

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

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

c. *Peshat* Commentators in France (part 2)

3. *Rashbam*

Let us now turn to the view of Rashbam,¹ one of the greatest of the biblical commentators.² Rashbam, too, asserted the independent status of exegesis on the basis of *peshat*, but unlike R. Yosef Kara, he believed that the midrashic messages, rather than the *peshat* understanding, represented the essence of the Torah. For example, at the beginning of his commentary on the Torah, Rashbam writes:³

"Let those who think understand that all the words of our sages, and their midrashic interpretations, are correct and true. And this is as we find in *Massekhet Shabbat* (63a), '... yet I did not know that a verse cannot depart from its plain meaning.' The essence of the laws and teachings are deduced from [seeming] superfluities in the text, or from linguistic peculiarities, which are apparent in the plain text, in such a way that the essence of the teaching may be deduced from it. For example, 'These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created (*be-hibar'am*)' (*Bereishit* 2:4) – our Sages understand the seemingly superfluous word, '*be-hibar'am*,' as an allusion to Avraham (whose name is made up of the same letters)."

Both Rashbam and R. Yosef Kara base their opinions on the teaching of *Chazal* that "the text never departs from its plain meaning," but they

¹ Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (c.1080 – c.1160), one of the early Tosafists, who authored commentaries on several *massekhtot* of the Talmud (including those printed in the Gemara, *Bava Batra* starting from 29a, and the tenth chapter of *Pesachim*). However, his principal contribution was in the area of biblical commentary, where he left his unique stamp on *peshat*. On Rashbam and his oeuvre, see Urbach, *Ba'alei ha-Tosafot* I, Jerusalem 5743, pp. 45-59; on his exegetical approach see E.Z. Melamed, *Mefarashi ha-Mikra – Darkeihem ve-Shitoteihem*, vol. 1, Jerusalem 5735, pp. 449-514; Y.Z. Moskowitz, *Parshanut ha-Mikra le-Doroteiha*, Jerusalem 5758, pp. 52-65; Touitou.

² See, for example, A. Chakham, "Perushei Rabbi Avraham ben Ezra la-Mikra," *Machanayim* 3, who notes that "a select group of commentators has made its mark on the national consciousness"; study of their commentaries "is considered mandatory for any Jew seeking to study *Tanakh* in-depth." He includes within this group Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Ramban.

³ He adopts a more strident tone in his commentary on *Bereishit* 37:2, as cited above: "The essence of the Torah comes to teach and make known to us – through allusion in the literal text – *aggada* and principles and laws... The earlier scholars, owing to their piety, were inclined to focus on the lessons to be derived, which are the essence."

understand this statement in different ways. According to R. Yosef Kara, it is a testament to the superiority of *peshat* over *derash*, while according to Rashbam it is simply a stamp of legitimacy granted to study of the *peshat*. In addition, while R. Yosef Kara regards the *derash* as separate from the text, according to Rashbam it represents a certain level – even a central dimension – of the text itself, arising from “[seeming] superfluities in the text, or from linguistic peculiarities,” in keeping with the principle of polysemy established by Rashi, his grandfather. In any event, both commentators share a fundamental approach that draws a distinction between *peshat* and *derash*, and views the study of *peshat* as a legitimate realm of study in its own right.

Let us consider a few examples of the many instances in which Rashbam rejects a midrashic interpretation, offering instead an interpretation on the level of *peshat*.⁴

1. Concerning the verse, "Avraham once again took a wife, and her name was Ketura" (*Bereishit* 25:1), Rashi cites the midrashic⁵ teaching that Ketura was Hagar. Rashbam comments laconically that "according to the plain text, this was not Hagar." We may assume that what he means is that it does not seem reasonable that the Torah would be talking about a figure by the name of Hagar who already known to us, with a different name, without mentioning explicitly the name that is already known.
2. Concerning the verse, "And behold, angels of God were ascending and descending upon it" (*Bereishit* 28:12), Rashi cites the midrash:⁶ "First 'ascending' and then 'descending' [although seemingly the order should be reversed, since we would expect the angels to emerge first from the heavens]: the angels who had accompanied him in Eretz Yisrael do not depart from the land, so they ascend heavenward, and the angels appointed over areas outside of Eretz Yisrael descended, in order to accompany him." Rashbam comments, "On the level of *peshat*, there is nothing to be deduced from the fact that 'ascending' is mentioned before 'descending,' for it is a matter of normal manners [*derekh erez*] to mention ascent prior to descent." The term "*derekh erez*" is often invoked by Rashbam as a means of clarifying the plain meaning of the text, in the sense of "what people usually do," social manners, social reality, or laws of nature.⁷ Since a person would usually say "ascending and descending," no special attention should be paid to the fact that the Torah describes the movement of the angels in this order.
3. Following the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, Moshe tells Aharon, "This is that of which God spoke, saying, I shall be sanctified among those who come near to Me, and before all the people shall I be glorified" (*Vayikra* 10:3). The commentators try to ascertain what statement of God Moshe is referring to here. Rashi, citing the midrash,⁸ maintains that

⁴ Melamed (see above), pp. 458-460, presents a detailed list of examples.

⁵ *Bereishit Rabba* 68,12; Theodor-Albeck edition pp. 788-789.

⁶ *Bereishit Rabba parasha* 61,4; Theodor-Albeck edition p. 661.

⁷ See Touitou, p. 31.

⁸ *Vayikra Rabba* 12,2; Margalioth edition p. 257.

this is a reference to the conclusion of the command concerning the building of the *Mishkan*: "And I shall meet there with Bnei Yisrael, and it shall be sanctified through My glory" (*Shemot* 29:43). He adds, "Do not read, '*bi-khevodi*' ('through My glory'), but rather '*bi-mekhubadai*' ('through My honored ones'). Moshe said to Aharon: Aharon, my brother, I knew that the *Mishkan* would be sanctified through those especially appointed by God, but I believed that that it would be either through myself or through you. Now I see that they were greater than me or you." Rashbam rejects this interpretation on logical grounds: "This is not in accordance with the plain meaning. Would God have announced to Moshe, 'Make Me a Sanctuary – and on that very day [that the Sanctuary is ready] the greatest among you will die?'" He therefore proposes a different understanding of the verse.⁹

Although Rashbam accepts the importance of *derash* as a dimension of Torah in its own right – perhaps even as the central dimension – this does not prevent him from sometimes expressing sharp criticism of interpretations that are based on *derash*, when they appear to him to contradict the meaning of the text. In several places Rashbam attacks such interpretations, and the commentators preceding him who proposed them – including even Rashi. For example, concerning the verse, "Dan shall judge his people, as one of the tribes of Israel" (*Bereishit* 49:16), Rashi comments (basing himself on the midrash),¹⁰ "It was concerning Shimshon that [Yaakov] uttered this prophecy." Rashbam comments,

"He who interprets this as a reference to Shimshon did not possess a thorough grasp of the plain meaning of the text. Would Yaakov have meant to prophesy here about a single individual, who fell into the hands of the Philistines, and had his eyes gouged by them, and met his death together with the Philistines – i.e., in such a negative vein? Heaven forefend."

Elsewhere, he writes:

"One who wishes to arrive at the essence of the plain meaning of the text here should think about this interpretation that I have proposed, for my predecessors did not understand it at all... Those who interpret [the text here] in reference to other matters are completely misguided."

⁹ He proposes that what Moshe is saying is that Aharon should continue his service despite his mourning: "It is through the service of the *Kohen Gadol*, who is close to Me, serving Me, that I wish to be sanctified, and that My Name and My service not be profaned." He explains: "For the verse reads, 'And he who is the *Kohen Gadol* among his brethren... he shall not allow his hair to grow long, nor rend his clothes... nor shall he depart from the Sanctuary, nor shall he profane the Sanctuary of his God' (*Vayikra* 21:10-12). Thus, if [the *Kohen Gadol*] does not depart [from the *Mishkan*, even under such circumstances as have befallen Aharon], he has thereby sanctified God. And [this interpretation is possible because although these specific commands to Aharon appear later on,] there is no chronological order in the units of the Torah. Therefore – 'Do not abandon the Divine service, for you are the *Kohen Gadol*; do not depart from the *Mishkan* and do not profane it; rather, let God and His service be sanctified through you.'"

¹⁰ *Bereishit Rabba* 98,14; Theodor-Albeck edition p. 1265.

(Rashbam on *Shemot* 3:11)

In several places Rashbam labels the midrashic interpretations offered by his predecessors as *hevel* (nonsense).¹¹

The commentaries of R. Yosef Kara and Rashbam influenced later sages of France, including R. Yosef Bekhor Shor,¹² who proposed dozens of *peshat* interpretations that were alternatives to the *midrashim* taught by *Chazal* – even where Rashi and Rashbam had not done so; and R. Chizkiya ben Manoach, in his commentary *Chizkuni*.¹³

Translated by Kaeren Fish

¹¹ See his commentaries on *Bereishit* 1:1; 37:2 (immediately after the excerpt cited above, concerning the arguments between himself and Rashi, which serves as an introduction to his criticism of Rashi's interpretation there); 45:28; *Vayikra* 26:21; *Devarim* 15:18.

¹² R. Yosef Bekhor Shor was a disciple of Rabbenu Tam and one of the 12th century Tosafists of northern France. For more about him, see Urbach, pp. 132-142; on his exegetical approach in the context of *peshat*, see Y. Nevo, *Bekhor-Shor – Perushei ha-Torah*, Introduction, pp. 4-5.

¹³ R. Chizkiya ben Manoach lived in France in the second half of the 13th century (c. 1250-1310). For more about his commentary, see R. Chavel's introduction to *Perushei ha-Chizkuni al ha-Torah*, Jerusalem 5766, pp. 5-13; Y. Ofer, "Perush ha-Chizkuni la-Torah ve-Gilgulav," *Megadim* 8, 5749, pp. 69-83; S. Japhet, "Perush ha-Chizkuni la-Torah – li-Demuto shel ha-Chibbur u-le-Matarato," in: M. Bar Asher (ed.), *Sefer ha-Yovel le-Rav Mordekhai Breuer* – vol. I, Jerusalem 5752, pp. 91-111. For more about his exegetical approach with regard to *peshat*, see Japhet, pp. 107-110.