

**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 2)

Moving on from Spain, this week we shall consider the greatest of the Provençal commentators – Radak.¹ Radak cites many midrashim, as he acknowledges in the introduction to his commentary on the Early Prophets: "I will also bring some midrashim, for those who enjoy midrashim." However, he too notes the need to draw a distinction between *peshat* and *derash*, and rejects midrashic interpretations that do not match the plain meaning of the text. The following are some examples:

1. In the chapter on David's valiant men, we read: "David longed, and he said, Who will give me water to drink from the well of Beit Lechem, which is by the gate! And the three warriors broke through the camp of the Pelishtim, and drew water out of the well of Beit Lechem, which was by the gate, and they took it and brought it to David. But he would not drink it, and he poured it out to God" (*Shmuel* II 23:15:16). In his commentary on these verses, Radak discusses the following midrash (the source is *Bava Kama* 60b):

"That which our Sages taught in this regard is most puzzling... They interpreted the words, 'Who will give me water to drink' in a metaphorical sense, equating water with Torah... Thus, the expression, 'Who will give me water' means that he had a halakhic question that he needed to ask of the Sanhedrin, who were in Beit Lechem... The halakha that he needed to ask concerned a plot of a field that is full of lentils and barley... and David asked if it was permissible for him to set fire to the sacks of lentils, with the intention of burning the Pelishtim who were hiding among them. They answered him, 'It is generally forbidden for one to save himself through the destruction of property belonging to someone else, but you are a king, and a king may break through [private fields] to make a road for himself, and nobody may prevent him from doing so... And the

¹ R. David Kimchi (1160-1235) was a major biblical commentator and one of the greatest of Hebrew grammarians. He is most famous for his commentaries on the Prophets and Writings, which appear in *Mikraot Gedolot* editions, but Radak also wrote a commentary on *Bereishit*, which has been widely disseminated over the past generation in the wake of its inclusion in the *Torat Chayim* edition (published by Mossad ha-Rav Kook). Concerning Radak and his exegetical approach, see Melamed, vol. II, pp. 719-932; Moskowitz, pp. 84-97.

meaning of the words, 'But David would not drink' is that he did not quote this teaching in the name of the three [warriors], for he said: It has been conveyed to me from the Beit Din of Shemuel in Ramah that anyone who is ready to die for words of Torah – one does not quote him on matters of halakha..."

Radak then goes on to comment:

"But this is very far from the plain meaning of the verses, which recount the story of David's valiant men... And the text recounts the brave acts of each of these three men in the beginning, and what the three later did in bringing water. There was no halakhic question concerning a field, rather, there was fierce battle, until Am Yisrael fled from before the Pelishtim, as recorded in the text... In all of this, what one should understand is the plain meaning of the text, as it stands."

Indeed, this is a rare case where Chazal's teaching includes wide-ranging elaboration that deviates very far from the plain meaning of the text, and for this reason Radak expresses himself quite sharply. However, as we shall see, Radak adopts the same approach even in instances where the midrash is less removed from the simple meaning of the text.

2. In *Yehoshua* (5:14) we read of the encounter between Yehoshua and God's angel in Yericho, during which the angel says: "No, but I am captain of the host of God; I am now come." *Chazal* understand this as meaning that he had come to rebuke Bnei Yisrael:

"He [the angel] said to him, You had already done away with the daily sacrifice offered at twilight; now you have done away with Torah study! He [Yehoshua] replied, 'For which of these [sins] have you come?' He answered, 'I am *now* come [i.e., because of the latter sin].' Therefore we read immediately thereafter, 'And Yehoshua tarried that night in the midst of the valley (*emek*).'² Rabbi Yochanan taught: This teaches that he tarried that night in the depths (*omkah*) of halakha." (*Megilla* 3a-b)

Radak interprets the words of the angel in accordance with their plain meaning: "'I am now come' – at the moment that you saw me, which is not what happens in the case of humans. This was meant to convince Yehoshua that he was in fact an angel." Radak then goes on to quote the midrash, but expresses reservations:

"But this midrash is far removed [from the plain meaning of the text], for the time of war is not a time for Torah study;

² The verse in this form does not exist in the Masoretic version; it is a combination of two separate verses, as Radak notes in his words cited below.

furthermore, the verse 'And Yehoshua tarried...' is located far from this verse, in the context of the battle against Ai."

In addition, Radak adds a further sharp comment:

"Furthermore, whoever wrote this midrash was mistaken concerning the verse, 'And he tarried...', for he confused two different verses: the verse that starts 'Yehoshua tarried (*va-yalen*)...' ends with the words, 'amongst the people' (*Yehoshua* 8:9), while a different verse reads, 'Yehoshua went (*va-yelekh*) that night into the midst of the valley' (8:13)."³

3. Before crossing the Jordan, Yehoshua tells the people: "Come here, and hear the words of the Lord your God... Hereby shall you know that the living God is among you, and that He will surely drive out from before you the Kena'ani... Behold, the Ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passes before you into the Jordan... And it shall be, when the soles of the feet of the *kohanim* who bear the ark... shall rest... then the water of the Jordan shall be cut off: those waters that come down from above, and they shall stand in a heap" (*Yehoshua* 3:9-13). Radak interprets, in accordance with the plain meaning, that the words "hereby shall you know..." refer to what follows:

"The meaning of this phrase is explained – that the Ark will pass before them and the waters of the Jordan will be cut off. Through this great sign they will know that God is in their midst, and will drive out the nations from before them."

Afterwards, he cites the midrash⁴ teaching that these words refer to what the text had mentioned previously, with the addition of a description that does not appear explicitly in the text:

"A midrash teaches that this refers to that which is written, 'Come here' – i.e., he brought them all between the two poles of the Ark, and this is one of the places where something small contained something larger, and he said to them, 'Hereby shall you know...' – by means of this wonder, where you see that you all manage to squeeze between the poles of the Ark."

To this Radak comments, "This *derash* seems far from the plain meaning, for had this been the wonder that he referred to, it would be mentioned [explicitly] in the text."

³ The Tosafot (3a, '*va-yalen*'), propose a solution to this problem that does not assume a mistaken reading on the part of the author of the midrash: "It is the style of the Talmud to abbreviate verses and to combine them." For more on this instance see R. Margaliot, *Ha-Mikra ve-ha-Mesora*, Jerusalem 5749, pp. 11-12; D. Rosenthal, "Chazal ve-Chilufei Nussach ba-Mikra", in: Y. Zakovich and A. Rofe (eds.), *Sefer Yitzchak Aryeh Zeligman*, Jerusalem 5743, pp. 414-415.

⁴ The source is *Bereishit Rabba* 5,7; Theodor-Albeck edition pp. 36-37.

Thus far we have reviewed the approaches of the best known biblical commentators, and we have seen that all of them recognized the vital distinction between *peshat* and *derash*. With the exception of R. Yosef Kara and Ibn Ezra, they all viewed *derash* as a dimension of interpretation that is independent and no less important than *peshat*, but they nevertheless emphasize that *peshat* is an interpretative level in its own right, and for this reason the *derash* cannot and must not obscure or negate the *peshat*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish