

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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**GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS**

**By Dr. Avigail Rock**

**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<sup>1</sup> and his brother R. Moshe.<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> 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 "*Sefer Mikhlo*" (the Book of the Array). *Sefer Ha-dikduk* deals with Hebrew grammar; *Sefer Ha-shorashim* is a Hebrew lexicon.<sup>4</sup> The importance of these works to the sphere of biblical

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1 He was an important exegete in his own right, who wrote many commentaries to Torah and *Nevi'im*. 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 Mikhlo*:  
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

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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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***.

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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 *Mefarshai 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.

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*.<sup>7</sup>
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.<sup>8</sup> 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):

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<sup>7</sup> See *Bereishit* 24:32, s.v. “*Va-yitten*,” “*U-mayim*.”

<sup>8</sup> 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.

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.”<sup>9</sup> 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

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<sup>9</sup> 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.

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,<sup>10</sup> 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

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<sup>10</sup> 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.

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.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes, the version of the Radak is different from the version which we have.<sup>12</sup>

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

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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.

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*.<sup>13</sup> 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

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<sup>13</sup> 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*!



superfluous, and it would have been enough to write “and he wept for him.”

<sup>14</sup>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*.<sup>15</sup> 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

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<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> The Radak’s commentary on *Tehillim* was one of the first books in Hebrew.

exiles is moaning and crying out from the exile, desiring the Holy Land, hoping that the glory may return to it. (*Ibid.* 42:2)

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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.<sup>16</sup>  
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,<sup>17</sup>  
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*,<sup>18</sup> there is no Torah" is the moral.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

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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.