

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

**Shiur #09d: "*Peshat*" and "*Derash*" – the plain meaning of the text vs.  
*midrash aggada* (homiletical teachings)**

**d. The Rambam and his son, Rabbi Avraham**

The Rambam did not write a systematic commentary on the Torah, but among his various compositions there are places where he addresses the relationship between *peshat* and *derash*. His approach was continued by his son, Rabbi Avraham, who did write a commentary on the Torah and thus devoted more extensive attention to this question.

The Rambam had sought to compose a commentary on *midrashei Chazal*, and in presenting this quest he drew a distinction between two types:

"I hope to write a book collecting all the sages' teachings in this regard from the Talmud and other works. I shall interpret them systematically, showing which must be understood literally and which metaphorically..." (Introduction to *Perek Chelek*)

The Rambam never wrote the book, but he did repeat, in many places, the same distinction between *midrashim* that should be understood literally and others that should be understood metaphorically. In the continuation of the passage above, he speaks of *midrashim* that "seem impossible" and which should be understood "as riddles and parables." Elsewhere he speaks of *midrashim* that are "figurative descriptions," noting: "This style was prevalent in ancient days; everyone adopted it in the same way as poets adopt poetic, figurative expressions."

It appears that in all these statements, the Rambam referred specifically to *midrashim* where the gap between *peshat* and *derash* is clearly apparent. As an example of this type of midrash he cites Bar Kappara's teaching:

"A paddle (*yated*) shall you have upon your weapon (*azanekha*) (*Devarim* 23:14): Do not read the word as '*azanekha*,' but rather as '*oznekha*' (your ear). This teaches that if a person hears something which is improper, he should place his finger in his ear." (*Ketubot* 5a-b)

The Rambam argues that it is clear, in this instance, that Bar Kappara does not mean to indicate that this is the actual meaning of the verse:

"I cannot imagine that any person whose intellect is sound would admit this. The author employs the text as a beautiful poetical phrase, in teaching an excellent moral lesson... This lesson is poetically connected with the above text."

The Rambam's son, Rabbi Avraham,<sup>1</sup> expanded on his father's view. In his *Ma'amar al Derashot Chazal*,<sup>2</sup> he divides *midrashim* into five categories, maintaining that most belong to the fourth – lyrical or metaphorical interpretation of verses. He emphasizes that those *midrashei Chazal* which do not pertain to principles of faith or to matters of halakha, are not to be regarded as binding tradition that must be accepted:

"Know, however, that there are interpretations of verses that do not involve principles of faith, nor any law of the Torah, that have not been passed down as tradition (i.e. as part of Torah). Some of these are logical suggestions, while others are pleasant teachings that are meant figuratively or metaphorically, teaching uplifting messages concerning the words... And it would seem that most of the *midrashim* of *Chazal* belong to this category, for it is universally recognized and agreed by all except for the misguided and the simple-minded that this category of their teachings comprises a mosaic of views..."<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Rabbi Avraham draws a distinction between those *midrashim* that flow from reasoned consideration of the verse, and those whose intention is not to explain the meaning of the verse but rather to use it as a springboard to teach a different lesson. It is this latter sort to which the Rambam refers, and Rabbi Avraham, too, brings a similar example:

"That which our Sages taught in the Gemara, in *Ta'anit* (9a): R. Yochanan said: The text states, 'You shall surely tithe...' (*aser te'aser*). This teaches, 'Take a tithe' (*aser*) in order that you will become wealthy (*tit'asher*)."

Clearly, in such instances, "the teaching does not indicate that the Sage believed this to be what the verse actually meant, heaven forefend."

Concerning *midrashim* – whose interpretation of verses are 'logical suggestions' – R. Avraham emphasizes that the teachings are not to be

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Avraham (1186-1237), son of the Rambam, succeeded his father as Nagid (head) of the Jews of Cairo after the Rambam died in 1204. He authored several works on halakha and Jewish philosophy, including responsa, the work *Ha-Maspik le-Ovdei haShem* (moral and halakhic teachings relating to prayer, with some teachings that go against the approach of his father), and the monograph *Milchamot Hashem*, which he wrote in defense of his father's writings and especially *Moreh Nevukhim*. For more about him and his oeuvre, see Rabbi Reuven Margalio's introduction to *Milchamot Hashem*, Jerusalem 5713, pp. 11-44; the introduction to N. Dana's edition of Rabbi Avraham's *Ha-Maspik le-Ovdei Hashem*, Ramat Gan 5749, pp. 11-48, and the sources he cites on p. 14, n. 1. *Ha-Maspik le-Ovdei Hashem*, originally written in Arabic, was translated into English in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by Samuel Rosenblatt under the title *The High Ways to Perfection*. See also below.

<sup>2</sup> In *Milchamot Hashem* (see previous note), pp. 81-88.

<sup>3</sup> *Milchamot Hashem*, p. 91.

considered as binding, received tradition. For example, he addresses the Tannaitic debate (*Zevachim* 116a) as to what it was that Yitro heard that caused him to come to Moshe in the desert (*Shemot* 18:1):

"I do not doubt R. Yehoshua's teaching concerning 'And Yitro heard,' with regard to what it was that he heard that caused him to arrive – that what he heard about was the war against Amalek. For this arises from reasoning, not from a received teaching. Proof of this lies in the fact that he cites textual evidence to support his claim,<sup>4</sup> whereas if this were a received teaching, he would need no support for it. Further proof lies in the fact that other Sages offer different possibilities for what he might have heard, and if this had been a received teaching they would not have expressed divergent opinions. R. Eliezer states that what Yitro heard about was the giving of the Torah, and he, too, cites evidence in support of his position."

R. Avraham makes two arguments in support of his claim that some *midrashim* do not fall under the category of "received teachings." First, there is the very fact that the Sages find it necessary to cite verses in support of their interpretations; second, there is disagreement between them – and if these *midrashim* had been handed down as a Torah tradition, there would be no need for proof-texts to be cited nor would there be debate about them.<sup>5</sup>

As noted, R. Avraham wrote a commentary on the Torah,<sup>6</sup> in which he implements his approach. As a consequence of his view that the midrash reflects the thinking of the Sages rather than a received tradition, he does not regard *midrashei aggada* as exegetically binding, and therefore explains

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<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Yehoshua teaches: "It was the war against Amalek that he heard about, for this verse follows after the conclusion of that episode, with the words, 'Yehoshua harried Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.'"

<sup>5</sup> In this regard, R. Avraham applies to Biblical commentary a well-known principle set down by his father in the context of halakha: that no law that had been given to Moshe at Sinai as part of the Oral Law could be subject to disagreement (see, for example, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Mamrim* 1:3: "There can never be any difference of opinion with regard to matters received through the Oral Tradition. Whenever there arises a difference of opinion with regard to some matter, this shows that it was not received as a tradition from Moshe.")

<sup>6</sup> The commentary was originally written in Arabic, and was translated by Efraim Yehuda Weisenberg on the basis of a sole manuscript dating to 1375. The work was unknown until the discovery of the manuscript in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and therefore while R. Avraham's other writings were known throughout the Diaspora, neither the Rishonim nor later scholars make any mention of his commentary on the Torah. The extant commentary includes *Sefer Bereishit* (except for chapters 2-20) and *Shemot*. It is not clear whether the original work included more. Concerning the exegetical approach of R. Avraham, see Y. Nevo, "Perusho shel R. Avraham ben ha-Rambam la-Torah", *Sinai* 113, 5753 pp. 230-254; C. Cohen, *Be-shalom u-ve-Mishor – Middot ve-De'ot be-Perush ha-Torah shel Rabbi Avraham ben ha-Rambam*, Jerusalem 5759; A. Bazak, "Perusho la-Torah shel Rabbi Avraham ben ha-Rambam", in: M. Bar Asher et al (eds.), *Teshura le-Amos*, Alon Shevut 5767, pp. 109-124; N. Ilan, "Hanachot Teologiot ve-Ekronot Parshaniim: Le-Tivo u-le-Yichudo shel Perush R. Avraham ben ha-Rambam la-Torah", *Davar Davur al Ofanav*, Jerusalem 5767, pp. 31-70; Y. Yinon-Fenton, "Ha-Rambam u-Beno, Rabbi Avraham ben Moshe – Hemshechiut ve-Shoni," in: A. Ravitzky (ed.), *Ha-Rambam – Shomranut, Mekoriut, Mahapkhanut*, vol. I, Jerusalem 5769, pp. 17-42.

many verses in accordance with their plain meaning, noting that the *midrashei Chazal* belongs to one of the two aforementioned categories.

We will first note some examples of places where R. Avraham argues that the midrash is offered as 'figurative ornamentation,' rejecting any possibility of using it to explain the text and even negating any connection between them.

1. In the introduction to the story of the sale of the birthright we read, "Esav came from the field, and he was faint" (*Bereishit* 25:29). The midrash posits that Esav returned from an act of murder,<sup>7</sup> or that he was spent after "having engaged in relations with a girl who was betrothed." R. Avraham explains the verse in the plain sense: "He was faint' – the road was long, and great effort is exerted in hunting, and perhaps it had been a long time since he had eaten." He then offers the two possibilities set forth in the midrash: "The midrashic teaching that he killed someone is similar to the teaching that he engaged in relations with a girl who was betrothed; these are teachings that bestow figurative, metaphoric beauty, and they are pleasant and make sense to those who involve themselves with such midrash, but they are not necessarily so, nor do they approximate the actual meaning of the verse, for those seeking its true meaning."
2. Commenting on the verse, "Yitzchak loved Esav for games was in his mouth (*ki tzayid be-fiv*)" (*Bereishit* 25:29), Rashi cites the midrashic teaching<sup>8</sup> that Esav "would entrap [Yitzchak] and deceive him with his words." R. Avraham writes, "There are some beautiful teachings which treat the word '*be-fiv*' as referring back to Esav – in other words, that he pursued Yitzchak's love by means of his words, which indicated his observance of the way of God. This is a wonderfully apt description of a certain nature, even though it is not the meaning of the verse."
3. In Yitzchak's blessing to Yaakov he says, "May God give you of the dew of the heavens and of the fat places of the earth" (*Bereishit* 27:28). The midrash<sup>9</sup> teaches: "'Of the dew of the heavens' – this is the manna, as it is written, 'God said to Moshe: Behold, I will rain bread from the heaven for you...'" (*Shemot* 16:4)." Here R. Avraham comments, "How sweet is the midrashic teaching of the Sages that 'of the dew of the heavens' hints to the manna... but it is a wonderful and beautiful metaphor, not a true interpretation."<sup>10</sup>

R. Avraham does not view these *midrashim* as interpretations of the text per se; rather, he regards them as teachings that are pleasing in their own right.

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<sup>7</sup> The source of the midrash is *Bereishit Rabba parasha* 63, 12; Theodor-Albeck edition pp. 694-695.

<sup>8</sup> The source of the midrash is *Bereishit Rabba parasha* 63,9; Theodor-Albeck edition p. 693.

<sup>9</sup> *Bereishit Rabba parasha* 66,3; Theodor-Albeck edition p. 747.

<sup>10</sup> For additional examples of similar comments on *midrashim*, see R. Avraham's commentary on *Bereishit* 25:22; 28:22; 38:15; *Shemot* 8:10.

With regard to the other type of *midrashim*, too – those which he defines as being based on "reasoned consideration" – R. Avraham maintains that one may disagree with them on the basis of one's own reasoning. The following are two examples:

1. We have already made mention of Ibn Ezra's discussion of Yitzchak's age at the time of the *akeda*. R. Avraham, too, citing his father, rejects the midrashic teaching that Yitzchak was 37 years old at the time.<sup>11</sup> He writes: "But my father and teacher, of blessed memory... said that if this was so, then Yitzchak's obedience in this act would truly have been a greater act than Avraham's obedience, and Yitzchak should have received an even greater promise and reward than what was promised to Avraham, yet there is nothing in the text to suggest that this is what happened."
2. Concerning the verse that lists the children of Leah who went down to Egypt – "All the souls of his sons and daughters were thirty-three" (*Bereishit* 46:15) – there is extensive commentary, since a count of the names adds up to only 32. *Chazal* explain that included in the total is Yocheved, who "was conceived in Canaan and born in the land of Egypt."<sup>12</sup> R. Avraham writes, "That which *Chazal* taught about this... has no support in the text; if it is halakha, we accept it, but the opinion of Ibn Ezra is that it was Yaakov himself who completed the total of thirty-three, and this is the most proper of the commentaries. Support for this is to be found in the verse at the beginning of the count: 'Yaakov and his sons...' – indicating that the number is completed with his inclusion."<sup>13</sup>

Thus R. Avraham, son of the Rambam, also joins the prevailing spirit of the medieval commentators in explaining the text in accordance with its plain meaning, maintaining a clear separation between *peshat* and *derash*.

## f. Summary

We have seen that classical commentators insisted that the *peshat*, the plain meaning of the text, be viewed as an independent form of interpretation from *derash*. It followed, for all of them, that the attempt to understand the text on the plain level constitutes a highly significant part of the overall goal of understanding God's word as embodied in the Torah. The plain text includes within itself all that is needed for its interpretation, and should be understood as reflecting normal manners of human speech and reason. The *derash* is perceived as a level distinct from the *peshat*, and there are different views regarding its significance – ranging from opinions that do not regard it as requiring in-depth study, to opinions that view it as an even more important level than the *peshat*. However, according to all the views that we have examined, the distinction between *peshat* and *derash* is a vital one.

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<sup>11</sup> See *Bereishit Rabba Vilna parasha* 56,8.

<sup>12</sup> *Bereishit Rabba parasha* 94,9; Theodor-Albeck edition p. 1180.

<sup>13</sup> See also what he writes in this regard on *Shemot* 2:1.

The commentators used logical considerations in the distinction that they drew between *peshat* and *derash*, and thereby bequeathed a legacy for future generations as to how the text should be approached, and in which ways the plain meaning of the text distinguishes itself from the midrashic lessons derived from it.

Moreover, they also paved the way for the innovative insights of all future generations into the *peshat*, in accordance with Rashi's assertion that the "plain meaning of the text is refreshed each day." Or, as Rabbi Yom-Tov Lipman Heller, author of the *Tosafot Yom Tov* (in his commentary on *Nazir* 5:5), puts it: "One is entitled to interpret the text, as we see that commentators have been doing since the times of the Gemara." Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, in the introduction to his *Or ha-Chaim* on the Torah, writes:

"Sometimes I expound on the plain meaning of the text in a manner that is different from the teaching of *Chazal*, and I have already stated my position that I do not disagree even to the tiniest degree, heaven forefend, with the Rishonim, but those who expound on the Torah are entitled to 'cultivate it and sow it' – 'a light sown for the righteous,' and the Land of the Living produces fruit from each and every seed that is sown in it by one who studies the Torah."

In view of this, we must conclude that the path proposed in our times by those in the Chardal (charedi-nationalist) camp, which negates the legitimacy of study of *peshat* and denies its distinction from *derash*, is actually a deviation from our classic exegetical tradition. The protest against the study of *peshat* is a protest against the path followed by the greatest of Torah commentators throughout history.

The ability of every generation to study the plain text and to arrive at new insights is a most tangible expression of the relevance of Torah to our lives. The *peshat* commentaries never ceased to express new insights and illumination – not in the time of *Chazal*, nor during the Middle Ages. The text continues to be illuminated anew, day after day, using new tools that shed bright light on it in every generation, and our generation is no exception.<sup>14</sup>

It should be clear that none of the classical commentators would ever have thought to argue – as some do today – that even if in the past it was permissible to interpret the text in accordance with the *peshat*, in our time we may no longer do so, owing to the inferior level of our generation. On the contrary, Rashi's comment to his grandson, Rashbam, admitting that if he lived longer he would need to write new commentaries in accordance with "the meaning of the plain text which is refreshed every day anew" is a demand and a challenge directed to each and every generation.

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<sup>14</sup> See U. Simon, "Mashma'utam ha-Datit shel ha-Peshatot ha-Mitchadeshim", in: U. Simon (ed.), *Ha-Mikra ve-Anachnu*, Tel Aviv 5739, pp. 149-152; English translation here: [http://www.lookstein.org/articles/simon\\_peshat.htm](http://www.lookstein.org/articles/simon_peshat.htm) ("The Religious Significance of the *Peshat*").

If we see ourselves as the proud descendants and inheritors of those who live Torah and learn Torah, we dare not forego our responsibility to give our own generation's interpretation to the text, as has every other generation before us.

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