

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

**Shiur #9a: "*Peshat*" and "*Derash*" –
*Midrash Aggada***

a. Introduction

Much has been written in the attempt to define the terms "*peshat*" and "*derash*,"¹ which have their origin in the teachings of *Chazal*.² It could happen that in a given debate over the explanation of a verse, everyone could agree that one of the proposed interpretations is a "*peshat*" one, while the other interpretation is a "*derash*" one, and yet disagree with one another as to which one is which! In fact, a well-known aphorism contends that "My interpretation of the verse represents the *peshat* (i.e., the plain meaning of the text), while yours represents *derash* (a homiletical lesson representing a different level of interpretation)." For the purposes of our discussion, we will assume the following definition:

"*Peshat* assumes that 'the Torah speaks in the language of human beings,'³ and that it should be understood in the same manner in which human speech is usually understood – i.e., in accordance with the rules of grammar and syntax, with consideration for textual context, and within the framework of that which human rational thought deems plausible,⁴ of social convention, and of the laws of nature. *Derash* assumes that the Torah does not speak in the language of man,⁵ and it must be understood in special ways, with attention paid to elaboration and superfluities, and using the hermeneutical laws."⁶

¹ See, for example, A. Touitou, *Rabbi Chaim Ben Attar u-Perusho Or ha-Chaim al ha-Torah*, Jerusalem 5742, p. 48, p. 13; S. Kamin, *Rashi – Peshuto shel Mikra u-Midrasho shel Mikra*, Jerusalem 5746, pp. 11-17; M. Ahrend, *Parshanut ha-Mikra ve-Hora'ato*, Jerusalem 5766, pp. 9-31.

² For discussion of *Chazal's* use of these terms and their meaning, see Kamin, pp. 32-48; D. Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash*, New York-Oxford, 1991, pp. 54-76; Ahrend, pp. 9-16. It is unanimously agreed that it is difficult to find a distinct and clear system in the way *Chazal* related to the differences between the two concepts.

³ See the appendix to this *shiur* for a discussion of the history of the phrase, "The Torah speaks in the language of human beings."

⁴ Obviously, it is clear that the biblical commentator lives within a certain cultural world, and his understanding of the *peshat* is inseparable from this world. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we cannot apply the same definition to the aim of his study (within the world that he is coming from): the desire to understand the text from within its authentic context.

⁵ Obviously, the intention here is that *derash* assumes that the Torah does not speak **only** in the language of human beings; it does not mean to negate the plain meaning of the text.

⁶ A. Touitou, *Ha-Peshatot ha-Mitchadshim bekhof Yom – lyyunim be-Perusho shel Rashbam la-Torah*, Jerusalem 5763, p. 55. His insightful comment concerning other definitions (ibid. 54, n. 8) is worthy of note: "Words about the 'objectivity' of the *peshat* as opposed to the 'subjectivity' of *derash* are in fact the evaluation of [the respective interpretations on the part of] the scholars, and not definitions reflecting the view of the commentators."

A huge body of midrashic literature was created, starting from the time of *Chazal* and up to the end of the Middle Ages. *Midrashei Chazal* were widely disseminated and highly popular among Torah scholars – especially those *midrashim* familiar to us from the commentaries of Rashi, who was fond of integrating them into his work. For many scholars, a large number of *midrashim* became integral to the content of the text itself.

Midrashim may be divided into two main types: *midrashei halakha*, pertaining to laws that are derived from the verses or based upon them; and *midrashei aggada*, pertaining to the non-legal parts of the Torah. In this chapter we will be discussing *midrashei aggada* and our attitude towards them; in the next chapter we will turn our attention to *midrashei halakha*.

In recent years in Israel, we have witnessed two different trends within the Religious-Zionist community: on the one hand there are rabbis and religious *Tanakh* scholars, many of them graduates of Yeshivat Har Etzion and associated institutions, who propound the study of *Tanakh* on the level of *peshat*, sometimes making cautious use of academic tools and the accumulated knowledge of the academic world. Amongst this group special mention should be made of Rabbi Mordekhai Breuer, *zt"l*, and – may they live long – Rabbi Yoel bin Nun and Rabbi Yaakov Medan, who have raised a generation of students and students' students who study *Tanakh* in depth, on the level of *peshat*, as an integral part of the world of the *beit midrash*.

On the other hand, there are rabbis and scholars of a more Charedi-National (*Chardal*) orientation, who view the study of *Tanakh* on the level of *peshat* as a dangerous innovation, and therefore rule out the study of *peshat* of *Tanakh* in our generation. *Tanakh* is not studied much amongst these circles, and the main approach to such study relies on *midrashei Chazal* or exegesis in Hassidic or kabbalistic style.⁷

In this chapter we will seek to demonstrate that the approaches that ignore the level of *peshat* represent a substantial deviation from the path of most of the major medieval biblical commentators. These commentators interpret the text on the level of *peshat* and proceed from the assumption that God's word, as recorded in the Books of *Tanakh*, finds expression on the level of *peshat*, too – perhaps principally so⁸ – and for this reason someone who

⁷ In recent years, statements have been heard such as, "We are fortunate enough to have *Chazal*, whose insight was close to the level of prophecy. In the Oral Law it is they who teach us greater depth than what we, with our meager abilities, are able to grasp ourselves. It is essential to know this, that through *Chazal* we see more depth... One can stand in front of a mirror and talk to himself, but this has nothing to do with what the *Tanakh* is saying" (Rabbi Tzvi Tau, *Tzaddik be-Emunato Yichyeh*, Jerusalem 5762, pp. 13-14); "In our *beit midrash* we emphasize the indispensable adherence to *Chazal* in studying *Tanakh*. Without this, the Book of Books is not complete" (Y. Rosen, *Sefer Shoftim be-Gova Chazal*, Jerusalem 5765, p. 9). In the Diaspora, sentiments along similar lines were expressed by Rabbi Aharon Kotler. See *Mishnat Rabbi Aharon III*:179.

⁸ As we shall see below, there are different views among the medieval commentators as to whether *peshat* represents the most important level of understanding, or whether it is an additional level subservient to *derash*.

wants to study God's word must know how to understand the meaning of the text on its plain level. They emphasize that the complementary insights offered by *derash* do not obligate the scholar of *peshat*, and they do not rule out the legitimacy of an interpretation that ignores these insights. In this chapter we will cite some comments in this spirit from the classical biblical commentators, and examine the ramifications of this approach for *Tanakh* study in our generation.

b. The attitude of the Geonim to midrash aggada

The distinction between *peshat* and *derash* is apparent already in the writings of the Geonim of Babylonia, who in many instances are reluctant to be bound to midrashic interpretations of verses. We shall review briefly the attitude of the Geonim to the midrash.⁹

It appears that it was Rabbi Sa'adia Gaon,¹⁰ the first rabbinic biblical commentator, who established the principle that "we do not rely on *aggada*,"¹¹ thereby setting the precedent for many of the *Geonim* to take a different view from that expressed in the midrash – obviously, with a clear distinction between halakha, as binding, and *aggada*, as non-binding. Rav Sherira Gaon writes explicitly:¹²

"Those matters which are inferred from biblical verses, known as midrash and *aggada*, are but conjecture; some of them are substantiated ... but many are not – such as R. Akiva's teaching that the 'gatherer' [of wood on Shabbat, referred to in *Bamidbar* 15] was Tzelofchad,¹³ or R. Shimon's assertion that 'the fast of the tenth month' refers to the 10th of Tevet,¹⁴ and they mention each opinion, but as for

⁹ See Y. Fraenkel, *Darkei ha-Aggada ve-ha-Midrash*, vol. II, Givatayim 1991, pp. 504-507; Y. Elbaum, *Lehavin Divrei Chakhamim*, Jerusalem 5761, pp. 47-64. Among the reasons for this attitude, as Fraenkel and Elbaum note, was the considerable attention invested in polemics against Karaites and even Muslims, who attacked *aggada* from a rationalist position.

¹⁰ Known by his initials – RaSaG (882-942), he was one of the greatest Jewish scholars in the early Middle Ages. He wrote books in the spheres of halakha, *Tanakh*, philosophy, and grammar, and these were a basis for later Jewish scholarship.

¹¹ See B.M. Levin, *Otzar ha-Geonim*: Berakhot, Haifa 5688, *Chelek Ha-Perushim*, p. 91, and n. 10.

¹² Rav Sherira Gaon (906-1006) was the Gaon of Pumbedita, and the author of a great number of responsa. The well-known *Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon* (Letter of Rav Sherira Gaon) deals with the development of rabbinic literature, and the history of the Talmud, the Savoraim and the Geonim.

¹³ See Shabbat 96b. Rabbi Akiva bases his opinion on the hermeneutical principle of the *gezera shava*: "Here the text says, 'And Bnei Yisrael were **in the wilderness**, and they found a man...' (*Bamidbar* 15:32), and later on Tzelofchad's daughters say, 'Our father died **in the wilderness**' (*Bamidbar* 27:3). Just as the later quote refers to Tzelofchad, so does the earlier one." We may assume that Rav Sherira Gaon's reservations concerning this identification related to the fact that if it had indeed been Tzelofchad who had gathered wood on Shabbat, the text would have mentioned him by name – as indeed the continuation of the discussion there would suggest: "R. Yehuda ben Beteira said to him: Akiva, either way you will have to answer for this in the future. If the matter is as you say, then the situation is that the Torah chose to conceal his identity, but you have revealed it. And if it is not as you say, then you are slandering a righteous man."

¹⁴ See *Rosh ha-Shana* 18b, where the opposing view is cited.

us – 'a man is praised according to his reason' (*Mishlei* 12:8). Likewise the *aggadot* brought by their disciples' disciples, such as Rabbi Tanchuma and Rabbi Ushia and the like – **most of them are not substantiated, and therefore we do not rely on the words of *aggada***. The correct interpretations among them are those **which may be backed up by logic and by the text**, but there is no limit or end to *aggadot*."¹⁵

According to Rav Sherira Gaon, *aggada* should be regarded as an educated opinion, not as an authoritative tradition handed down, and therefore the exegete has every right to accept or reject it. The guiding principle, in his view, is the question of the extent to which the *aggada* is based on reason and grounded in the text. Where the connection is strong, the *aggada* may be accepted; where it is not, "we do not rely on the words of *aggada*."

A similar view was adopted by Rav Shemuel ben Chofni Gaon,¹⁶ who drew a clear distinction between matters of halakha and matters of *aggada*, in terms of the obligation to accept them:

"*Aggada* is any interpretation brought in the Talmud that does not explain a commandment. This is *Aggada*, and one should only rely on it within reason. You should know that all laws that the rabbis [of the Talmud] enacted on the basis of a commandment come directly from Moshe our Teacher, may he rest in peace, who received them from the Almighty. One may neither add nor detract from them. But when [the rabbis] interpreted [non-legal] verses, they were expressing their own opinions and what happened to occur to them. We rely on these interpretations only when they are reasonable."¹⁷

¹⁵ Cited in *Sefer Ha-Eshkol*, Hilkhhot Sefer Torah, Albeck edition 60b.

¹⁶ Rav Shemuel ben Chofni (the Gaon of Sura starting from the year 997, d. 1013) wrote works in different spheres, including a Commentary on the Torah and philosophical works. For more about him see A. Greenbaum's introduction to *Perush ha-Torah la-Rav Shmeul ben Chofni Gaon*, Jerusalem 5739, pp. 11-23.

¹⁷ Translation by Dr. Moshe Simon-Shoshan: <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/taggada/02taggada.htm>.) This excerpt is from *Mavo la-Talmud*, which is erroneously attributed to Rabbi Shemuel ha-Naggid. The work is actually an abridged translation of a work by Rabbi Shemuel ben Chofni Gaon, entitled *Mavo el Mada ha-Mishna ve-ha-Talmud*; see Elbaum, p. 52, no. 11, and the bibliography listed there. Further on there are more quotations from the writings of Rabbi Shemuel ben Chofni Gaon, the most strident among them being an excerpt from a letter (originally published by S. Asaf, *Tekufat ha-Geonim ve-Sifrutah*, Jerusalem 5737, p. 283), in which he states, with rhyming literary finesse, that while some of the early Geonim would write *aggadot* to draw the hearts of readers, "we have adopted different paths in writing *halakhot* and traditions, and **these are like fine flour, while the *aggadot* are like chaff...**"

In his commentary on the story of the woman medium consulted by Shaul (*Shemuel I* 28), R. Shemuel ben Chofni Gaon maintains that it is inconceivable that the woman actually conjured up the spirit of Shemuel. In his view, the entire story is one of deceit on the part of the woman, and she herself invents all the messages conveyed to Shaul. He is well aware that *Chazal* understand the episode according to its plain meaning (see, for instance, *Chagiga* 4b; *Sanhedrin* 65b) – i.e., that the woman did indeed raise the spirit of Shemuel, but he writes: "Even though what *Chazal* say in the Gemara suggests that the woman truly raised up

A similar view is expressed by his son-in-law, Rav Hai Gaon:¹⁸

"Rav Hai was asked concerning the distinction between *aggadot* written in the Talmud, regarding which we are charged to remove their corruptions, and other written *aggadot* outside of the Talmud. He replied: Everything included in the Talmud is more clear than that which was omitted. Nonetheless, with respect to the *aggadot* included therein, if it cannot be reconciled or it has been corrupted, one should not rely upon it, for we have a principle that one does not rely upon *aggada*. Yet, we are charged to correct the distortions in anything included in the Talmud, for if a teaching did not contain a midrash, it would not have been included in the Talmud. But if a text lies so corrupted, beyond anyone's ability to edit it, then we must treat it as words which are not legally binding. But regarding other *aggadot* we are not obligated to pay so much attention: if they are true and correct, they should be studied and preached, if not, they should be ignored."¹⁹

Rav Hai Gaon maintains that a distinction should be drawn between the *aggadot* found in the Babylonian Talmud, and those that do not appear there. In the case of the latter, the guiding principle is that "if it is reasonable and good – it is studied and taught; if not – we do not pay attention to it." Concerning the *midrashim* that appear in the Gemara, on the other hand, greater efforts should be exerted in order to understand them, but here too – "if they make no sense, and have been corrupted, they are not to be relied upon."

Elsewhere the Geonim discuss the midrashic interpretation of the verse, "And it shall be on that day that there shall be no bright light (*or yekarot*) but thick darkness (*ve-kipaon*)" (*Zekharia* 14:6):

"What is the meaning of the terms '*yekarot*' and '*kipaon*'? Rabbi Elazar taught: This means that the light that is precious (*yakar*) in this world, is considered of no value (*kapuy*) in the World to Come. R. Yochanan taught: These refer to the laws concerning leprosy and the ritual impurity of a tent in which there lies a corpse; these are dear [i.e., acquired at great cost, requiring great effort to understand] in this world, but are cheap [i.e., easily understood] in the World to Come. R. Yehoshua ben Levi taught: These refer to people who are honored in this world, but will be considered unimportant in the World to Come."

Shemuel, **such statements cannot be accepted where they run counter to rational thought**" (quoted in the commentaries of R. Yehuda ben Bil'am and Radak on *Shemuel* I 28).

¹⁸ Rav Hai Gaon (939-1038), son and heir of Rav Sherira Gaon of Pumbedita, and son-in-law of Rav Shemuel ben Chofni, Gaon of Sura, is considered the last of the Geonim. His best-known works include *Mishpetei Shevu'ot* and *Sefer ha-Shetarot*.

¹⁹ Translation by Mark Goldenberg

<http://www.cardozo.yu.edu/sites/default/files/Berachyahu%20Lifshitz.%20Aggadah%20Versus%20Haggadah,%20Towards%20a%20More%20Precise%20Understanding%20of%20the%20Distinction.pdf>

The Geonim devote brief discussion to these interpretations, but conclude: "These are all *midrashim* and *aggadot*... and there are other ways of understanding this verse."²⁰

To conclude this brief review, let us consider what Rabbenu Chananel²¹ writes in his commentary on *Chagiga* 12a concerning the many *midrashim* cited there: "These are all *midrashim*, and we should not be too exacting with them, holding them up to rational evaluation."

The critical attitude of the Geonim towards midrash was not passed down to later generations. During the Middle Ages the attitude changed, and midrash came to occupy a central and significant place in Jewish scholarship. For instance, in his Introduction to the *Commentary on the Mishna*, the Rambam writes:

"Do not imagine that the *midrashim* brought in the Talmud are of little importance, or of little value. They serve an important purpose, insofar as they include some profound allusions to wondrous matters, accessible to those who study these *midrashim* in depth. From them we understand something of the absolute, unsurpassed good, and they reveal some Godly matters, matters of truth, which these wise men concealed within them, and which have been sought by generations of philosophers."

Nevertheless, despite the value given to *midrashim*, the distinction between *derash* and *peshat* is still maintained, and the legitimacy of *peshat* as an independent level of interpretation in its own right is preserved. The medieval biblical commentators maintained the distinction systematically, throughout their commentaries, as we shall see in the next shiur.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

APPENDIX – THE HISTORY OF THE PHRASE, “THE TORAH SPEAKS IN THE LANGUAGE OF HUMAN BEINGS”

Originally, the statement that "The Torah speaks in the language of human beings" was meant in a rather limited context. Rabbi Akiva's approach was that it is necessary to seek the reason for every instance where the Torah uses an expression involving a repetitious phrase – such as "*hikaret tikaret*" (Bamidbar 15:31); "*bashel mevusha*" (*Shemot* 12:9); "*shaleach teshalach*" (*Devarim* 22:7), etc., while Rabbi Yishmael rejects this exegetical principle, maintaining that "the Torah speaks in the language of human beings" – i.e., in using these grammatical forms, the Torah does not mean to teach us anything extra; rather, the situation is "Just as when a person is telling his friend to do something: if he wishes to urge him, he repeats himself and commands him twice over; thus, the text doubles its language, in order to urge [us]" (*Torat*

²⁰ *Teshuvot ha-Geonim Harkaby*, siman 353.

²¹ Rabbenu Chananel ben Chushiel (965-1055) was the first to write a commentary on the majority of the Babylonian Talmud. He was one of the greatest scholars in the early period of the Rishonim.

Chaim, Bava Metzi'a 31b). For instance, concerning the verse, "That soul shall surely be cut off (*hikaret tikaret*), its iniquity is upon it" (*Bamidbar* 15:31), Rabbi Akiva teaches: "'*Hikaret*' – [teaches that the soul will be cut off] from this world; '*tikaret*' – [it will be cut off] from the World to Come" (*Sanhedrin* 64b), but Rabbi Yishmael rejects this interpretation, maintaining that the Torah is simply "speaking in the language of human beings."

This debate is related to the exegetical approach in general: while R. Akiva tended towards extensive, far-reaching exegesis, R. Yishmael adhered more closely to the plain meaning of the text. On the differences between their respective approaches concerning midrash, see A.J. Heschel, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted Through the Generations*, Bloomsbury 2006, pp. XLI-LIX.

It should be noted that many of the Rishonim extended the use of the principle that "the Torah speaks in the language of human beings" to apply also to the expressions in the Torah that seem to attribute some corporeality to God. Thus, for example, the Rambam writes (*Hilkhot Yesodei haTorah* 1:12): "...All such [descriptions] and the like which are related in the Torah and the words of the Prophets – all these are metaphors and imagery. [For example,] 'He who sits in the heavens shall laugh' (*Tehillim* 2:4); 'They angered Me with their emptiness' (*Devarim* 32:21); and 'As God rejoiced' [*ibid.* 28:63]. With regard to all such statements, our Sages said: 'The Torah speaks in the language of man.'"

Similarly, Radak writes (in his commentary on *Yirmiyahu* 14:8), "In many places the Torah speaks about the Creator using the language of man, attributing to Him sight and hearing and smell, a hand, a foot – in the manner of human speech, but all is meant metaphorically, so that people can understand." For an in-depth discussion on the use of the phrase from the period of the Talmud through to the Rambam and its connection to the philosophy of religious language, see Margalit and Halbertal, *Idolatry*, Harvard University Press, 1992, pp. 54-62.