. In 1879, after twenty years of conflict, wandering, and humiliation, Malbim left K?nigsberg, returning to the Russian Empire to assume the position of rabbi in Kremenchug, Ukraine,[5] but he died on the way, on the first day of Rosh Hashana, in the year 5640.[6]

B. Commentary to the Narrative Portion of the Torah

Characteristics

Malbim composed a comprehensive commentary on all of *Tanakh* (except for *Koheleth*and *Eikha*). Without any doubt, this commentary became the most widely read of the more recent biblical exegetes' works.

The commentary on the Torah may be divided into two parts — the narrative part and the halakhic part. His style in the narrative part is very similar to the style of Abarbanel's commentary. He usually explains a full unit, placing the questions at the beginning.[7] In his introduction to his commentary on *Yeshayahu*,[8] Malbim expands on his exegetical philosophy, and he explains there that his commentary follows the *peshat* of the verse, rather than the *derash* (or, to use his term, *derush*).[9]

The most prominent characteristic of Malbim's commentary is his analysis of synonyms and various forms of repetition in *Tanakh* (parallelism and recapitulation). In his view, Scripture is divine, and as a result, it does not speak in the human way. Therefore, it includes no synonyms for the sake of poetic beauty; every word has a special significance of its own, and every word is chosen with punctiliousness, in order to transmit a certain specific message. Similarly, there can be nothing redundant, duplicative, or extraneous in the biblical narrative.[10]

In Malbim's introduction to *Vayikra*,[11] Malbim counts six hundred and thirteen principles of linguistics, many of which deal with the distinctions between ostensible synonyms. Malbim dedicates so much time to this topic partly because of his great desire to strengthen the study of *peshat* among Orthodox Jews, but mainly, it is polemic directed against the interpretations of the Maskilim. During his time, the Maskilim began developing a literary relationship to the Torah, similar to the relationship of the local culture to classical Greek literature, an approach which extinguishes the holiness of the Torah.[12] Expressing the antithesis of this approach, Malbim works hard to prove that the Torah is not "literature"; rather, it was written in holiness, with utmost precision in the composition of every jot and tittle.

Examples

We will demonstrate this with Malbim's analysis of synonymous parallelism in his comments on Yaakov's words to Shimon and Levi: "Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel!" (*Bereishit* 49:7). The classic approach sees this as direct parallelism, with the initial word, "Cursed", serving both hemistiches:

> A: Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce,
>
> B: And [cursed be] their wrath, for it is cruel!

If "their anger" parallels "their wrath"; "fierce" parallels "cruel", and the second hemistich adds nothing to the first.

Malbim, on the other hand, explains that wrath and anger are not equivalent:[13]

> There is a difference between anger and wrath, for anger is what one feels towards one who has sinned against him, and wrath is the expression of one's fury toward another who did not sin against him, until it crosses a line. Towards Shekhem ben Chamor, there was anger expressed, but towards the rest of the citizens of Shekhem, there was wrath expressed.[14]

Malbim reads the verse very carefully, and his precise reading produced many pleasing and felicitous comments. Thus, for example, Malbim claims that one should differentiate between the term "*selicha"*(absolution) and other expressions of forgiveness:

> The definition of the verb "to absolve" is that one removes the sin from reality totally, as if it had never existed in reality at all. This is its distinction from other terms. For example, when he says, "I have taken away your sin" (*Zekharya* 3:4), the sin has an independent existence, [15] it is just being taken away from the person…
>
> Therefore, you will find the term "*selicha*" only in association with God, not in terms of one person's relation to another. While a person may "take away sin" or "bear sin" he cannot absolve, for this means that the matter, in reality, is as if it had never existed at all. (*Vayikra* 4:26)

This interpretive approach has ramifications for resolving contradictions in*Tanakh*. Thus, for example in the Bilam narrative, at first God tells Bilam not to join the officers of Moav, saying "You shall not go with them (*imahem*)" (*Bamidbar* 22:12) while below God says, "If the men have come to call you, rise, go beside them (*itam*)" (*ibid.* v. 20). Bilam indeed goes with the officers of

Moav, and God becomes angry ("And God's anger was kindled because he was going," v. 22). The resulting difficulties have been addressed by many biblical commentators.[16] Malbim distinguishes between *imahem* and *itam*:

> There is a distinction between "beside him" and "with him," for "with him" indicates equality, while "beside him" will tell us that one is the principal. Now, God let him know that he must not go "with them" equally, but only "beside them" — his mind must be separated from their minds, because he was forbidden to go with the intent to harm Israel. He does not do so, for he went "with them".

Another nice example may be found in the words of Yosef's brothers to themselves after their father's death, "*Lu* Yosef loathe us" (*Bereishit* 50:15). The difficulty in the verse is that it should have used the term "*pen*" (lest) rather than "*lu*" (would), because "*lu"* is used when one wants something to happen, while "*pen"* is for when one is concerned about some eventuality. [17] Malbim has a nice comment here, explaining the use of the word "*lu"*:

> I have already explained… that the greatest revenge upon one's enemy is if, in place of his enmity and the evil he dealt him, [the victim] will make [the aggressor] one of those who eat at his table, doing him only good and kindness, for then he will remember constantly the evil which he has done…
>
> Now, Yosef's brothers felt this, and Yosef's good was in their eyes akin to stoking the coals in their heads, and they said: Would it only be that Yosef may loathe us certainly! Thus, would that "he may return to us all of the evil which we have dealt him." Let him do evil in practice, not good, for that is to us like stabbing us with a sword.[18]

C. Commentary to the Halakhic Portions of the Torah

Characteristics

Malbim's commentary on the halakhic part of the Torah is a magnum opus in its own right; apparently, in his view, it is the central part of his commentary on the Torah. A proof of this is the fact that Malbim begins the writing of his commentary on the Torah with the Book of *Vayikra*, the content of which is almost exclusively halakhic, and his commentary for *Vayikra* is significantly longer than his commentaries on the other books of the Pentateuch.

Malbim expands on the significance of interpreting the Torah's halakhic sections in his commentary on the Book of *Vayikra*. He explains that his commentary was composed in order to counter his generation's disrespect for

Oral Torah and the authority of the Sages.[19] This disrespect was a product of the apparent lack of connection between the law of Oral Torah and the text of the Written Torah; the links seemed forced, and the derivations did not seem to be the natural products of the verses.[20] Because his contemporaries found the Sages' hermeneutics unconvincing, they concluded that the Oral Torah was not binding.[21] Malbim writes his commentary in order to fight these views,[22] which spread progressively through the second half of the 19th century. His aim is to prove that the Sages' exegesis is in fact based upon the rules of language.[23]

For this purpose, Malbim formulates six hundred and thirteen linguistic principles that the Sages carried with them when they analyze these verses. (These rules are written individually in his work *Ayelet Ha-shachar.*[24]) According to his view, these rules were correct in the biblical era, and *Tanakh* was written according to them. The reason that the Maskilim opposed these rules was, he maintained, out of ignorance.[25] They were unfamiliar with these rules, and specifically the words of the Sages written according to these principles. Ultimately, these derivations point towards the *peshat* of the verse, unlike the words of the Maskilim, who did not recognize the rules of language according to which *Tanakh* was written.

Aims of the Commentary

Malbim's commentary deals with three areas in particular:

1. Explaining halakhic exegesis: in his commentary on the Torah, Malbim cites the compendia of Tannaitic Midrash —*Mekhilta, Sifra*, and *Sifrei* — and he explains these derivations at length.

2. Explaining the *peshat* of the verses: for this purpose, Malbim uses the rules of biblical linguistics, formulated in his introductions to *Yeshayahu* and *Vayikra*.

3. Exploring the connection between *peshat* and *derash.*[26] In light of this link, Malbim gives his commentary the name *Ha-Torah Ve-Ha-Mitzva*.[27]

Examples of Halakhic Commentaries

The following examples are taken from halakhic passages, and they demonstrate the essentials of Malbim's interpretive approach and his exegetical innovations.

1. The verse, "Judge your comrade righteously" (*Vayikra* 19:15), is understood in the *Sifra* as "Give every person the benefit of the doubt."

Malbim explains how this explanation of the Sages, which apparently has nothing to do with the*peshat*, is actually the depth of the simple meaning of the verse:

> An additional *derash* is based on the phrasing of "Judge your comrade righteously" in the singular language, for there are always two litigants, as it says, "And you shall judge righteously between each man and his brother" (*Devarim* 1:16)…
>
> However, we can imagine justice limited to one person if another examines his acts, along the lines of "Judge me God, according to my righteousness" (*Tehillim* 7:9). Thus, this means that you should judge your fellow favorably; you shall not see him as evil…

In other words, a court case always involves two litigants, and therefore the Sages expound that we are talking about judging the behavior of one's fellow. Thus, upon each person is the obligation to give his fellow the benefit of the doubt, to find him righteous.

2. *Devarim* 23:25 says:

> When you enter your neighbor's vineyard, then you may eat grapes until you are fully satisfied, but in your vessel you may not put any.

The simple meaning of the verse is apparently that whenever a person enters his fellow's vineyard, he may eat some grapes, as long as he does not store it in a vessel. But the Sages understand (see*Bava Metzia* 87b and Rashi's comment on the verse) that this verse is speaking only about a person working in a vineyard — a laborer is allowed in to eat in the vineyard while he picks grapes, but it is forbidden for him to store any in a vessel. Malbim sets out to prove that the *derush* of the Sages which determines that we are talking about a laborer doing his job is in fact the depth of the simple meaning of the verse.

He distinguishes between two forms of commands in the Torah. The first is when the verb appears, followed by the object (e.g. "You shall not curse the deaf," *Vayikra*19:14); the second is when the object appears first, and then the verb (e.g. "The nakedness of your daughter-in-law you shall not reveal," *ibid.* 18:15). When the verb appears first, the Torah is presenting an absolute prohibition, even if the given object in the verse is not at issue (e.g., "You shall not curse the deaf" is actually a general prohibition against cursing anyone, even those who cannot hear). When the object appears first, the Torah forbids only in a situation in which the object which appears in the verse is at issue (e.g. "The nakedness of your daughter-in-law you shall not reveal"

— the prohibition applies only to one's daughter-in-law). In other words, when the object appears first, it defines the command.

According to this rule, the verse should read, "When you enter your neighbor's vineyard, then you may eat grapes until you are fully satisfied, but you may not put any in your vessel." Then there would be total opposition between "you may eat" and "you may not put" — it is permitted to eat the grapes, but it is forbidden to put them in vessels. However, in the form in which the verse is written, "When you enter your neighbor's vineyard, then you may eat grapes until you are fully satisfied, but in your vessel you may not put any," the definition of the prohibition is determined by "in your vessel," and the matter is apparently perplexing.

Malbim explains that if we understand that we are talking about a laborer, whose main occupation is putting the owner's produce in the owner's vessels, the verse may be understood: when the laborer does his job and puts produce in the basket, it is allowed for him to eat, but concerning putting in vessels, it is only permitted for him to put in the owner's vessels and not his own vessels.[28]

*

We will conclude with Malbim's commentary on *Devarim* 30:1, "…and you shall call them to mind among all the nations where Lord your God drives you off;" this comment explains the unique significance of the verb "to drive off" as reflecting God's love for the Nation of Israel, even at the time that He punishes them:

> The distinction between casting off and driving off is threefold:
>
> a) When one casts off, the object is flung far away from him;
>
> b) Through casting off, the object is ruined;
>
> c) One demonstrates that one does not care where the object lands.
>
> However, one who drives off, as long as he drives off, he must be close to the object, and through driving it off, it will not be ruined, and he will know where it is…

This is testimony and evidence that God's eyes are upon you solely to do good for you.

[1] This book was greatly appreciated by the Chafetz Chayim, and its rulings are mentioned in*Mishna Berura* more than a hundred times. It was first printed in 1837.

[2] In Bucharest, Malbim established an association for the dissemination of the Hebrew language.

[3] In the Hebrew periodical "*Ha-Levanon*" (17 March 1865), Malbim describes his imprisonment:

> It was the eve of the Shabbat on which we read "Remember what Amalek did to you" (*Devarim* 25:17)… when the agents of the police came, by the order of the minister… They surrounded my house on every side… and they took me by force and cast me into the wagon and the cage which they brought, and the entire battalion, all the police captains and the guards, the armed men and the patrolmen and the cooks and their servants and their dogs, surrounded the cage on every side. It was treatment normally accorded to one of the thieves or the murderers who are infamous and notorious throughout the land.

In the continuation, Malbim indicts the Jews who brought this about:

> This was by the hand of adversaries from among our own people; they were the ones who destroyed our Temple and sold their own brothers into the hands of their adversaries, who shunned them…

[4] There he met the heads of the Alliance Isra?lite Universelle, an international organization founded in 1860 by the French statesman Adolphe Cr?mieux in order to safeguard the human rights of Jews around the world.

[5] In the year 1879, a number of congregations in New York invited him to come to the United States and to serve as the chief rabbi of the country, but he rejected this proposal.

[6] In 2000, Yisroel Meir Gabbai, founder of Agudas Ohalei Tzadikim, dedicated to maintaining Jewish graves and cemeteries in the Diaspora, attempted to find Malbim's grave in Kiev. R. Gabbai found his headstone, but beneath it was bedrock, indicating that the ground beneath had never been excavated. R. Gabbai hypothesized that the Jewish community buried Malbim in one place and put the headstone in another place, out of the concern that those who opposed him would violate his grave; thus, the exact location of his grave in the cemetery is unknown.

[7] Abarbanel is very well-regarded by Malbim; the latter calls the former the "knight-errant of exegesis, our noble teacher, R. Yitzchak Abarbanel" (commentary on *II Shemuel* 24).

[8] Malbim began his biblical commentary with the Book of *Esther* (1844), and afterwards he moved on to the Book of *Yeshayahu* (1849).

[9] These are his words:

> I have now taken out, in the light of the sun, this commentary on Yeshayahu's vision (*Yeshayahu*, ch. 1), and I will bring out other parts of this sort… It follows, in the general and the specific, the pathways of*peshat,* which have been paved by many… It does not travel down the pathways of*derush*; it does dig deeply with the shovel of criticism… You will find it neither *derush* nor criticism, neither secret nor allusion, only the simple *peshat*…

[10] This is what he writes in the introduction to the Book of *Yeshayahu*:

> In the parables of the prophets, there is no repetition of the matter in different words — neither the matter itself, nor the statement, nor the parable… There cannot be found in the parables of the prophets or in their statements… nouns or verbs left out by happenstance… The parables of the prophets cannot be found to be empty shells… for the utterances of the Living God are they all; the Living God is in their midst, the spirit of life in their nostrils…

[11] We will look at this introduction at length below.

[12] Concerning this phenomenon, Malbim relates in his introduction to the Book of *Vayikra*:

There is “a time to act for God” (*Tehillim*119:126), a time to act for the Written Torah… For this evil congregation has likened it to one of the stories of primitive peoples, and its poems and its parables they have equated to that of the emir and of the Greeks.

[13] The assumption of Malbim, assigning significance to every word and every expression, does not necessarily mean that we cannot apply a word which appears in the first hemistich to the second; it merely means that we must reject the idea that there is no significant distinction between the hemistiches.

[14] In his commentary on this verse, Malbim applies an exegetical principle which he sets down in his introduction to the Book of*Yeshayahu*:

> Know that this is a great principle and a basic tenet: the parable will always proceed conceptually from the light to the heavy, from the small to the great, from the few to the many, and not in the opposite direction. Any place which appears that it will be found in Holy Writ two words or equivalent issues, the second must necessarily add something to the first…
>
> Now, should you find a source in *Tanakh* in which the second word or sentence appears to be lighter or smaller than the first, know certainly that you have not understood the explanation of these verses fundamentally.
>
> Indeed, all of the linguists have mentioned this, but they have not kept to it and they have not used it; according to them, this is rule which holds true in most cases, but not in all of them. However, I say that we will not find in any place an exception to this rule…
>
> Indeed, we may rely on this for the purpose of distinguishing synonyms, for every later word we know certainly to include more than that which precedes it…

[15] It continues to exist on its own.

[16] See the Ramban’s commentary and *Akeidat Yitzchak*.

[17] In Modern Hebrew, a similar distinction exists between chance (*sikkui*) and worry (*chashash*): there may be a *sikkui* of a good outcome, but there is a *chashash* of a bad outcome.

[18] See Bekhor Shor’s commentary on this verse.

[19] As Malbim puts it:

> They denied it, and they said that it is not so. They have mocked the Sages, and [deniers] have said that [the Sages] did not know the simple meaning of the verses and were unfamiliar with the specifics of language… It has been in their eyes a source of derision and laughter all through the day.

[20] In his language:

> This matter is yet another step beyond, exceeding all ideas of the most shocking audacity! Our coreligionists, who breach everything, have arrogated for themselves a new vision and failed. From them have emerged the Karaites and the deniers who have shattered the yokes and who burst the bonds. They have corrupted the mighty ones, the nation of holy people.

[21] This is what he writes:

> However, when we investigate the verses themselves and we pay attention to the paths which they took in deriving many laws from the verses, we discover that the roads have moved and all traces have vanished. In most cases, it seems that we find that not only does the simple meaning of the verse not compellingly lead to the *derush*which is derived from them; moreover, we find the opposite: the depth of the *peshat*contradicts the *derush* and opposes it. In the majority of instances, it seems that they have hung the shields of the mighty upon spider webs. Great and consequential laws are supported by a single word or a single letter, and despite

massive toil expended, one cannot comprehend or find the way that this word or letter proves to be so compelling…

[22] Malbim puts this quite poetically, playing “the Hebrews” off “the blind” (both of which are pronounced *ivrim*, but which are spelled differently):

The Hebrews will see/ That diamonds flow free

Ten times over with glee/ While the blind must fearful be

For there are weapons and engines of war

Where the wolves of evening and the mixed multitude roar

Against every heretic and denier

Every critic and defier

Against all who to uproot and deracinate aspire

Who deny the essence, who doubt or investigations require

Their mouths will be shut, alongside every liar.

[23] As he defines it:

…for all the words of the Oral Torah are compelling, engrained in the *peshat* of the verse and in the depth of the language.

[24] He justifies his choice of this name for his composition, *Ayelet Ha-shachar* (*Morningstar* or*Breaking Dawn*), writing that just as daybreak disperses the dark, his work aims to do the same:

They are the six hundred and thirteen lights which illuminate and glitter and shine like the stars of light upon the face of the heavenly firmament, and they will enlighten all dark place and cast aside the gloom in the lands of the living (*artzot ha-chayim*)…

[25] In his words:

There is wisdom, the boors must see

Though it be hidden in mystery

From the eye of every grammarian

Every researcher and critical utilitarian.

All of those in language reputed wise

You shall not to the ankles of the first generation rise

And if the latter ones walk in the dark

The former ones are nigh to the angels’ mark.

Holy officers is the rank they achieve

By the holy spirit they perceive

By them alone is wisdom amassed

Among them no foreigner has passed.

[26] Malbim formulates it this way:

On the third side, “the center crossbar” which “extend[s] from end to end” (*Shemot*26:28) connects the writ and the tradition with loops, “and the tabernacle will be one” (*ibid.* v. 6). This explains the words of the Sages and their enigmas, the words of our rabbis in their tradition on the basis of the fundamentals of language…

And all the words of the tradition and the Oral Torah are explained in Writ and maintained in the depth of *peshat* and parable…

For the *derush* is the simple *peshat,* and all the words of the Sages are compelling, engrained in the depth of language and the fundamentals of the Hebrew language.

[27] In the language of Malbim:

It is upon the reader to connect the Torah and commandments with clasps, to connect the explanation of the Torah (Holy Writ) and *mitzva* (the teaching of the *Sifra*) one opposite another, each will cleave to his brother, come together, and not be separate, “and the tabernacle will be one.”

[28] These are his words:

We may begin with one rule: every place in the Torah where it says not to do something and includes a detail, if there is an aspect in which it is forbidden even without this detail, the “You shall not” will be mentioned first and only afterwards the detail.

Consider this (*Vayikra* 19:11): “You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie each man to his comrade” — even though it says “each man to his comrade,” stealing, falsehood and lying are inappropriate in all circumstances, so first we have the act, and then the detail. Similarly (*ibid.* vv. 13-18), “You shall not oppress your fellow;” “You shall not curse the deaf;” “You shall not corrupt justice;” “You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people;” “You shall not stand upon your fellow’s blood;” “You shall not hate your brother in your heart;” “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your own countrymen.” However, when without this detail there is no reason to forbid the act, such as the forbidden sexual relationships, it always mentions the detail and afterwards the act…

It turns out, according to this rule, that after it says that he will eat as much as he wants, it should have been stated, “but you may not put any in your vessel,” for when it says “but you may not put any” there is an aspect to forbid regardless, for putting is the opposite of eating. Thus, we have proven that the verse must be talking about a laborer, for the sole occupation of the laborer is to put produce into the owner’s vessels.

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Y'hi Zikhro Barukh.

****

In memory of our beloved father and grandfather,
Fred Stone, Ya'acov Ben Yitzchak,
whose yahrzeit will be Sunday 25 Tammuz, July 15th.
Ellen, Stanley, Jacob Chaya, Zack, Yael, Ezra, Yoni, Eliana, and Gabi Stone.

****

Lecture #28:
The Netziv

A. Biography

R. Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893) — hereinafter, the Netziv (literally, “pillar” or “governor”) — was born in the Russian Empire, in Mir, Belarus, to an educated, scholarly family. His father, Yaakov, was a merchant and Torah scholar, and his mother was descended from R. Meir Eisenstadt.[1]

At the age of thirteen, he married the daughter of R. Yitzchak of Volozhin (Reb Itchele), the son of R. Chayim, the founder of the Volozhin Yeshiva. When he married, the Netziv moved with his bride to the city of Volozhin.

After R. Chayim died, his son R. Yitzchak took over the yeshiva, and when R. Yitzchak died in the year 1851, his son-in-law and nephew, R. Eliezer Yitzchak Fried, inherited his position. R. Eliezer Yitzchak did not last long in this position; a few years later, in 1854, he passed away. The Netziv was then appointed to be the Rosh Yeshiva, and the Netziv held on to this position for close to forty years. In the year 1866, after his first wife died, he married his niece.[2]

Under the Netziv's leadership, the Volozhin Yeshiva became resoundingly successful, and it was famed far and wide. The students came to the yeshiva from the farthest reaches of Europe, and the number of students in the yeshiva reached a height of four hundred. The Volozhin Yeshiva recruited elite students who could study Talmud and Tosafot on their own and were ready to apply themselves in long hours of study. The graduates of the yeshiva during the Netziv's tenure eventually became the shapers of Orthodox Judaism throughout the world at the end of the 19th century. This elite group included, among others, R. Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Kohen Kook, R. Shimon Shkop, R. Isser Zalman Meltzer (author of *Even Ha-Azel*), R. Barukh Ha-Levi Epstein (author of *Torah Temima*), and many other notable figures.

While the Volozhin Yeshiva enjoyed great success, it also underwent more than a few crises. Foremost among them was the Russian government's demand that the administration integrate secular Russian studies in the curriculum the yeshiva. This issue was raised repeatedly, with increasing intensity. Although the Netziv initially accommodated these demands, in the year 1892, the yeshiva was asked to implement far-reaching changes: [3] now the yeshiva would be require to dedicate most of its time to secular studies, and religious studies would only occupy a few hours at the end of the day. Otherwise, the yeshiva would be shuttered. In the end, with great pain, the Netziv decided to close Volozhin Yeshiva. With the closing of the yeshiva, the Netziv resolved to make*aliya*, but his health failed, and in the year 1893, he died in the city of Warsaw.

The Netziv's scholarliness was expressed in his various compositions, which showed him to be a master of all disciplines of Torah study. He wrote *Birkat Ha-Netziv* on the *Mekhilta*, *Emek Ha-Netziv* on the *Sifrei*, and a composition on the Babylonian Talmud called*Meromei Sadeh*. In addition, he wrote a commentary on R. Achai Gaon's *She'iltot* called *Ha'amek She'ala* (the name comes from the verse, *Yeshayahu* 7:11), and*Ha'amek Davar* on the Torah, with addenda in a commentary called *Harchev Davar*. The Netziv dealt not only with theoretical study, but also with teaching practical Halakha. The Netziv's responses to those who turned to him may be found in his responsa.

Aside from his scholarly activity, at the end of his life, the Netziv joined the Hovevei Zion movement. He became an ardent supporter of the Zionist movement, advocating for the Jewish settlement of what was then Ottoman Palestine.[4] He even would put out charity boxes on Yom Kippur eve to gather contributions for the settlers. This was at a time when many Orthodox rabbis (R. S.R. Hirsch among them) shunned the Zionist movement; some even opposed the movement in a public way, out of concern for the negative influence of the movement's membership, which included a significant number of people associated with the Haskalah.

The Netziv contributed to the development of Torah study in the yeshiva setting in a number of ways. First, while most *yeshivot* of the time studied primarily the Babylonian Talmud, the Netziv devoted a place of honor to the in-depth study of Midrashic and Geonic literature, which had been almost totally banished from the bookshelves of *yeshivot* before the Netziv. His*Ha'amek She'ala* is an analytical composition of R. Achai's *She'iltot,* and the Netziv was the first to analyze Geonic literature systematically.

The Netziv also continued to develop the methodology introduced by the Gra, a method of comparing and emending texts in order to allow for a basic understanding of

primary sources. However, it appears that the Netziv's most sweeping and seminal innovation was to move biblical study to the center of the yeshiva's focus. While contemporary *yeshivot*avoided studying *Tanakh*, apparently due to the increased interest of the Maskilim in biblical studies, the Netziv stressed for his students the importance of studying Holy Writ. The Netziv himself gave a daily shiur in the weekly Torah portion, and these lessons constituted the basis of his masterwork of biblical exegesis, *Ha'amek Davar*.

B. The Aim of the Commentary

In *Kidmat Ha-Emek* (his introduction to *Ha'amekShe'ala*, Part II), the Netziv relates to the importance of biblical study. In the period of the Netziv, as we have said, the study of *Tanakh* was seen as not particularly exigent. Thus, the Netziv sets out to explain why the study of *Tanakh* is in fact important, beginning by citing*Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Tisa* 11:

> "R. Shimon ben Lakish says: Just as a bride adorns herself with twenty-four adornments, so a Torah scholar must be diligent in twenty-four books…"
>
> The bride, aside from the essence of her dowry and the conditions of her marriage, comes to her nuptial home expending all effort to find favor in the eyes of her husband and all who are happy with her.
>
> This is the condition of the Torah scholar, that aside from the body of laws which he studies in order to perform them, which brings him to the level of the Torah scholar, he still must adorn himself with traits and ethics and wisdoms alluded to in the twenty-four books of Holy Writ, to find favor in the eyes of God and man.
>
> Thus, he makes his way straight and pure, following the path of good manners, loving people and maintaining their honor. He seeks out their desire and their good and their peace, and the name of Heaven is sanctified by him.

The Netziv reaches the conclusion that the study of the Written Torah has two facets, and a Torah scholar must deal with both of them:

> From our words we have learnt that the Written Torah may be expounded in two ways: one way, for the topic at hand, to study every jot and tittle until we reach the point of the law or the depth of the story…

In other words, one aim of studying the Written Torah in detail is the basic understanding of Halakha and the story being told. However, there is also an additional facet – the derivation of wisdom and morality from the Torah - and every sage must interpret the verses and learn from them according to the needs of his generation:

> Another way is to derive, via an exacting reading of the language, wisdom and knowledge which diverges from the topic under discussion…
>
> The sage has to know the time and its issues in order to accommodate himself to that which is good and moral, according to his wisdom.

In other words, a Torah scholar is required to learn ethics from the Torah according to the needs of his generation, beyond the basic intent of the verse.

C. Style and Target Audience

As we have said, the basis of this commentary is the series of lectures given by the Netziv on the weekly Torah portion in Volozhin Yeshiva. The style of the commentary is not simplistic at all. The point of departure for his commentary is that his students are experts in the sources of Oral Torah and well acquainted with the passages under discussion. The Netziv uses a great number of expressions borrowed from the Gemara's language, and he makes numerous references to the literature of the *Rishonim* and the*Acharonim*.[5]

The style of the commentary, its contents and themes, testify to the fact that the commentary is designed mainly for Torah scholars. Similarly, in keeping with the aims of the commentary, it is designated in particularly for his contemporaries, their problems and needs. Therefore, while the thoughts of the Netziv are nice even not in their time, in order to get to the depth of his commentaries, one should expend effort to understand the background of their writing.

D. Relationship between Written and Oral Torah

In his commentary on the Torah, the Netziv stresses the compelling connection between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. The Netziv's expansive exploration of this topic appears to be an attempt to contend with the disrespect of the Maskilim towards the Oral Torah, who saw it as a human creation that often contradicts the Written Torah. It is worth noting that more than a few of the yeshiva students struggled between traditional Judaism and the Haskalah movement.[6] In order to produce and strengthen the status of the Oral Torah among his students, the Netziv posits a view of the Written Torah according to which it does not contradict the Oral Torah.[7]

An example of this may be seen in his commentary to *Shemot* 21:20, "When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod, and the slave dies under his hand, he shall surely be avenged." The Netziv asks the following question on this verse:

> According to tradition, this comes to teach us that one who kills his slave must be put to death by sword, like any murderer. If so, what is to be derived from "with a rod"? Also "he shall surely be avenged," aside from the Sages' commentary, has an additional intent.

The Netziv begins by addressing the apparent contradiction between the Oral Torah, which sees this verse as the source for the law of killing one's slave in a general way, and the *peshat* of the verse, which talks about striking him or her with a rod. Similarly, the Netziv wants to understand the *peshat* of the words "he shall surely be avenged" without the commentary of the Sages, who use textual analogy to derive that the punishment for homicide is decapitation by sword (*Mekhilta, Mishpatim* 7).

The Netziv explains the verse through a *peshat*interpretation that does not contradict the Sages' hermeneutics:

> This indicates that if he hits him with a rod and he dies, then aside from the punishment of murder, that one is liable to receive the death penalty as per the Sages' tradition, this sin is compounded by exceptional cruelty. It is much worse than if he kills him with a sword and the like, for with a rod he extinguishes his life with great suffering, over a number of hours. Therefore, "he shall surely be avenged" — from the heavens.

In other words, someone who kills his slave is liable to be put to death by the sword, as the Sages expound; but in addition to this, someone who is killed in an torturous manner (because killing with a rod is a slow, cruel death, as the rod is not designed for killing), incurs an additional punishment from the heavens: "he shall surely be avenged."

E. The Ethical Imperative

As we said above, the second aspect of studying Torah is finding contemporary wisdom, ethics, and good traits in it. There are a number of ethical topics that the Netziv stresses explicitly a number of times; apparently, he believes that there is a need for his contemporaries to address and improve in these areas. In the Netziv's introduction to his commentary on the Torah, he relates at length to the central reason that led to the destruction of the Second Temple, baseless hatred. The Netziv explains that although there were great Torah scholars in the era of the destruction, they were not as morally impeccable as the Patriarchs:

> This was the praise of the Patriarchs: aside from their being righteous and saintly and lovers of God to the greatest extent possible, they were also morally impeccable. Indeed, they followed this model of behavior even with the nations of the world, even the ugly idolaters; regardless, they regarded them with love and concern for their welfare…
>
> This is all opposed to the Second Temple generation:
>
> Because of the baseless hatred in their hearts, they suspected that anyone who acted in a way not accordance with their own view of the fear of God was a Sadducee and a heretic. This led them ultimately to bloodshed, by way of hyperbole, and to all of the evils in the world.

It is difficult not to see here some deep criticism of the Netziv's contemporaries. It may be that specifically in the Volozhin Yeshiva, the mother of all *yeshivot*, which put a great emphasis on the toil and effort required to fulfill the *mitzva* of Torah study, the Rosh Yeshiva was concerned that the students might indeed be wise and understanding, but they were not moral in terms of their behavior and good manners. They might fight for truth, but at the price of the honor of and love for the other. Therefore, he warned of a situation such as this.[8]

There are other possibilities as well. It may be that his words are based on the negative attitude of many Orthodox national leaders towards the Zionist movement and the members of the Haskalah.[9] Finally, it is possible that this relates to the fierce debate between the Hasidim and their opponents. (Despite the Netziv's own opposition to the Hasidic approach, as we shall see below, he avoided direct confrontation with the Hasidim.)

The Netziv relates to this once again in his explanation of the first verse of the priestly blessing (*Bamidbar* 6:24), "May God bless you and protect you":

> For blessing needs[10] protection, so that it will not become an obstacle; one well-versed in Torah requires protection from arrogance, desecration of the Name and the like…

The fact that the Netziv spends so much time addressing the moral behavior of Torah scholars testifies to the great ethical sensitivity of the Netziv and his relationship to the actions of the yeshiva students and scholars of his generation.

In this context, one may cite his words concerning the issue of the dangers of religious zealotry, to which he relates more than once in his commentary (apparently, on the basis of the difficult arguments ravaging the Jewish People in his period, which we have mentioned above). Thus, for example, in his comments on the vengeance which Shimon and Levi wreak upon the citizens of the town of Shekhem, the Netziv criticizes the behavior of the brothers:

> "Yaakov's two sons" — "Two" is superfluous… but it comes to teach us that even though they were united in their great fury to destroy a city in its entirety, and they were united also to put themselves in great jeopardy, nevertheless, they were two. In other words, they were of two minds in what ignited this fire.
>
> One came with the human view of being zealous for the honor of his father's house, which may enflame one in this manner. However, this is a foreign fire, as is known. The other comes with the view of being zealous for God, without any impetus and inclination away from "fire, the very flame of the God" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 8:6). In any case, from a fire such as this, one must also be very careful, to address the place and the time…

> Yaakov Avinu explains in his rebuke the two views which were in this, but he did not consent even to the sublime fire…[11] (*Ha'amek Davar,Bereishit* 34:25)

Thus, the Netziv warns us about the dangers of religious zealotry. First, it may spring from less-than-pure motives; in such a case, there is no *mitzva* in the endeavor, but rather a sin. Even in a situation in which one's zealotry is based on pure motives, one must be very careful about it. Therefore, the Torah distinguishes between Levi and Shimon ("Yaakov's two sons"): Shimon's motivation is personal, while Levi's motivation is pure. Nevertheless, Levi's acts are just as dangerous, and therefore Yaakov rebukes him about this before his death.

F. Anti-Hasidic Interpretations

A clear opposition to Hasidism is expressed in the commentary of the Netziv. He relates many times to the concept of a "foreign fire" in God's service; out of one's great enthusiasm, there is a risk in this that it may ruin the normal standards of decency and humanity. In his commentary on the "foreign fire" of Nadav and Avihu, the Netziv writes:

> Because they entered in order to offer this fire out of the enthusiasm of God's love, the Torah says that even though God's love is precious in God's eyes, He does not desire it in a way which He has not commanded. (*Ha'amek Davar*,*Vayikra* 10:1)

In other words, the service of God that is appropriate is the form in which the person subordinates himself to God's will and accepts upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven; he does not act out of internal pressure, but as a servant before his master.

As for the principle of "foreign fire", the Netziv expands on it in a number of places. For example, in his explanation of the sin of Korach and his assembly, he explains in a very original way the distinction between the sin and punishment of Korach and his two hundred fifty men on the one hand and the sin and punishment of Datan and Aviram on the other:

> It appears that the two hundred and fifty men[12]were indeed greats of Israel in every aspect, including in the fear of God. Their motivation was the priesthood, which is the impetus of clinging to and loving God, like a fire burning in their midst. This was not for the sake of imagined office and honor, but to become holy and to acquire this great distinction by service. They also knew that the word of God was true as transmitted by Moshes, and there was no cause to question it, God forbid. They only thought, in their hearts, about the will of God, and they chose to surrender themselves to death for God's love, "for love is as strong as death" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 8:6)…
>
> This is called, "Those who sin with their lives" (*Bamidbar* 17:1): they sought to lose their lives only in order to acquire the height of love and saintliness, which He, Blessed be His Name, does not desire…
>
> Now, since they regardless intended to act for the name of heaven, on account of this they were punished by the burning of the fire which came out of the Holy of Holies, and there was in this a matter of honor… (*Ha'amek Davar, Bamidbar* 16:1)

The two hundred and fifty men sinned in aspiring to excessive closeness to God, despite the fact that they knew that they would die by doing so. In other words, giving oneself over to closeness to God can be a sin, if it is done by contravening God's command. The danger which ambushes God's servant is born of enthusiasm; by shrugging of the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, one crosses the borders which the Torah defines.

It is clear that these words reflect the attitude of the Lithuanian *yeshivot* which opposed the Hasidic movement. We should note that the Netziv, who teaches religious tolerance, expresses the positive side of the enthusiasm of the two hundred and fifty men; their unique punishment, he argues, is an expression of honor and respect.

Another anti-Hasidic allusion may be found in*Bamidbar* 15:40:

> "So that you shall remember and perform all My commandments" - This is the remembrance for a person of distinction who is totally absorbed in loving God. The verse commands him to make strings of sky-blue, which tell of the connection to lofty thoughts; regardless, he must recall the performance of the mitzva in its time… Then his holiness will be truly Godly.

The Netziv here criticizes the men of distinction who are not punctilious about the proper times for the performance of *mitzvoth*. Apparently, this is directed against those Hasidim who were less than careful about prayer times and the like.

We may add in this connection the Netziv's attitude towards to holiness. The Netziv stresses that there is no immanent holiness in man; sanctity emanates from man's behavior, not man's nature.

> "Holy shall they be to their God" — This means separation from men for God's name, in every way by which the name of heaven may be sanctified; thus, they must excel in good traits, modesty and the like, unlike those who separate themselves from other people not for the sanctification of heaven's name, but only out of superciliousness and arrogance. *(Ha'amekDavar*, *Vayikra* 21:6)

It may be that his words are directed towards the "rebbe" phenomenon, which became more widespread in his generation. Alternatively, he may be addressing certain students who thought highly of themselves because of their supposedly great wisdom. To all of these, the Netziv turns and says: if Israel does not sanctify God, it cannot be sanctified.

G. Original Interpretations

The Netziv has many innovative commentaries, and we will note some of them:

1) Concerning the Levites, the Torah commands in *Parashat Bamidbar*, "And they shall not come when the sanctuary is being swallowed (*ke-valla*), lest they die" (*Bamidbar*4:20). Every exegete has attempted to explain this verse, particularly the word "*ke-valla.*"[13]The Netziv explains this in a very sharp and simple way:

> "*Ke-valla*" — this means in the blink of an eye; as in eating, one who swallows without chewing does not benefit from the eating, just a moment of swallowing. Similarly, one who sees something which does not satisfy the eye is referred to as swallowing, and the verse warns that they [the Levites] should not look even when the sanctuary is being swallowed.

In other words, the Levites are not allowed to look at the vessels of the *Mishkan*when they are exposed, even for the shortest time of "*ke-valla*."

2) The Netziv, like the Malbim, explains synonyms, precisely dissecting in differentgrammatical forms and different prepositions. A good example of this is the distinction between*"va-yikra el"* and *"va-yikra l-"*:

> "Pharaoh called to Moshe (*el Moshe*) and to Aharon (*le-Aharon*)" — it does not say *le-Moshe* and *le-Aharon*… and this is because calling has two aspects, one of which is that other is not present, and he sends to summon him. The second is that even if he is there, he calls him by name to indicate geniality and all love and honor, and in this aspect, it says "*el*" as with "*Va-yikra… el Moshe*."*(Ha'amekDavar*, *Shemot* 8:21)

In other words, "*va-yikra el*" is calling with affection or respect, while "*va-yikra l-*" is summoning, inviting a person of lower social stature.

3) In the following example, the Netziv explains the parallelism of "wayward and rebellious" in the verse (*Devarim* 21:18), "If a man has a wayward (*sorer*) and rebellious (*moreh*) son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him."

> In the verse in the Book of *Mishlei* (1:8), "Listen, my son, to your father's discipline (*musar*), and do not abandon your mother's teaching (*tora*)," the explanation is as follows. The father knows the way[14] to teach his son God's Torah, which is called discipline, and the mother teaches by way of good manners and good custom, and this is the mother's teaching. Thus, the son who does not listen to the father's discipline (*musar*) is called wayward (*sorer*) and one who does not listen to the mother's voice is rebellious (*moreh*). The idea is that he does not follow the way of the Torah or good manners.

4) We will conclude with the Netziv's commentary praising the settlers of the Land of Israel, even those who do not study Torah:

> The essential will of the Blessed One is that they should be dwelling in Israel for the security of the Land of Israel — that is, they should not trade with those outside the land…
>
> This indicates that when a person does not study Torah himself, he requires greater protection, and there is no place better protected than the Land of Israel, the main residence of Israel.

[1] He wrote a volume of responsa, *Panim Me'irot*.

[2] The Netziv's sister was married to R. Yechiel Michel Ha-levi Epstein, author of *Arukh Ha-Shulchan*.

[3] Czar Alexander III (1845-1894) made these rules with the vision of one nationality, one language, one religion, and one government throughout his empire. Throughout his rule (beginning in 1881), he sought to do this by forcing the Russian language and Russian education upon all of his subjects. On the basis of this reality, one may understand the Netziv's interpretation of the sin of building the Tower of Bavel (in his comments to*Bereishit* 11:4, "Come, let us build a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and we shall make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed upon the surface of the entire land"):

> They thought that all cities would be close and subordinate to this city, in which they built the tower, and the tower would allow them to see far off, across all of civilization, so that they would not be spread out in another land…

> “And we shall make a name for ourselves” — this refers to people who would watch over things, those who would be appointed over others as military officers to punish the transgressors…
>
> All of this was due to the concern of “lest we be dispersed upon the surface of the entire land”…
>
> Now, whoever would turn from the “common speech” (*ibid*. v. 1) among them, his penalty was to be incinerated, as they did to Avraham Avinu. It turns out that this “common speech” was for them an obstacle, for they decided to kill anyone who thought differently…

The Netziv presents a totalitarian society, akin to the Russian government which he was all too familiar with: a society which wants to build a tower in order to allow the observation and strict control of people, compelling them to adopt a unified view. Such a society would certainly be united, but necessarily it would lead to the elimination of anyone having the temerity to defy it.

[4] Kibbutz Ein Ha-Netziv was named in his honor, in tribute to his Zionistic activities.

[5] In addition to his scholarly style, the Netziv uses many acronyms (although these abbreviations may be the work of the publisher). Sometimes, one may find sentences written almost completely in acronyms and bizarre permutations. Thus, in his commentary to*Devarim* 22:7, we find:

Concerning sending away the mother bird, it is written	åáùéìåç ä÷ì ëúéá	åáùìää"÷ ëúéá
That there is reward in this world	ùëø áòåìí äææ	ùëø áòää"æ
All the more so for honoring one’s father and mother	îëì ùëï áëáåã àáîëù"ë åàì	áëáåã àå"à

[6] Among the students who left the way of the yeshiva was the poet Chayim Nachman Bialik. Aside from his famous creation “*Ha-Matmid*”, which describes yeshiva life, and additional poems that explicitly deal with topics such as these, he hints to his theological struggles even in such apparently innocent context as the nursery rhyme “*Nadneda*.”

The Mishna (*Chagiga* 2:1) writes:

> Whoever reflects upon four things would have been better off had he not been born: what is above and what is below, what is before and what is beyond…

Bialik writes in “*Nadneda”*:

> See, saw, see, saw
> Up, down, down and up!
> What’s up?
> What's down? –
> Only me,
> Me and you,
> Two of us balanced
> on the scales
> In between the earth
> and the skies.

[7] The Netziv relates to the relationship between the Written Torah and Oral Torah when he analyzes the double *mitzva* of *tefillin*. In his view, the head *tefillin*symbolize the Written Torah, which is revealed to all the nations, while the hand *tefillin* symbolize the Oral Torah, which is hidden from other peoples and unique to the Nation of Israel. He explains the significance of the formulation, “And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a frontlets between your eyes” (*Shemot*13:16):

> Because of this, it is said in the head *tefillin*, “and as frontlets between your eyes,” which means an adornment, and this is because the Written Torah, in which it says, “And all the nations of the land” (*Devarim* 28:10). The hand*tefillin* is so that the power of the Oral Torah. According to this reason, the head *tefillin* is put before the hand *tefillin* because it is like the sword, that the scabbard is an adornment only when the sword is placed in it, but without the sword, there is no point of it at all even to be adorned with it. This is not true of the sword, even without a scabbard; its aim is the same, but it has no glory, for its bearers when it is unsheathed. Similarly, the point of

the Written Torah is only achieved when we believe in the Oral Torah and we know of it if it was less or more, but without this it does not help at all… *(Harchev Davar*, *Shemot* 13:16)

[8] We may find evidence of conduct unbecoming Torah scholars in the memories of a student in the Volozhin Yeshiva, the author Abba Balosher, who describes the opposition of the students to the Netziv's desire to appoint his son, R. Chayim, to become Rosh Yeshiva after his retirement, in the following way:

> Every day and every hour, the Netziv would find anonymous messages, many written with heavy hands, filled with words hard as sinew against him, and they caused him a grievous injury. Like the frogs in Egypt, these letters arose and engulfed the Netziv — in his bedchamber and upon his bed, in the Holy Ark and his lectern, in his *tallit* bag, among his bookshelves and in the pockets of his clothing — there was no place clear of them. This showed great cruelty… (Abba Balosher, "*Bialik Be-Volozhin*," *Moznayim*4 [1935], pp. 123-124).

[9] We may find evidence of this in a letter he wrote to Hovevei Zion in the year 5649 (1888-1889):

> I have been shocked to see how lies and hypocrisy have arisen, to devise evil schemes against our brothers those who live in the colonies in our Holy Land…
> "May God cut off all duplicitous lips" (*Tehillim*12:3), for with duplicity they make the mitzva of settling the land a sin, and they dissuade the many from performing this *mitzva*. This is one of the ten things precluding repentance!(*Iggerot Tziyon* [Jerusalem, 5683], 101).

[10] This means that one must be circumspect in receiving the good.

[11] See also his commentary to *Bereishit* 49:6-7.

[12] These are consumed by a heavenly fire, while the faction led by Datan and Aviram are swallowed by the earth.

[13] For example, Rashi explains that the Levites must not look at the time when the vessels are "swallowed" by their coverings, and the Rashbam explains that the Levites may not look when the *Mishkan* is disassembled ("swallow" means to take apart and disassemble, as in*Eikha* 2:5, "He has swallowed all of her palaces").

[14] Apparently, this should say "his way".

GREAT BIBLICAL EXEGETES
By Dr. Avigail Rock

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In memory of our beloved father and grandfather,
Fred Stone, Ya'acov Ben Yitzchak,
whose yahrzeit is Sunday 25 Tammuz, July 15th.
Ellen, Stanley, Jacob Chaya, Zack, Yael, Ezra, Yoni, Eliana, and Gabi Stone.

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Lecture #29:
Shadal

A. Biography

R. Shemuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865) — hereinafter, Shadal — was born and lived in Italy. His father, R. Chizkiya, was a carpenter and Torah scholar.[1] When he was four, Shadal began studying the Pentateuch with his father,[2] while paying special attention to the *peshat* of the verse, without relying on previous exegetes. His father saw to Shadal's academic and Torah studies.

Shadal was sent to a modern Talmud Torah, in which, in addition to religious subjects, they studied sciences and languages, including German, Italian, French and Latin, languages which in the future would prove very influential upon Shadal's commentary.

In the year 1821, Shadal wrote an Italian translation of the *Siddur*. With the publication of this translation, Shadal became well-known among the Jews of Italy. Afterwards, Shadal published his poems[3] and his essays on biblical philology. In the year 1826, he married the daughter of his teacher, R. Raphael Baruch Segré. In the year 1829, when the Rabbinic Seminary of Padua was opened, he was appointed as one of the first two instructors upon the recommendation of Yashar,[4]and this began a new period of his life.

Shadal became one the dominant figures among Italian Jewry and one of the founders of the*Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement. Even though he was an observant Jew, his critical method had a great influence upon the Haskalah movement. Shadal was known as a linguist, a Hebraist, an exegete, a researcher of medieval literature, and a poet. Dozens of his essays were published in various periodicals in his time. In the year 1831, he finished writing his book *Ohev Ger* (Lover of the Sojourner) about Targum Onkelos, and he even named his firstborn son Ohev-Ger.

Though he enjoyed great success in academic research and his impressive intellectual achievements, Shadal's personal life was full of pain. In the year 1841, his wife, Bilha Bat-Sheva, died after long years of mental illness, during which Shadal tended to her.

Shadal then married his wife's sister, and she bore him two sons and one daughter; one of the sons died at age seven. Some years after this, in 1851, his daughter Malka passed away as well, at the age of eighteen. In the year 1854, his firstborn son Ohev-Ger, who was also his favorite student, died at the age of 24. The death of his firstborn son shattered his spirit, and over the next few years, his body deteriorated. He suffered from poverty[5] and blindness, and he died in the year 1865.

B. The Commentary

Source and Scope

Shadal comments mainly on the Torah and the books of *Yeshayahu*, *Yirmeyahu, Yechezkel, Mishlei*,and *Iyov*. The first edition of his commentary on the Torah was published in the year 1847, as an addendum to the commentary of the Rambemam (R. Moshe ben Menachem Mendelssohn) on the Torah, called *Ha-Mishtadel*. (The verb "*shadal*" in Aramaic means "to swing", and the reflexive, "*mishtadel*,*"* means "to struggle" or "to insinuate oneself").

Shadal himself did not write a complete commentary on the Torah; the *Peirush Shadal La-Torah*, as it appears in print today, was the product of the editing of Shadal's students, around five years after his death.[6] The commentary was edited according to his printed commentary, *Ha-Mishtadel*, his different essays, and the notes of his lectures in the Rabbinic Seminary. On some issues, Shadal changed his view from that which was published in *Ha-Mishtadel*. He stated in his lectures, in these cases, that "this annuls what was said in *Ha-Mishtadel*."[7]

Characteristics

Shadal's comments point to his thorough knowledge of all of the twisting paths of Jewish exegesis preceding him. Sometimes he quotes the commentaries of his predecessors to agree with them, and sometimes to argue with them.[8] Shadal's knowledge was not limited to traditional Jewish exegesis; he was quite familiar with both Christian exegesis and biblical criticism, and he quotes widely from them, sometimes to support them and sometimes to express reservations. In his introduction to the Book of *Yeshayahu*, Shadal justifies the use of Christian commentators, writing:

> If sometimes I find in them… a new interpretation which is justified on all sides, I do not reject it; I accept it, and I write it in the name of its masters, because my only aim is truth, and our faith, thank God, does not fear the truth.[9]

One of the unique qualities of Shadal's commentary is the exegetical give-and-take between him and his students quoted by him in his commentaries.[10] These debates reveal a modest teacher, who shows love and regard for his students and their views; he is even ready to reject his own view and accept the views of his students. See, for example, his words at the end of his introduction to the Book of *Yeshayahu*:

> Praise and glory also go to all of the beloved and pleasant students, who inclined their ears attentively to the sound of my words. They came along with me into the thick of it to seek the truth, and they helped me by their diligent study to bring the truth out to the light and to devise innovations…

An example of the debate among the students may be found in Shadal's comments on (*Bereishit* 13:16), "I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring will also be counted," in which he cites an exegetical debate between three of his students in explaining the verse:

> David Chazak said that it should be read as if was written in the simple conjugation: "one will count your offspring."[11] Eliezer Avraham Fava responded to him responded that "if one can count the dust of the earth" should be understand as "just as one cannot count," and this will justify saying "your offspring will also be counted" — in other words, "your offspring also cannot be counted." And Shabbetai Ancuna says "if one can count" is an infinitive: "Were it possible to count the dust of the earth, it would be possible to count your offspring as well."

Interpretive Approach

In his introduction to his commentary of the Torah, Shadal lays out three principles of biblical exegesis, and in his introduction to his commentary on the Book of *Yeshayahu*, he determines additional rules. In this framework, we will bring some of his most prominent rules for interpreting the Torah.

1. **Grammar and linguistics** — this principle holds an important place in Shadal's commentary. Aside from his startling command of language in his commentary on *Tanakh*, Shadal uses his wide control of Semitic languages (Aramaic, Syriac, Arabic). This knowledge helped him a great deal in his commentary on the Torah and *Nevi'im*. Thus, for example, in his commentary on the changing of Sarai's name to Sara (*Bereishit* 17:15), he writes that "In Arabic, '*sara'* means to have many offspring." In other words, there is significance to the fact of adding the letter *heh* to our matriarch's name, in keeping with the event which it alludes to - that she will have biological offspring.[12]

Another example of the use of Semitic languages is to explain the difficult word "*nedari*" in the Song of the Sea — "Your right hand, God, *nedari* in strength" (*Shemot* 15:6). Shadal writes:

> It appears that root "*adar"* is cognate to "*azar*" in Hebrew and "*chadar*" in Syriac (which means to surround and encircle), and thus it is similar to "*nezar* in might" (*Tehillim* 65:7), and this is the source of the term "*adderet,"* a type of garb which encircles the body, as well as "*addir*." Ultimately it comes from "*nezar*", and it is a metaphor for strength, as in (*Yeshayahu* 45:5), "I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, *a'azerkha*."

2. **Explaining the verses according to the reality in which they were written**[13] — An example of applying this principle may be found in the commentary upon the reward of the midwives, "And he made houses for them" (*Shemot* 1:21). Shadal explains that midwives in the biblical era were generally women not blessed with their own families, and for

this reason they could work, which required leaving the house frequently. On the basis of this, it is understood that the reward for the midwives is having families of their own.

Another example may be seen in his commentary about the meaning of the coat of many colors which Yaakov gave to Yosef (*Bereishit* 37:3). He explains (according to *Bereishit Rabba* 84:5) that the intent is for a garment which covers the entire body, even hands and feet. The workers in the field wore short clothing, because it would be easier to work in them; a long garment was the dress for men who did not work in the fields. Thus, it became a status symbol. In other words, receiving the coat of many colors from Yaakov symbolizes the fact that Yosef is emancipated from the family chores.

3. **Literary sensitivity** — according to Shadal, in order to understand the holy poetry and the parables of the Torah and *Nevi'im*, the commentator must develop sensitivity to poetry, and in his language, he must "have a poetic soul."[14] Indeed, Shadal has an incomparably poetic soul. This sensitivity is expressed in the commentary on the Torah and the commentary on*Nevi'im*.

For example, he explains the psychological complexity of Yaakov's lengthy response to seeing his son's coat, "It is my son's coat. A fierce animal has devoured him. Yosef is certainly torn to pieces" (*Bereishit* 37:33). Shadal explains that the statement, "Yosef is certainly torn to pieces" is not a pointless repetition of the statement, "A fierce animal has devoured him." They express the different stages of Yaakov's perception of the event:

> At first, when he saw the coat, he said, "It is my son's coat;" afterwards, when he contemplated the blood upon it and what they said about finding the coat, along with the fact that Yosef still had not returned to his house, he considered in his heart, "A fierce animal has devoured him." When this last idea occurred to him, immediately his mercies were aroused for his son, and he pictured in his imagination as if he saw Yosef in the jaws of the animal, and then he called out bitterly, "Yosef is certainly torn to pieces!" — in other words: An unspeakably cruel fate has befallen my beloved son, Yosef!

Many examples of his poetic soul may be found in his commentary on the Song of the Sea (*Shemot*15:1-19), and we will cite a number of them. The Torah uses the singular in "Horse and its rider" (*ibid*. v. 1), which Shadal explains in this way:

> In the poetic parable, singular is better than plural, for the feeling is much stronger because the reader's thoughts flit among many topics. Consider, for example, "Bring justice to the orphan, plead the widow's cause" (*Yeshayahu*1:17). Were it said to bring justice to the orphans and to plead the cause of widows, the parable would lose a great deal of its power, as the reader's thoughts would flit among many orphans and widows. Now, all of them are gathered together into one orphan and one widow…

Another example is the use of Aramaic words in the Song of the Sea — e.g., "*rama*" in the above-mentioned verse, "Horse and its rider He cast (*rama*) into the sea. Shadal explains the use of Aramaic words in the Song of the Sea in the following way:

> Similarly, many unique Aramaic words are used for poetic analogies, such as "*enosh*" instead of "*adam*" [for "human being"]…
>
> This is because the poetic form loves to use words unfamiliar to the masses, as well as ancient and bizarre words. (Similarly, in the Italian language, the poets choose for themselves Latin words or words from Old Italian.) The very unfamiliarity with them will add to them felicity and grace.

This literary sensitivity is displayed also in the legal sections of the Torah, not only in its poetic sections. For example, in *Parashat Mishpatim*, Shadal identifies more than a few instances of wordplay designed, in his view, as mnemonic devices. Thus, for example, we have the following verse (*Shemot* 22:4), which uses the root of *bet/vet-ayin-reish* three times:

> If a man causes a field or vineyard to be grazed over (*yaver*), or lets his beast (*be'iro*) loose and it feeds (*u-vi'er*) in another man's field, he must pay the best of his field or the best of his vineyard.

Shadal explains the verse using the concept of "*lashon nofel al lashon,*" alliteration and paronomasia.

> It uses "*be'iro*"[15] for *lashon ha-nofel al lashon*… and the sentences are stated in this poetic way, so that it will make an impression in the masses' memory.

An additional example of this may be found in the Shadal's comments (ibid. 23:5) on the prohibition of abandoning the fallen donkey of one's enemy, "Forestall leaving (*mei-azov*) him; you shall certainly help (*azov ta'azov*) him with it:" "This is *lashon ha-nofel al lashon*with oppositional meanings."

In other words, the meaning of "*mei-azov*" in the first part of the verse is to abandon, while "*azov ta'azov*" means to help him to unload the burden.

4. **The significance of the cantillation marks** — Shadal attributes great significance to the cantillation marks, and he stresses their role as reflecting interpretive tradition; aside from this, he stresses that the tradition of cantillation marks dates from the first days of the Second Temple, and therefore it is not binding.[16] Indeed, Shadal does not hesitate to argue with the cantillation marks.

Thus, for example, the verse (*Bereishit* 8:11) tells us, "And behold an olive leaf torn off in its mouth." Should we read this: "And behold a torn-off olive leaf was in its mouth" or "And behold, an olive leaf was torn off in its mouth"? Shadal chooses the first option, indicating that the olive leaf was fresh and moist; however, he admits that this stands in opposition to the cantillation marks, which put a pause in between "olive leaf" and "torn off".

Original Interpretations of Shadal

Shadal's commentary contains a wealth of original interpretations which point to his straightforward intellect and clear thinking.

One example of this may be found in the verse, "And she saw that he was good, and she hid him for three months" (*Shemot* 2:2). Biblical exegetes attempt to understand what "good" refers to and to explain the link between the two hemistiches, "And she saw that he was good/ And she hid him."[17] Shadal explains in the following way:

> To me, it appears to be simple, for we call an infant "good" when he is not crying and bawling; if he had been bawling, it would not have been possible to hide him, for his voice would have been heard from far off, but because he was good, she was able to hide him.

C. Textual Considerations

In his relationship to the issue of biblical text, Shadal writes this:

> The tenth principle is that the books of the Holy Writ were kept constantly in the midst of Israel as a precious, beloved treasure, and no one ever set a hand against them to falsify them, to add to them or to take away from them.
>
> Despite this, it would have been impossible, after so many transmissions and so much copying, not to have alternate versions, one of which is correct, emerging from the hands of the author, and the other only the mistake of the copyist scribe. This was more common in previous generations, when books were not bound together in individual volumes…

> However, once they were written in Assyrian script, supreme caution and alacrity was exercised by the sages and the entire nation in keeping the holy books. Thus, there were only very few errors or alternative versions.

In other words, Shadal does not reject totally the possibility of textual errors. We find this explicitly in his commentaries, particular in *Nevi'im*, but also in the Torah.

Thus, for example, we find some interesting comments on Yosef's interpretation of the dreams of his fellow prisoners. The verse (*Bereishit* 40:19) states:

> Yet within three days, Pharaoh shall lift up your head from off you and shall hang you on a tree, and the birds shall eat your flesh from off you.

The difficulty in the verse is that it is not clear why after the killing of the chief baker by decapitation there would be a reason to hang him. Shadal notes that "There are those who say" that the word "from off you" is a scribal error, which comes from the end of the verse, and in the original version, it said, "Pharaoh shall lift up your head," similar to what Yosef says about the chief butler (v. 13).[18] This interpretation engendered opposition from Orthodox Jews on the one hand; on the other hand, low biblical critics saw it as a proof to buttress to their positions. Therefore, it appears to me that despite the fact that Shadal sets out this interpretation in the name of "those who say," there is room to speculate that he is talking about his own view, but in order to avoid conflict, Shadal attributes this to "those who say."

D. View of Halakhic Midrash

Shadal's straightforward mind compels him to sometimes explain the halakhic verses in opposition to the Sages' hermeneutics, which often do not fit with the*peshat* of the verse. Naturally, like the Rashbam, Shadal does not intend to reject the halakhic authority of the Sages and to determine that one should follow Halakha according to his commentaries and to deviate from the Sages; according to him, halakha remains on one side and *peshat* on the other. As to his approach to interpreting passages of biblical law, Shadal himself testifies:

> I have not moved from explaining the verses according to the depth of their simple meaning… and many times against the ruled and accepted law… and I have also explained the reason for their *takkana*.

In other words, in his view, the Sages knew full well that halakhic midrash does not follow the *peshat* of the verse; with this awareness, they used their legislative prerogative to expound the verse as a*takkana*, an institution necessary for the proper order of society. Therefore, Shadal is allowed to explain the verse according to the *peshat*, which is in fact the original meaning of the verse.

An example of this may be found in his interpretation of the law of assault (*Shemot* 21:18-19):

> If men quarrel, and one hits the other with a stone or with his fist, and he does not die but is confined to bed, the one who struck the blow will not be held responsible if the other gets up and walks around outside with his staff; however, he must pay the injured man for the loss of his time and see that he is certainly healed.

The verse talks about bodily injury caused during a dispute between two men. One of the combatants hits the other with a stone or fist, but the blow is not fatal, merely one which requires recuperation. R. Yishmael explains in the Mekhilta that the phrase "with his staff" is metaphorical:

> "With his staff" — in full health; this is one of the three matters that R. Yishmael expounded in the Torah as an metaphor. (*Mekhilta, Mishpatim, Nezikin* 6)

Shadal, on the other hand explains "with his staff" following the *peshat*: if the injured party is able to walk with the aid of a cane ("with his staff") and afterwards dies, the attacker is liable only for payments, for one may say that his death was the result of his negligence, because he was not careful to refrain from exertion during his recuperation. Of the Sages' halakha, he writes, "And this is stringency." Shadal apparently sees in the words of the Sages a *takkana*, according to which the attacker will be cleared only if the victim will return to his original strength and power. Shadal tries to explain the role of the Sages as institutors of *takkana*, not as explicators of *peshat*.

Another example of Shadal's view of explaining halakhic verses in opposition to the Sages is his commentary on the law of the owner of the killer ox (*Shemot* 21:29-30):

> If, however, the bull has had the habit of goring and the owner has been warned but has not kept it penned up and it kills a man or woman, the bull must be stoned and the owner also must be put to death. However, if payment is demanded of him, he may redeem his life by paying whatever is demanded.

The halakhic ruling is that the owner of the ox is not to be put to death by the court; he is only liable to make restitution as the court will determine:

> "And the owner also must be put to death" — by the hands of heaven. You say by the hands of the heaven, or perhaps it is by the hands of man? When it says, "However, if payment is demanded of him, he may redeem his life," it mandates redemption for those put to death by the hands of heaven.[19] (*Mekhilta*, ibid. 10)

Shadal, on the other hand, explains these verses following the *peshat*:

> "And the owner also must be put to death" — According to the *peshat*, he will be put to death by the court, but the Torah allows taking payment, since he did not kill with his hands; it left it in the hands of the judges to adjudicate based on the issue of the person and the issue of the occurrence, whether it is most appropriate to execute him or to allow him to save himself by payment, and how much the payment should be…

In other words, the word "if," according to Shadal, is explained in its regular meaning, as giving a number of options to choose from: indeed, the basic law suggests putting the owner to death, but sometimes, according to the judgment call of the court, it may rule that a ransom payment is sufficient. Shadal apparently would explain that the fact that the normative Halakha precludes putting the owner of the killer ox to death in a case such as this and instead requires that he make restitution is yet another example of the Sages' power and prerogative of *takkana*.

E. The Humane Aspect

Together with the intellectual aspect, Shadal's commentaries are suffused with a humane aspect. Thus, for example, in his commentary to *Shemot* 12:44,"But every slave that is bought for money may eat of it after you have circumcised him," Shadal explains the requirement of circumcising a slave:

> Circumcision of servants is the obligation of the master from Avraham and on…
>
> Thereby, the level of the servant, which is a bit lower than that of his master, is raised. Therefore, immediately after he is circumcised, he may eat of the paschal offering like his master.
>
> Now, towards the end of the Second Temple era, our traits were ruined by the Herodian kings and Israel learned the ways of the non-Jews, and particularly those of the aristocrats and patricians. They yearned to

> emulate the Romans, and as we know, the Romans were cruel to their slaves. Thus, a situation was created in Israel that masters did not want to circumcise their servants so that [the servants] would not think of themselves as Israelites and as human beings.
> Then the Sages of Israel arose and decreed that whoever failed to circumcise his servants could not partake of the paschal offering. Their intent was, in my view, this: anyone who cannot regard his slaves as human beings is not fit to be among those who celebrate the holiday of liberation.

According to Shadal, the Torah is not a book of information and laws; the essential aim of the Torah is the development of the empathy and ethics, and the aim of many commandments is the development of the emotion of compassion. For example, this is what he writes in his commentary on *Vayikra*22:28, "Do not slaughter a cow or a sheep and its young on the same day":

> The aim here is not to show actual compassion to the animals, but to strengthen in in our hearts the attribute of mercy and to distance us from cruelty.[20]

This thought is mentioned in his famous poem, "*Chelek Ke-Chelek Yokhelu*" (Portion by Portion They Shall Eat):

> Curse wisdom if slyness and plotting it inspires,
> Teaching us guile and not letting righteousness soar!
> I hope intelligence is lost forever and sagacity expires
> If kindness and compassion be their casualties of war…
> No, for this reason intelligence and thought were granted
> To see peace sown and kindness planted.

[1] In Shadal's introduction to the Book of *Yeshayahu*, he describes his father:

> My master father, of blessed memory, who was a carpenter, never read Homer… but he read*Tanakh* every day…

In a number of places, Shadal quotes his father's interpretations. For example, in his commentary on*Bereishit* 27:18, Shadal brings in the name of his father an interesting interpretation, in which Shadal's father distinguishes between Yaakov's words to Yitzchak and Esav's words to Yitzchak in the episode of the blessings:

> My master father, of righteous blessed memory, says that Yaakov when he came to his father only said "My father," and he waited to be asked who he was. Esav, on the other hand, immediately when he came before him he explained to him why he came and he did not wait for him to ask him who he was, for he immediately said, "May my father rise and eat…" (*ibid*. v. 31)
> The reasoning of the matter is that Yaakov was afraid that Yitzchak would recognize his voice, and in order to test the matter, he only said first, "My father," and it was in his mind that he might recognize his voice and would say to him: What is it, Yaakov my son? Then he would have spoken to him of other matters and would not at all have mentioned the matter of the blessings. This was not the case with Esav, who was not afraid lest he be found to be a liar; he had no need for this, so he revealed his desire immediately.

[2] Shadal began writing his innovative Torah interpretations at a young age. Indeed, in his comments on the phrase, “brother of Rivka, mother of Yaakov and Esav” (*Bereishit* 28:5), he notes that already in the year 5573, namely when he was thirteen, he was already writing commentaries on the Torah.

[3] In the year 1825, he published a collection of poetry titled *Kinnor Naim.*

[4] R. Yitzchak Shemuel Reggio (1784-1855) was a rabbi, philosopher, academic researcher of Jewish studies, biblical exegete and writer. He was one of the leaders of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement and one of the founders of the Rabbinic Seminary of Padua.

[5] Most of his money was spent on books.

[6] Indeed, Shadal writes in his introduction to the Book of *Yeshayahu* about economic difficulties which delayed printing his commentaries:

> Behold, my soul has pined greatly throughout these years to see my work publicized in the world. Nevertheless, I will not be pained about the gates of its printing being sealed before me. For I have seen that in my passing over it every three years with new students, I am constantly correcting my mistakes and filling in the lacunae found in my work, and in my mouth and my heart I would say: whatever is done from the heavens is for the good.

[7] See, for example, his commentary on *Bereishit*18:19.

[8] In a certain way, Shadal’s commentary is similar to Abarbanel’s commentary in that the two of them are accustomed to quote different interpretations in a critical way, in order to arrive at the most correct interpretation.

[9] Shadal attributes great significance to the truth in a general manner. Among other things, he composed the poem “*Ha-Emet Nissi*” (Truth Is My Banner), in which he describes his readiness to seek the truth despite the insults and indignities he suffers. The sonnet goes as follows:

> Verity and straightness, heaven’s true word
> To you, from youth until now, my troth I plight
> I have set you up a stronghold from every fright
> Drawing the bow, my loins I gird.
> Against those who bend the knees, to falsehood deferred,
> I have seen many, but I fought your fight.
> I have despised deceit, I have loathed plots outright
> On those who are clean of hand, I have honor conferred.
> Therefore, hatred and burden began to sever
> Between me and my dear ones; they thought me senseless and neurotic
> They imagined me crazy and quixotic.
> Black and beautiful, my mistress, until the grave
> For you, the shame of man I brave
> To be an adornment for verity, forever.

[10] In this way, there is a certain similarity to Tosafot’s commentary on the Talmud.

[11] One who can count the dust of the land can also count your seed.

[12] The Shadal also suggest an additional explanation for adding the “*heh”*:

> Perhaps the “*heh*”, an indication of the feminine, is added to “Avraham” and “Sara” as a sign of fecundity.

[13] Shadal puts it this way:

> The fifth principle is to leaver our own place and time and to bring ourselves into the time of the writers and their place. This certainly is not feasible for us to do completely, but a bit of this is possible and achievable. Above all, the exegete must not intend to find favor in the eyes of his contemporaries, to acquire for himself praise and honor, to find many buyers for his books, for this will bring him (even though he has no intention of doing so and never stops loving truth) to subvert the words of the ancients and to bring them closer to the customs of the latter ones.(Introduction to the Book of*Yeshayahu*)

[14] These are his words:

> The eighth principle in holy poetry and prophetic analogies requires, aside from this, that the exegete have a poetic soul, in a way that he will be prepared to go into the internal workings of the thoughts of poets and prophets, to understand the things which were not written but were in the thought of the poet. (Introduction to the Book of *Yeshayahu*)

[15] This is a rarely-used term for one’s livestock.

[16] So he says in his introduction to the Torah:

> Indubitably, the notes and tones have exceedingly great significance at the time that we come to explain the Holy Writ. Indeed, we see that the greats among the exegetes oftentimes have relied on the view of the cantillation, and some of them have even warned us explicitly not to veer from it…
>
> In truth, the view of the cantillation deserves our respect as well as our attention. However, this does not make them infallible, and the biblical exegetes have not forbidden us absolutely the option of taking issue with it.

[17] See, for example, the interpretations of the Ramban and Rashbam ad loc.

[18] An additional example of his textual approach appears in the commentary to *Bereishit* 27:46, on the verse, "And Rivka said to Yitzchak, 'I am disgusted (*katzti*) with my life…'" Shadal relates to the small letter *kuf* of the word "*katzti*":

> It appears to me that the custom of writers in days of yore, when a word would begin with the same letter which appeared at the end of the previous word, they would leave out one of these letters, and perhaps they would note that letter with some sign to know that it stands in the place of two. After some time, they began to add in between the two words the missing letter, and because it was narrow, they wrote it small. Similarly, we find: "*Va-yikra el Moshe*" (*Vayikra* 1:1).

"*Vayikra*" ends with the letter *alef* (written small), and the next word, "*el*" begins with an *alef*. Similarly, "*katzti*" which begins with a *kuf*, follows "Yitzchak", which ends with a *kuf*.

[19] The ransom payment is not an acceptable solution for those who are to be put to death by human hands, i.e., the court.

[20] Similarly, see his words to *Devarim* 20:19, relating to the prohibition of destroying trees:

> But I command you that you shall not cut it down, so that you shall make your soul accustomed to the good trait, not to forget what was good to you.