

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

Shiur #2c:

Composition of the Torah according to *Tanakh* and Jewish Tradition
Part 3

D. Moshe's involvement in the writing of the Torah

I. Two Views of Moshe's role in the writing of the Torah

A further question that must be addressed is whether Moshe was involved in determining the wording of the Torah, or whether all its verses were dictated by God. Here, too, the text itself offers no explicit information. The *midrashim* take two main directions in this regard. On the one hand, there is the *midrash* that we have already cited:

"This teaches that Moshe wrote down whatever the Holy One, blessed be He, told him to write, as it is written, 'And Barukh said to them, He dictated all these words to me...' ([Yirmiyahu 36:18](#))" (*Sifri Devarim, piska 357*)

According to this view, God dictated the Torah to Moshe, word for word. Ramban adopts this view, writing in his introduction to *Bereishit*:

"Thus Moshe was like a scribe copying an ancient text, and therefore he did the writing, but it is true and clear that the entire Torah, from the beginning of *Bereishit* to 'in the eyes of all Israel' [i.e., the end of *Devarim*] was uttered by the Holy One, blessed be He, to Moshe, in the same way that we find, 'He dictated all these words to me, and I wrote them with ink in the book' ([Yirmiyahu 36:18](#))."^[1]

However, in other *midrashim*, and among the medieval sages, there are frequent expressions of an approach that grants a special status to Moshe in writing the Torah even though its content was received from God. In *Shemot Rabba* we read:

"An alternative explanation for the words, 'Write for yourself' ([Shemot 34:27](#)): The ministering angels said to the Holy One, blessed be He: You are giving license to Moshe to write whatever he wishes; he might say to Israel, 'I gave you the Torah – I am the one who wrote it and gave it to you!' The Holy One, blessed be He, told them: Heaven forefend that Moshe would do that, and even if he did, he is trusted, as it is written, 'Not so My servant, Moshe; in all of My house He is trusted' ([Bamidbar 12:7](#))." (*Shemot Rabba*, Vilna edition, *Ki Tisa* 47, 9)

According to this *midrash*, God did not necessarily dictate the Torah explicitly to Moshe, but rather trusted Moshe to write in accordance with His will:

"Even if Moshe would write something in the Torah on his own initiative, it would not be, heaven forefend, with the intention of being able to say that he himself had written and initiated that element; rather, he is 'trusted in all the house' of Torah, and to him I have handed over all the principles and ways of the Torah." (Commentary of Rabbi Ze'ev Wolf Einhorn)^[2]

We conclude, therefore, that according to this *midrash*, Moshe did indeed write the Torah in accordance with his own understanding, with God's approval, and with the assumption that God relied upon his abilities to write the Torah as it should be written.

It should be noted, however, that the *Mishna* in [Sanhedrin \(10:1\)](#) lists, among those who have no share in the World to Come, one who says, "The Torah is not Divine in origin." The Gemara provides eight different teachings concerning this statement. I shall cite two of them, which relate to the writing of the Torah:

"Our Sages taught: 'For he has despised God's word and has violated His commandments; that soul shall utterly be cut off' – This refers to one who says, 'The Torah is not Divine.'... Another opinion says: 'For he has despised God's word' – this refers to one who says that the Torah is not Divine, and even one who says: 'The entire Torah is Divine, except for this verse which was not said by God, but rather Moshe said it himself' – this is 'for he has despised God's word.' And even if he says, 'The entire Torah is Divine, except for this detail, this *kal va-chomer*, this *gezera shava* (i.e., Torah laws that are deduced by means of the hermeneutical rules)' – this is 'for he has despised God's word.'" ([Sanhedrin 99a](#))

These two opinions reflect very different positions. According to the first view, which accords with the plain meaning of the *mishna*, the punishment stated in the verse refers only to someone who denies altogether that the Torah was conveyed by God to Israel. According to the 'other

opinion,' the scope of the required belief in the Torah's divinity is far more extensive and excludes even someone who maintains that a single verse was uttered by Moshe on his own, and not from God's mouth; it even excludes someone who denies the Divine origin of the lessons derived through the hermeneutical laws, within the framework of the Oral Law.

The second view, established as one of the Rambam's Thirteen Principles of Faith,^[3] appears at first glance to contradict the view in *Shemot Rabba* quoted above. However, this is not necessarily the case. The main argument of the "other opinion" is that the significance of faith in "the Divine origin of the Torah" (*Torah min ha-shamayim*) is that Moshe did not act on his own accord; however, this does not have to rule out the possibility that God gave Moshe license to write the Torah in his own words, and that Moshe did not deviate from the framework of the license given to him.

II. Moshe's role in the view of Rashbam, R. Yosef Bechor Shor, and R. Yehuda he-Chassid

In any event, several medieval sages of northern France held the view that Moshe had God's permission to formulate the text, as I shall now demonstrate.

Rashbam, the grandson of Rashi, offers a unique view, arguing that many units or verses in the Torah were written not for their own sake, but rather as a preface or background to units that appear later on in the Torah. The point relevant to our discussion is that Rashbam often seems to suggest that these antecedents were written by Moshe, in order to clarify certain points later on in the Torah. For instance, Rashbam offers the following explanation of why it was necessary to start *Bereishit* with the story of the Creation:

"This entire unit on the work of the six days is brought by Moshe as a preface, to explain what God says later, at the time of the giving of the Torah: 'Remember the Shabbat day, to sanctify it... for [over] six days God made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day' ([Shemot 20:8-11](#)). And this is the meaning of the verse, 'And it was evening and it was morning, the sixth day' ([Bereishit1:31](#)) – that sixth day, which was the conclusion of the six days of which God spoke at the giving of the Torah. Therefore Moshe told this to Israel, so they would know that God's word is truth: Do you then maintain that the world has always been built up as you see it now, full of all kinds of goodness? It was not so; rather, 'In the beginning, God created...'" (Rashbam, [Bereishit 1:1](#))

Elsewhere, Rashbam explains why the Torah records the stories of Yosef and his brothers:

"All of this was necessary for Moshe to write, for by means of this he rebuked them – 'As seventy souls your forefathers went down...' ([Devarim 10:22](#))." (Rashbam, [Bereishit 37:2](#))^[4]

A similar approach is also adopted by Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor^[5] in his commentary on the Torah. For example, the commentators discuss Yaakov's instructions to the messengers who carry his gift to Esav:

"And you shall say moreover, Behold, your servant, Yaakov, is behind us – for he said, I shall appease him with the gift that goes before me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me." ([Bereishit 32:21](#))

Where is the end of what the messengers are supposed to convey to Esav from Yaakov? Some of the commentators understand the final words – "and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me" – as not being included in the message that the messengers should recite before Esav, but rather a narration of what Yaakov is thinking in his own mind. Ibn Ezra, for example, writes: "'For he said' – [this refers to] Yaakov, in his heart; and this is what Moshe writes." Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor adopts the same view, but expresses it in a more radical way:

"The author of the book (*ba'al ha-sefer*) is explaining that this is why Yaakov did all of this – in order to dissipate Esav's anger, if his intentions had been evil; but the shepherds did not say this [to Esav]."

There are other background comments occurring as part of the Torah narrative concerning which R. Yosef Bekhor Shor explains using the same approach. For instance, with regard to the verse, "Yaakov set up a pillar upon her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day" ([Bereishit 35:20](#)), he writes:

"So says the author of the book (*ba'al ha-sefer*) - that that is the pillar of Rachel's grave, which still existed until his day."^[6]

Another commentator who follows this approach is Rabbi Yehuda he-Chasid.^[7] He maintains, for example, that the final chapter of the Torah, describing how Moshe saw the entire land, actually preceded – chronologically – the writing of the section setting forth the boundaries of the land at the end of *Bamidbar* (chapter 34). Were this not so, he argues, Moshe would not have been able to describe the land in such detail:

"And God showed him the entire land' ([Devarim 34:1](#)), and this was... prior to the end of *parashat Mas'ei*, where it says, 'And the border shall go down to Zifron,'^[8] and likewise concerning all [the borders], for how could Moshe had written all this if he had not seen it all from Har ha-Avarim, Mount Nevo? For the Torah does not follow chronological order." (Commentary of Rabbi Yehuda he-Chasid, [Devarim 3:25](#))

The basic assumption here is that Moshe could not have written a description of the borders of the land without having seen it with his own eyes; hence, the conclusion is that God did not dictate this to him. Elsewhere in the commentary of R. Yehuda he-Chasid he is quoted as saying that a chronological distinction should be drawn between the writing of the two verses in the Torah that pertain to the command to build *sukkot*. In his view, the verse, "You shall dwell in *sukkot* for seven days, every citizen in Israel shall dwell in *sukkot*" ([Vayikra 23:42](#)), was written in the first year after the Exodus. The explanation for this command, which appears in the following verse, is "in order that your generations will know that I caused the Children of Israel to dwell in *sukkot* when I brought them out of the land of Egypt", and Rav Yehuda he-Chasid suggests that this explanation was added by Moshe in the fortieth year, and refers to the *sukkot* in which the Children of Israel dwelled on the plains of Moav, during the conquest of the land:

"This verse was uttered in the fortieth year, when they were encamped on the plains of Moav, and dwelled in *sukkot*, and were conquering territories.^[9] God had commanded it in the wilderness of Sinai, and Moshe wrote this in the fortieth year in order to provide an explanation for what He had commanded concerning *sukkot* – because it was God's intention to cause you to dwell in *sukkot*, and to conquer territory for you." (*Perush Rabbi Yehuda he-Chasid*, [Vayikra 23:43](#))^[10]

III. The Views of *Midrash Lekach Tov* and *Sekhel Tov*

The last opinions that we shall address as part of our discussion of this approach are the compilers of the medieval *midrashim* – *Lekach Tov* and *Sekhel Tov*. Rabbi Tuvia ben Eliezer, compiler of the *Midrash Lekach Tov* (also known as *Pesikta Zutreta*),^[11] in addressing the story of the Creation, explains why on the sixth day the Torah says, "the sixth day" ([Bereishit 1:31](#)), using the definite article, in contrast to the other days ("a fifth day," "a fourth day," etc.):

"Another explanation: 'The sixth day' – when the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Torah to Moshe at Mount Sinai, He recounted to him the entire act of Creation, from beginning to end. When the Holy One, blessed be He, said, 'Remember the Shabbat day, to sanctify it, for in six days God made the heavens and the earth... and He rested on the seventh day'

([Shemot 20:8-11](#)), and Moshe arranged the entire work of Creation in a book, and wrote 'the sixth day,' the day upon which there was an end to the labor of the world. Likewise he says, 'And it shall be on the sixth day that they shall prepare that which they will bring in' ([Shemot 16:5](#)). Therefore he said 'the sixth day' here too – in other words, the sixth day of activity." (Lekach Tov [Bereishit 1, 31](#), Buber edition, p. 16)

According to the *Midrash Lekach Tov*, God "recounted" to Moshe all of Creation, and Moshe "arranged" it all in a book, and it was he who decided on the expression, "the sixth day." This view conforms with the introduction of the midrash to the Torah:

"Moshe wrote, with Divine inspiration, the creation of the world, in accordance with all that is written in the book of the Torah of Moshe, the man of God, from God's mouth, so as to make His might known to His nation, Israel." (Buber edition, 70a-b)

Moshe heard the story from God, but he was the one who wrote it down, with his Divine inspiration and in his own words.^[12] In light of this we can also understand the midrashic comment on the verse,

"And what is the land – is it fat or lean; is there a tree in it or none? And you shall gird yourself and take of the fruit of the land – and the season was the season of the first of the grapes." ([Bamidbar 13:20](#))

Here, too, we can ask where Moshe's words to the spies end. It is fairly clear that the final words of the verse, are not part of his message to them, and this represents Rashbam's understanding of the verse. The *Midrash Lekach Tov* states this slightly differently. Concerning the comment at the end of the verse, he writes:

"This is a note by the editor (*ha-sadran*), to speak the praises of the Land of Israel." (*Lekach Tov*, [Bamidbar 13](#), p. 210)

This term – *ha-sadran* – is used in the midrash to refer to the writer, or compiler, of the Torah in other places, too.^[13]

The same idea also arises in the work of Rabbi Menachem ben Shlomo, compiler of the *Yalkut Sekhel Tov*.^[14] In five different places in his commentary,^[15] he too mentions the "*sadran*," in contexts that are similar in nature to the instances treated in *Midrash Lekach Tov*. For instance, concerning the verse, "And Yosef made it a law over the land of Egypt, to this day, that a fifth part goes to Pharaoh" ([Bereishit 47:26](#)), *Midrash Sekhel Tov* writes: "'To this day' – this is a comment by the *sadran*" (Buber edition, p. 298).^[16]

Thus, we have seen that there are two main approaches to understanding the way in which Moshe wrote the Torah. According to one approach, exemplified by certain *midrashim* and the Ramban, God dictated the Torah to Moshe, word for word, and Moshe served merely as a scribe, having no influence on a single word in the Torah. The other approach appears in the works of medieval Ashkenazi commentators such as Rashbam, R. Yosef Bechor Shor and R. Yehuda he-Chassid, as well collections of *midrashim* such as *Lekach Tov* and *Sekhel Tov*. It can be summarized in a general way as follows: God conveyed the contents of the Torah, and authorized Moshe to formulate at least some of the text in his own style, or to arrange the materials as he saw fit.

E. Summary

In the last few *shiurim* we have seen that the *Tanakh* does not state clearly and explicitly how, and by whom, the Five Books of the Torah were written. There are references to "Torah" in its narrow sense, including central portions of *Devarim*, which Moshe was explicitly commanded to write. The tradition of *Chazal* maintains unequivocally that it was Moshe who wrote all five books, and this tradition is based on explicit verses in *Nechemia*. In the books of the Prophets, too, we see extensive use made of the language of the Torah and its content.

Among *Chazal* there are different opinions as to how exactly the Torah came to be written. Among other approaches, we see that from the plain text there is a strong basis to say that "the Torah was given one part (scroll) at a time" – i.e., that the Torah comprises various parts that were written at different times, some perhaps even before Moshe's time (such as *Bereishit*), and it was only at the end that Moshe joined them all into a single book. Likewise, we noted two approaches among *Chazal* and the medieval commentators in understanding the way in which Moshe wrote the Torah: one view maintains that the entire Torah was dictated by God to Moshe, word for word, from beginning to end. The other view suggests that Moshe was given the role of editing/collating, or perhaps even formulating in his own words, the content he had received from God.

Appendix – Rav Yehuda HeChasid and his commentary to the Torah

Rabbi Yehuda son of Shmuel he-Chasid, of Speyer, was born around the year 1140 and died in 1217. He was one of the leaders of the group known as *Chasidei Ashkenaz* (the pietists of Ashkenaz) – a movement that developed during the 12th-13th centuries and involved various practices related to Kabbalah, with its members adopting a life of asceticism and self-mortification. The students of Rabbi Yehuda he-Chasid included some of the most important sages of Ashkenaz, such as Rabbi Yitzchak, author of the *Or Zaru'a*, and Rabbi Moshe of Coucy, author of the *Sefer ha-Mitzvot ha-Gadol (Semag)*. Rabbi Yehuda's best known work is *Sefer Chassidim*, which includes moral teachings, matters of halakha and customs, explanations of prayers, and various commentaries. He is also known for his work *Tzva'at Rabbi Yehuda he-Chasid*, which includes ten "legacies" and practices, some of which are highly unusual.

Some fifty years ago, a book entitled *Perushei ha-Torah le-Rabbi Yehuda he-Chasid* was published in Jerusalem by Yitzchak Shimshon Lange, based on two manuscripts as well as various commentaries which appeared in other books and were attributed to Rabbi Yehuda he-Chasid. The commentary was written by Rabbi Yehuda's son, Rabbi Moshe Zaltman, who found some of the material among his father's writings, heard other parts directly from his father, and gathered additional material from others who conveyed teachings in his father's name. The book gave rise to extensive debate, which we will discuss in the next section.

^[1] On the question of whether the Torah was dictated to Moshe orally or whether he copied it from an "ancient book," see Heschel, *Torah Min ha-Shamayim be-Aspaklaria shel ha-Dorot*, pp. 344-347.

^[2] One of the greatest of the commentators on the *midrash*; Vilna, 19th century.

^[3] See Rambam's Commentary on the *Mishna*, Introduction to chapter "Chelek" in Tractate *Sanhedrin*; [Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 3:8](#).

^[4] For more on this subject see A. Touitou, *Ha-Peshatot ha-Mitchadshim Bechol Yom – Iyyunim be-Perusho shel Rashbam la-Torah*, Jerusalem 5763, pp. 120-122. Touitou expands on Rashbam's approach and posits that the entire narrative aspect of the Torah, along with *Devarim*, were written by Moshe, of his own accord, while only the halakhic aspects, including the commandments, were written by Moshe at God's command. The justification for this expansion is not sufficiently proven, as noted by M. Sabbato, "Perush Rashbam la-Torah," *Machanayim* 3, 5753, pp. 116-117, and A. Kislev, "Va-Ani Lefaresh Peshutan shel Mikraot Bati," *Shenaton le-Cheker ha-Mikra ve-ha-Mizrach ha-Kadum* 15 (5765), p. 321.

^[5] Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor, a disciple of Rabbeinu Tam, was one of the Tosafists in 12th century France. He wrote a commentary on the Torah (a critical edition edited by Y. Nevo was published by Mossad ha-Rav Kook, Jerusalem, 5754) and on *Tehillim*, as well as *piyutim* (liturgical poems) and commentaries on the Talmud (see E.E. Urbach, *Ba'alei ha-Tosafot*, vol. 1, Jerusalem 5714, pp. 132-140).

^[6] For more on Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor's approach, see R. Harris, "*Muda'ut le-Arikhat ha-Mikra Etzel Parshanei Tzefon Tzarfat*," *Shenaton le-Cheker ha-Mikra ve-ha-Mizrach ha-Kadum* 12, pp. 302-305.

^[7] See the Appendix to this *shiur* for information on Rav Yehuda he-Chasid and his Torah commentary.

^[8] [Bamidbar 34:9](#); the Masoretic text reads, "And the border shall emerge (*va-yetzei ha-gevul*) to Zifron."

^[9] Apparently, Rabbi Yehuda he-Chasid's argument that dwelling in *sukkot* is related to war, arises from the fact that in various places "*sukkot*" appear in the description of preparations for war. For example, in the words of Uriya ha-Chiti: "The Ark, and Israel and Yehuda, dwell in *sukkot*, and my lord Yoav, and my masters servants, are encamped in the field" ([Shmuel II 11:11](#)); or in the war that Achav wages against Aram, where we read of Ben Hadad: "And he was drinking – he and the nobles – in *sukkot*, and he said to his servants, 'Set yourselves in array' – and they set themselves in array against the city" ([Melakhim I 20:12](#)).

^[10] For additional places where Rabbi Yehuda he-Chasid follows this approach, see G. Brin, "*Kavim le-Perush ha-Torah shel Rabbi Yehuda he-Chasid*," in: *Te'udah 3 – Mechkarim be-Sifrut ha-Talmud, be-Lashon Chazal, u-ve-Parshanut ha-Mikra*, Tel Aviv 5743, pp. 221-223.

^[11] This midrash was compiled in the 11th century, apparently in Greece. Concerning the midrash (and the source of the name "*Pesikta Zutreta*," which seems to have been based on an error), see A. Raisel, *Mavo la-Midrashim*, Alon Shevut 5771, pp. 370-377.

^[12] It seems that this is how we should understand the midrashic teaching concerning God's words to Moshe: "Come to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants, in order that I may set for these signs of Mine in his midst. And in order that you will tell it in the hearing of your children and your children's children, that which I performed in Egypt..." ([Shemot 10:1-2](#)). According to the midrash, God's command to Moshe here related to the writing of the story of the Exodus in the Torah: "This verse was said to Moshe, in order that he would tell it in the Torah, to make it known to future generations." Here, too, we get the impression that God dictates the content to Moshe, but leaves the wording to his own judgment.

^[13] The midrash notes that when Yaakov's sons report Yosef's words to them, they claim that he told them, "And bring your youngest brother to me, that I may know that you are not spies, but that you are honest men; I shall deliver your brother to you, and you shall conduct commerce (*tischaru*) in the land" ([Bereishit 42:34](#)). In the Torah's account of the actual exchange, there was no mention of commerce at the end (*ibid.*, 16). *Midrash Lekach Tov* explains this as follows: "The *sadran* was sparing with words, for the Torah did not previously report [that Yosef said], 'and you shall conduct commerce in the land'; yet they reported to their father [that Yosef had said], 'and you shall conduct commerce in the land'" (Buber edition, p. 105b-106a). For more on the matter of the "*sadran*" in this midrash, see: G. Brin, "*Ha-Sadran ve-ha-Mesader*," *Leshonenu* 66, 5765, p. 341-346.

^[14] This midrash was compiled in 1139, apparently in Italy. For more on *Midrash Sekhel Tov* see A. Raisel (above, n. 11), pp. 378-382.

^[15] Aside from the examples treated below, see [Bereishit 26:32](#), Buber edition, p. 107; 36:31, p. 210; 41:4, p. 250; 43:34, p. 265 (in this instance the commentary parallels that offered on the same verse in the *Midrash Lekach Tov*).

^[16] For more on the attitude of this midrash towards the "*sadran*," see Y. Elbaum, "*Yalkut 'Sekhel Tov': Derash, Peshat, ve-Sugyat ha-'Sadran'*," in: M.M. Bar Asher et al (eds.), *Davar Davur al Ofnav: Mechkarim ve-Parshanut ha-Mikra ve-ha-Koran bi-Yemei ha-Benayim, Mugashim le-Chaggai Ben Shammai*," Jerusalem 5767, pp. 82-93.