

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

**Shiur #9c: "*Peshat*" and "*Derash*" – the plain meaning of the text vs.
midrash aggada (homiletical teachings)**

c. *Peshat* Commentators in Spain and in Provence (Part 1)

Biblical commentary on the level of *peshat* was also prevalent among the Rishonim of Spain and Provence, including Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Ramban. We shall briefly review the approaches of these prominent commentators in this regard.

Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra¹ was a commentator who adopted a clear and explicit path with regard to the significance of *peshat* interpretations of the text.² He addresses the subject briefly in the introduction to his commentary on the Torah: "The way of *peshat* does not step aside for *derash*, for 'there are seventy faces to the Torah' (i.e., the Torah can be interpreted in a myriad of ways),"³ and throughout his commentary there are many instances where he rejects an interpretation that represents *derash*. The following are some examples:

1. Commenting on the verse, "Avram heard that his brother had been taken captive, and he led forth his trained servants, born in his own house – three hundred and eighteen [of them]" (Bereishit 14:14), Rashi cites the midrash (Nedarim 32b) that this is a reference to Eliezer alone, since the *gematriya* (numerical value of the name) of 'Eliezer' is 318. Ibn Ezra understands the verse literally, as a reference to "his disciples, whom he had trained regularly in warfare, although they have not previously been mentioned." He adds, "And the [interpretation based on] the numerical value of the name 'Eliezer' is

¹ Ibn Ezra (c. 1089-1164) was a scholar whose knowledge was wide-ranging and diverse. In addition to being a biblical commentator he was also a poet, grammarian, philosopher, translator, astronomer and astrologer. For more about his exegetical approach see Melamed, vol. II, pp. 519-714; Moskowitz, pp. 67-83.

² It should be noted that unlike Rashbam – who, as we have seen, maintained that *derash* has its basis in the text, being deduced from "[seeming] superfluities in the text, or from linguistic peculiarities," Ibn Ezra held the view that the text had one single meaning. He maintained that not all the information necessary for the proper understanding was to be found in the text itself (unlike the view of R. Yosef Kara), and that the supplementary data is transmitted through the Oral Law. Nevertheless, in his view the information transmitted orally is not derived from the text – even if from the *midrash aggada* it would seem so, since the midrashic method is not the source for the information that *Chazal* convey. We will discuss the significance of this view in terms of *midrashei halakha* in the next chapter.

³ The expression "seventy faces to the Torah" was popular among biblical commentators from the Middle Ages onwards, although it does not appear in the Talmudic literature. For the history of this expression see H. Mack, "Shiv'im Panim la-Torah: le-Mahalakho shel Bitui," in *Sefer ha-Yovel le-Rav Mordekhai Breuer*, vol. II, pp. 449-462.

arrived at through *derash*, for the text does not speak in *gematriya*, since anyone wishing to interpret any name in either a positive or negative light [on this basis] is able to do so; hence, a name should be treated as just that."⁴

2. Concerning the verse, "And Avraham was old, advanced in age, and God had blessed Avraham with everything [*ba-kol*]" (Bereishit 24:1), the Gemara cites an opinion that Avraham had a daughter whose name was "*Bakol*" (Bava Batra 16b). Ibn Ezra explains the verse in its literal sense, as meaning that God had blessed Avraham "with long life, and wealth, and honor, and children, and this is all that a person desires." He adds, "And as for the midrashic teaching that 'Bakol' was the name of his daughter – [were this indeed indicated by the text,] it would require the addition of a prepositional '*bet*.'" In other words, the teaching does not sit well with the language of the verse; if this were the intention, it would read, "God had blessed Avraham **with bakol** (*be-bakol*)."
3. Yaakov swears an oath in Beit El: "And all that You give me, I will surely tithe for You" (Bereishit 28:22). Chazal teach that Yaakov set aside his son Levi, too, as a tithe – as one of the first ten of the sons born to him.⁵ Here, too, Ibn Ezra understands the verse in the plain sense: "[This means,] to deduct a tithe of all the wealth that You give me, to give it to whomever is worthy to receive it in honor of God." He adds, "As for the midrashic teaching that Levi was set aside as one tenth [of his sons] – nowhere in the Torah do we find that a person offers a tithe from among his children; tithes are taken only from cattle and sheep and produce."

Sometimes Ibn Ezra draws a distinction between details that appear in a midrash as part of a conceptual or symbolic idea,⁶ and details that have their source in historical tradition and are therefore binding even where they do not match the plain meaning of the text. Sometimes, Ibn Ezra expresses his reservations with regard to an interpretation that represents *derash*, but declares that if this is an accepted tradition, he withdraws his reservation. The following are some examples:

1. "Haran died before his father, Terach, in the land of his birth, in Ur Kasdim" (Bereishit 11:28). Ibn Ezra understands "Ur Kasdim" literally, as the name of a place located in a valley. With regard to midrashim about Avraham in his youth, prior to God's revelation to him, he adds:

⁴ Concerning Ibn Ezra's negative view of *gematriya* as an exegetical approach unconnected to the plain meaning of the text, see A. Mondschein, "Le-Yachaso shel Ibn Ezra el ha-Shimush ha-Parshani be-Midat ha-Gimatriya," *Te'uda* 8, 5752, pp. 137-162.

⁵ Bereishit Rabba 70, 7; Theodor-Albeck edition p. 804.

⁶ Concerning *derash* as an expression of ideas on different levels, the following is a loose translation of Ibn Ezra's rhyming words at the beginning of the introduction to his commentary on Eikha: "There are many diverse types of *midrashim*: some are esoteric riddles, secrets, and parables; others come to offer support for weary hearts with profound teachings; others still come to train the feeble [in faith] and to fill those who are empty [of knowledge]. Therefore the [plain] meaning of the verses may be viewed as the body, while the *midrashim* are like the garments that clothe it – some sheer as silk, others coarse as sackcloth. The path of *peshat* is the body, with its specific wording and its laws, and hence the ancient teaching [of the Sages] that 'the text is [to be understood] in accordance with its plain meaning.'"

"*Chazal* taught that [this alludes to the fact that] Avraham was cast into a fiery furnace. This is not indicated in the text, but if it is an accepted tradition, we accept it as we do the words of Torah."

2. Ibn Ezra addresses the question of Yitzchak's age at the time of the *akeda* (the binding of Yitzchak): "Our Sages taught that Yitzchak was 37 years old when he was bound upon the altar. If this represents an accepted tradition, we accept it. According to reason, however, it seems improbable, for [if so] it is proper that Yitzchak's righteousness should be apparent, and his reward should be double that of his father, for he gave himself willingly to be slaughtered, but the text says nothing about [this act of supreme religious devotion on the part of] Yitzchak" (Bereishit 22:4). On the basis of this logic, Ibn Ezra rules out the possibility that Yitzchak could already have been an adult, for the text notes explicitly that this was a test for Avraham, not for him. However, he notes that if this is indeed an accepted tradition, he accepts it. Ibn Ezra then offers his own opinion on the matter: "It seems reasonable that he was close to the age of 13, and his father forced him and bound him against his will. This is evidenced in the fact that his father hid this secret [the object of their journey] from him, saying, 'God will provide Himself a lamb' – for had he told him, 'You yourself will be the sacrifice', he would probably have fled."
3. *Chazal* teach⁷ that the Jewish people were surrounded by seven clouds during their wanderings in the wilderness, since the word '*anan*' (cloud) appears seven times in the text. Ibn Ezra maintains, on the basis of the plain text, that there were only the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud that are mentioned in the verses (Bamidbar 14:14 and elsewhere), but adds, "Thus, there are these two alternating pillars over the Mishkan, but if it is an accepted tradition that there were clouds of glory, we relinquish our view and rely on the tradition" (Ibn Ezra in his long commentary, Shemot 15:22).

In any event, even where Ibn Ezra acknowledges the possibility that the midrashic teaching rests on accepted tradition, he does not refrain from proposing a different interpretation of the text, in accordance with its plain meaning, which he regards as exegetically preferable – so long as it is not conclusively proven that the details introduced in the midrash are indeed accepted tradition.

Let us now turn our attention to the well-known commentary of Ramban⁸ on the Torah. This commentary is unique and also revolutionary in many respects, including its integration of kabbalistic teachings. For the purposes of our discussion it should be noted that Ramban was more consistent than any other commentator in distinguishing between *peshat* and

⁷ Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Beshalach, petichta le-massekhta de-'vayehi,' Horowitz-Rabin edition, p. 80.

⁸ Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (1194-1270) is regarded as one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of all time. He authored commentaries on the Torah, some parts of *Tanakh*, and many tractates of Talmud. He also authored works in the spheres of halakha, kabbala, and Jewish philosophy. For more about his exegetical approach, see Melamed, vol. II, pp. 937-1021; Moskowitz, pp. 98-116.

derash, usually by stating, "*al derekh ha-peshat...*" (i.e., that the interpretation in question reflects the plain meaning of the text) – an expression that he uses some 160 times. In the vast majority of cases Ramban cites the *peshat* interpretation as an alternative to the midrash, and in dozens of instances he does so after noting some difficulty in the *derash* (although he usually also tries to resolve the verse in accordance with the midrashic teaching). The following are some examples:

1. The commentators debate what it is that causes Yitzchak to suspect Yaakov, who is dressed up as Esav, and to demand, "Draw near, I pray you, that I may feel you, my son, whether you are really my son Esav, or not" (Bereishit 27:21). Rashi, based on a midrash,⁹ explains that it surprised Yitzchak that 'Esav' made reference to God: "Yitzchak said to himself, Esav does not usually mention God, but here he said, 'Because the Lord your God sent me good speed' (27:20)." Ramban questions this interpretation, pointing out, "But Esav was not viewed as wicked [i.e., someone who lacks a consciousness of God] by his father!" He immediately offers an explanation that could resolve this question – "Perhaps he thought to himself that since Esav was a man of the field, whose mind was trained on hunting, he avoided mentioning God's Name for fear that he might come to utter it inadvertently in a place that was not clean; in the eyes of his father, this [habit of not mentioning God's Name] would be viewed [in a positive light,] as a sign of Esav's fear of heaven." Nevertheless, Ramban offers an alternative interpretation: "According to the plain meaning, this [suspicion] would arise because of the sound of his voice." Indeed, this is supported by Yitzchak's words, "The voice is the voice of Yaakov, while the hands are the hands of Esav" (27:22).
2. Following the story of Yosef and Potifar's wife, we read, "And it was, when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, '**After the manner of these things** (*ka-devarim ha-eleh*) your servant did to me...'" (Bereishit 39:19). Rashi cites the midrashic teaching:¹⁰ "It was during intercourse that she said this to him, and this is the meaning of her words, 'After the manner of these things your servant did to me – i.e., engaging in intercourse like this.'" Here, too, Ramban questions: "But Yosef's master was a eunuch, and his wife had married him when he was young... Moreover, how is it possible that she would have implicated herself, and made herself loathsome in the eyes of her husband, telling him that she had engaged in sexual relations – whether under duress or willingly? For he would surely kill her: why did she then not cry out at the beginning, and flee, as she ultimately did?" Again Ramban tries to answer his own question: "Perhaps what [Chazal] meant by 'after the manner of these things' is other acts of sexual immorality, not actual intercourse." Nevertheless, he also offers an explanation on the level of *peshat*: "According to the *peshat* no such explanation is necessary, for the letter '*kaf*' (in the expression '*ka-devarim ha-eleh*') need not imply a comparison to something else; it simply means, 'these things.'"

⁹ The source of the midrash is Bereishit Rabba 65,19; Theodor-Albeck edition p. 732.

¹⁰ Bereishit Rabba 87, 9; Theodor-Albeck edition p. 1074.

3. When Moshe rebukes the Hebrew man striving with his fellow, the man retorts, "Who made you a prince and judge over us? Do you intend (literally, 'say') to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?" (Shemot 2:14) Rashi cites the midrash,¹¹ "From here we learn that Moshe had killed the Egyptian by uttering God's Name." Ramban asks, "If this is so, who told the Hebrew aggressor that Moshe had killed him?" To this he proposes the possible answer, "Perhaps Moshe had laid a hand upon him and then cursed him in God's Name; this would explain why the text states, 'He smote the Egyptian...' Or perhaps when he fell dead before him, Moshe was afraid that he would be reported, so he buried him in the sand, and [the Hebrew man] saw him doing so, and knew that he was the cause [of the man's death], or assumed that he had killed him with a sword, for he saw only the burial." Once again, he proposes an alternative interpretation: "But on the plain level of the text, when one says, 'Do you say to do such-and-such,' it means, 'do you intend to,' for 'saying' sometimes refers to one's inner thoughts... But here there is no need for such an explanation, for he says, 'Who made you a prince and judge over us?' i.e., is it because you seek to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian, that you rebuke me and say, 'Why do you smite your fellow?'"

We see from these examples that Ramban endeavors to explain the midrashic interpretation in such a way as to reconcile it with the text. Like Rashi and Rashbam, he does not regard *derash* as a form of exegesis that is not intended to match the text. At the same time, Ramban tries to explain the verses on the level of *peshat*, even where he is able to reconcile the midrashic teaching. He expresses this guiding principle himself, with the following words:

"However, since Rashi sometimes takes pains, after citing midrashim, to explain the plain meaning of the text, he thereby permitted us to do the same, for there are 'seventy faces to the Torah,' and there are many midrashim that are not unanimous among the Sages." (Ramban on Bereishit 8:4)

Ramban continues the same principle that Ibn Ezra had upheld – the "seventy aspects of the Torah," and he adds that even among the midrashim of *Chazal* we find many disagreements, and therefore midrash should not be viewed as the single, mandatory interpretation.

Moving on from Spain, next week we shall consider the greatest of the Provençal commentators – Radak.

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¹¹ Shemot Rabba 1,30; Shinan edition p. 91.