

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

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

**c. *Peshat* Commentators in France (part 1)**

**1. *Rashi***

As noted in the previous *shiur*, Rashi often incorporates *midrashim* in his biblical commentary. He was the first commentator to draw a clear distinction between commentary on the level of *peshat*, and teachings on the level of *derash*. He sets forth his exegetical approach most concisely:

"There are many *midrashei aggada*, and our Sages have set them down and ordered them in *Bereishit Rabba* and the other midrashic collections. My intention is only [to teach] the plain meaning of the text and such *aggada* that clarifies the words of the verses, so that each word is properly understood in context." (Rashi on *Bereishit* 3:8)

Rashi sets himself a dual objective: to explain "the plain meaning of the text," and also to cite midrashic interpretations, when they answer to the definition of "clarifying the words of the verses so that each word is properly understood." In so doing, Rashi implicitly expresses the view that there is *aggada* that belongs to a different category – teachings that do not match the plain meaning of the text. The distinction between them is not clear-cut; it is not always clear how Rashi selects the *midrashim* that he cites in light of this criterion.<sup>1</sup> In any event, he often proposes interpretations for the text in accordance with "the plain meaning" and in accordance with "its midrashic interpretation," and in many instances he notes explicitly that he is citing a *midrash aggada* which does not match the plain meaning of the text. Some examples include:

"There are *midrashei aggada* [on this matter], but they cannot be resolved with the plain meaning" (Rashi on *Bereishit* 3:22);

"There is a *midrash aggada*, but I seek only to address the plain meaning" (ibid. 3:24);

"And there are *midrashei aggada* on this matter, but this is how the text is to be understood" (ibid. 4:8);

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<sup>1</sup> On this issue see, inter alia, Kamin's book; N. Leibowitz and M. Ahrend, *Perush Rashi la-Torah – Iyyunim be-Shitato*, vol. II, Tel Aviv 5750, pp. 363-406; A. Grossman, *Emunot ve-De'ot be-Olam shel Rashi*, Alon Shevut 5768, pp. 43-60; Y. Jacobs, "*Peshutam shel Mikraot*," *Shenaton le-Cheker ha-Mikra ve-ha-Mizrach ha-Kadum* 22.

"And there is a *midrash aggada*, yet this is how the text is to be understood" (ibid. 19:15).

Rashi elaborates somewhat in explaining his approach at the beginning of *parashat Vaera*. The verse reads,

"And I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, by [the Name] El Sha-dai, but My Name [the Tetragrammaton] I did not make known to them. And I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Kena'an" (*Shemot* 6:3-4).

Rashi (commenting on verse 9) addresses the question of why mention is made here of the forefathers, and he cites the midrash (from *Sanhedrin* 111a):

"Our Sages interpret this in connection with what is written previously, where Moshe said, 'Why have You dealt badly...' (*Shemot* 5:22). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Alas for those who are gone and no more to be found! I should mourn the deaths of the forefathers, for many times I revealed Myself to them by the name of El Sha-dai, yet they did not say to Me, What is Your Name? You say, [if Bnei Yisrael question whether I am truly sent by God, and they ask,] 'What is His Name?' – what shall I tell them? (*Shemot* 3:13). When Avraham sought a burial plot for Sara, he did not find one, until he was forced to purchase a plot for a great sum of money. Likewise, Yitzchak was challenged concerning the wells that he dug [but he did not question Me], and in the same way Yaakov 'purchased the piece of land' in order to have somewhere to pitch his tent (*Bereishit* 33:19). Yet they did not question My character. You, on the other hand, ask, 'Why have You dealt badly...' (*Shemot* 5:22)."

However, Rashi raises a difficulty with regard to this midrash:

"The midrash does not match the text, for several reasons: first, the verse does not say, 'But they *did not ask* concerning My Name'; [rather, it says 'I did not make it known to them']... And furthermore, how does this understanding fit in with what comes next in the verse – 'And also I have heard...' 'Therefore say to Bnei Yisrael...' (*Shemot* 6:5-6)?"

Rashi therefore establishes the following principle:

"Therefore I say that the verse should be explained in accordance with its plain meaning, each word being understood in its context, while the midrashic interpretation may be expounded upon, as it is written, 'Is My word not like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer shattering the rock?' (*Yirmiyahu* 23:29) – i.e., God's word is like the splintering of a rock into many sparks."

With these words Rashi lays the foundations for the simultaneous

parallel existence of different levels in biblical exegesis, and the legitimacy of independent exegesis on the level of *peshat*. His basic assumption is the polysemous nature of the text: i.e., it contains multiple meanings accessible through different levels and modes of interpretation, without one level cancelling out the significance another. For this reason, the level of *peshat* has value and significance in its own right.

Rashi's commentary had a tremendous impact on his generation, and the *peshat* school of exegesis in France grew and flourished.<sup>2</sup> Prominent Jewish scholars of the late 11<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries who wrote *peshat* commentaries include Rabbi Yosef Kara and Rashbam, whose approaches we will examine presently. However, it should first be noted that Rashi himself was aware of the processes that his generation had undergone in the return to a study of the plain level of the text – as evidenced by the testimony of his grandson, Rashbam, in his commentary at the beginning *parashat Vayeshev* (*Bereishit* 37:2):

"The lovers of [rational] thought should understand and think about what our Rabbis have taught us, namely that 'no verse loses its simple meaning' (*Shabbat* 63a). This is true even though the essence of the Torah comes to teach and make known to us – through allusion in the literal text – *aggada* and principles and laws, by way of [seeming] superfluity of language, and through the thirty-two hermeneutical principles of R. Eliezer, son of R. Yossi ha-Gelili, and through the thirteen hermeneutical principles of R. Yishmael.

The earlier scholars, owing to their piety, were inclined to focus on the exegetical derivations, which are the essence. As a result they were not familiar with the profundity of the plain meaning of the verses. For this reason, the Sages advised, 'Do not accustom your children to *higgayon*, [which is understood as biblical study]' (*Berakhot* 28b), and they also said, 'One who occupies himself with the biblical text is of questionable merit, while one who occupies himself with Talmud – there is nothing more meritorious than this' (*Bava Metzi'a* 33a). As a result of such [teachings], they were not trained for proficiency in the plain meaning of the biblical text...

Rabbeinu Shlomo, my mother's father, the great light of the exile, who explained *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, and *Ketuvim*, dedicated himself to explain the plain meaning of the text, and I, Shmuel, son of his son-in-law R. Meir, of blessed memory, argued with him, in his presence, and he conceded to me that if he had the opportunity, he would write other commentaries, in accordance with the plain meanings which are renewed each day."

Rashbam seeks to explain why it is that until Rashi's time there was no widespread occupation in biblical commentary. In his view, since it is the

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<sup>2</sup> For the reasons behind this expansion, see A. Grossman, *Chakhmei Tzorfat ha-Rishonim*, Jerusalem 5755, p. 471; Touitou, pp. 11-47. Both note that the two principle factors were the 12<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance and the increasing phenomenon of Jewish-Christian disputations. Grossman adds also the influence of the Judeo-Spanish heritage, with the gradual liberation of the Jews of northern France from subservience to German traditions.

*derashot* – the midrashic lessons derived from the text – that represent the "essence of Torah," earlier commentators focused on these lessons, and neglected the study of the plain level, the *peshat*, of the text. Rashi represented a turning point: he awarded extensive attention to the plain meaning of the text in his commentaries on *Tanakh*. However, Rashi himself was aware that his exegesis was not the "last word" in the realm of *peshat*; he acknowledged that if he had time he should indeed compose new commentaries, since "the plain meaning is renewed anew each day." In fact, there is evidence that in certain places Rashi did indeed amend his commentary in light of Rashbam's comments.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. R. Yosef Kara

The *peshat* approach in biblical exegesis is set forth most clearly and unequivocally by Rashi's disciple and colleague, R. Yosef Kara.<sup>4</sup> R. Yosef Kara (c. 1050 – c. 1125) occupied himself with commentary on *Tanakh* and on *piyyutim*, and was among the Rishonim who upheld the importance of studying the plain level of the text. Rashi, who was slightly older than him, makes mention of him several times in his commentaries,<sup>5</sup> as does Rashbam, who was younger than him.<sup>6</sup> R. Yosef Kara engaged most markedly in *peshat*, and expressed his opposition to approaches that supported interpretations that deviated from the plain meaning of the text. The foundation of his view may be gleaned from the following (commentary on *Shmuel I* 1:17):

"Know that when the prophetic text was written, it was written whole and complete, so that future generations would not stumble in it, and in its place it lacks nothing. There is no need to bring proofs from elsewhere, nor midrash, for the Torah was given whole – it was written whole and lacks nothing. The purpose of the *midrashim* proposed by the Sages is to glorify the Torah and to enhance it. But one who is not proficient in the plain meaning of the text, and inclines towards a midrashic interpretation of it, may be compared to one who is drowning in a river, being swept away by its waters, and he grabs whatever comes his way in order to save himself. Whereas had he paid attention to God's word, he would have sought the meaning of the text in its context, and would thereby have fulfilled that which is written: 'If you seek it as you do silver, and search for it as for treasures, then you will understand the awe of the Lord, and attain knowledge of God' (*Mishlei* 2:4-5)."

R. Kara argues that the interpretation of the biblical text must be based solely

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<sup>3</sup> An example is cited by M. Sabbato, "Perush Rashbam la-Torah," *Machanayim* 3, 5753, p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of Rabbi Yosef Kara and his exegetical approach, see A. Grossman, pp. 254-346, and his references on p. 254, n. 1; concerning his *peshat* approach see G. Brin, *Mechkarim be-Perusho shel R. Yosef Kara*, Tel Aviv 5750, pp. 37-45.

<sup>5</sup>For example, "So I heard from R. Yosef..." (Rashi on *Yishayahu* 64:3); "R. Yosef told me this, in the name of R. Menachem" (ibid. 10:24) – the reference here is to R. Menachem ben Chelbo, the uncle of R. Yosef Kara. (For more about him, see Grossman, pp. 340-346.)

<sup>6</sup> For example, "This I heard from my friend R. Yosef Kara..." (Rashbam on *Bereishit* 37:13).

on the data that appear in the verses themselves; *Tanakh* is given over whole, with all the details needed in order to be understood. Hence his fierce opposition to the interpretation of verses based on information that is found only in midrash. R. Yosef Kara expresses himself in a similar vein elsewhere, too; we shall examine a few examples.<sup>7</sup> Concerning the verse at the beginning of the Song of Devora,

"God, when You went out of Se'ir, marching out of the field of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens dripped; the clouds, too, dripped water. The mountains melted from before God; this Sinai, before the Lord God of Israel" (*Shoftim* 5:4-5),

R. Yosef Kara cites a midrash which interprets these verses as a reference to the day of the giving of the Torah; the nations of the world did not wish to receive the Torah, and "the entire world turned on its inhabitants... believing that [God] would return the entire world to its primordial chaos."<sup>8</sup> He goes on to comment:

"This is the midrashic interpretation, but I am unable to reconcile this with the plain text in its context; this is not its plain meaning. Furthermore, the astonishing question is, what does this [verse, in its context,] have to do with the giving of the Torah?... Moreover, **it is not the practice of the prophets, in any of the twenty-four books [of *Tanakh*], to obscure their words in such a way that their meaning must be derived from an aggadic teaching.**"

Here, too, R. Yosef Kara comes back to the idea that all that is needed to understand a prophecy is to be found within the words of the prophecy itself. One cannot arrive at what the prophet means by relying on aggada that is not explicit in the text.

The verse, "And in due course (*li-tekufot ha-yamim*) Chana conceived, and she bore a son" (*Shmuel* I 1:20), is interpreted by *Chazal* as a precise accounting of the period of Chana's pregnancy, lasting six months and two days:

"The minimum number of seasons (quarters) that can be referred to by the plural form, '*tekufot*,'<sup>9</sup> is two; and the minimum number of days that can be referred to by the plural form, '*yamim*,' is two" (Rosh Ha-shana 11a).

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<sup>7</sup> We have already examined one example of his approach, in an earlier chapter, as part of our discussion of the identity of the author of *Sefer Shmuel*.

<sup>8</sup> I have not found the source of this midrash. S. Epstein, in his *Perushei Rabbi Yosef Kara le-Nevi'im Rishonim*, Jerusalem 5733, p. 24, n. 2, writes: "See *Avoda Zara* 2b," but fails to note that the Gemara there is connected only in a most general way to the idea that God approached the other nations to give them the Torah, and they did not accept it; there is no reference at all there to the Song of Devora. *Mikraot Gedolot ha-Keter, Yehoshua-Shoftim*, Jerusalem 5752, p. 107, is unfortunately even more misleading in this regard, since the reference there is simply to *Massekhet Avoda Zara*, without even the qualifying "see".

<sup>9</sup> According to *Chazal*, a "*tekufa*" (season, period of time) means a quarter of a year – i.e., three months.

R. Yosef Kara, however, maintains that this expression simply means, "at that season when Elkana was accustomed to going up to Shilo." He adds:

"I am aware that all those who uphold the *aggada* and the Talmud will scoff at this, for they will not abandon the teaching of the Sages in *Rosh Ha-shana* and in some other tractates, and they will follow their interpretation, but **those who think will think on the proper path to establish the true meaning.**"

R. Yosef Kara is aware that his interpretation is likely to arouse opposition among scholars who are accustomed to reliance on *aggada* and the Talmud, but he holds fast to his view that scholars of the *peshat* – "those who think" – will strive to understand the truth through study of the plain meaning of the text.

In his commentary on *Yishayahu* 5:9, R. Yosef Kara takes his approach one step further:

"Incline your ear and make yourself subservient to the text. For each and every verse expounded by our Sages, may they rest in peace, although they teach a midrash about it, they ultimately say of it, 'No verse loses its simple meaning.' Thus, we have no better exegetical approach to the verse than its simple meaning... And thus Shlomo, king of Israel, said, 'Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to My knowledge...' (*Mishlei* 22:17) – meaning, even though one is commanded to ['incline one's hear' and] listen to the Sages, ultimately the intention is to 'apply your heart to My knowledge.' The verse does not say, 'their (the Sages') knowledge,' but rather 'My (God's) knowledge.'"

Here R. Yosef Kara asserts that interpretation of the text in accordance with *peshat* is not only a legitimate exegetical approach, but is in fact *preferable* to interpretations that turn to *derash*.<sup>10</sup>

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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<sup>10</sup> A similar view is expressed by R. Yishayahu di Trani (the Younger), who lived in 13<sup>th</sup> century Italy (for more about him see Y. Lipschitz [ed.], *Sanhedri Gedola V* [part II], Jerusalem 5732, pp. 5-10): "And they taught, 'The text never loses its plain meaning'; **this is the essence.** Of the midrashim that are expounded around it, some are essentially closer to the *peshat*, while others are [removed from the plain meaning] almost to the level of '*remez*'" (*Piskei R. Yishayahu Acharon z"l*, Sanhedrin 11:7, Wertheimer edition, Jerusalem 5754, p. 194; for more on his assertion here see Elbaum, pp. 96-104); "And the Torah Sages taught that 'the text never loses its plain meaning' – i.e., although any person is entitled to expound on the text in any matter that may be expounded.... **Nevertheless, the plain meaning of the text is its essence, and this is the truth**, for the text never loses its plain meaning" (*Kuntres ha-Raayot le-R. Yishayahu Acharon z"l*, Sanhedrin 90a, Wertheimer edition, p. 91).