

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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**GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS**  
**By Dr. Avigail Rock**

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This week's shiurim are dedicated in loving memory  
of Yehuda Nattan Yudkowsky z"l whose yahrzeit is 17 Cheshvan  
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**Lecture #2:**  
**Saadia Gaon**

**A. BIOGRAPHY**

Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon ben Yosef (882-942)<sup>1</sup> — 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,<sup>2</sup> 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

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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.

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 7<sup>th</sup> 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 8<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> The command

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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 12<sup>th</sup>-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.

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*),<sup>4</sup> 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*,<sup>5</sup> 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

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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.

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.<sup>6</sup> 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

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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.”

meant to be clear, logical and understood by the Arabic-speaking target audience,<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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".<sup>9</sup>

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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* (1:9). 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.

- 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.<sup>10</sup>
- 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.<sup>11</sup>
- 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:<sup>12</sup>

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.

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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*.

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:<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> 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."<sup>15</sup> It means to say: so must a punishment be put upon him.

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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.

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*.<sup>16</sup>

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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?



## 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.

(Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch)

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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.]