

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS
By Dr. Avigail Rock

Dedicated in memory of Tzipporah Bat R'Mosheh z"l

Lecture #03:
R. Yona ibn Janach

A. INTRODUCTION

His Life and His Work

Although R. Yona ibn Janach did not author even one full volume dedicated to biblical commentary, his contributions to *parshanut* have proven momentous. Who was he, and why is his work so crucial to the development of Jewish exegesis?

R. Yona ibn Janach (henceforth, Ribag)¹ lived in Spain in the first half of the 11th century,² and he was one of the most important Hebrew linguists and grammarians of the early medieval period. For Ribag, as we shall see, biblical exegesis represented both the most fundamental basis and the ultimate application of the study of Hebrew language and grammar. His grammatical innovations lay the foundation for biblical exegetes who came after him, such as R. Avraham ibn Ezra, and these exegetes often cite his explanations throughout *Tanakh*. There is no doubt that one should view Ribag as an important exegete who influenced *parshanut* both in his time and in the following generations. For this reason, we must attempt to understand his approach.

Ribag was one of the first to formulate the rules of Hebrew syntax. Indeed, it may be that he was the first to use the *peh-ayin-lamed* format as the basis for demonstrating and explaining all verbs and conjugations.³ Using this

1 The full name of Ribag, as is written in his own works, is Abu al-Walīd Marwān ibn Janāh. Ibn Ezra referred to him by the Latin name Marinus, and he was the one to give him the first name Yona (dove), as “ibn Janach” literally means “winged.”

2 The years of his birth and death are tentatively put at circa 993 and 1050.

3 An example of this view may be found in his preface to *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*, ed. Bekher (Jerusalem, 5726), 3:

Know... that many times I will speak of the *peh* of the verb or the *ayin* of the verb or the *lamed* of the verb. Know that my intent is to fix for each of the verbs its tenses and

model, all roots are of three letters, the first of which is referred to as *peh*, the second as *ayin*, and the last as *lamed*. Ribag studied and was very much influenced by the grammatical works of R. Yehuda ben Hayyuj,⁴ but he apparently never met him; Ribag mentions R. Yitzchak ibn Gikatilla and the linguist and poet R. Yitzchak ben Shaul as his regular teachers. He made his living in the field of medicine, and apparently wrote a medical text that is not extant. In addition, he studied philosophy and was an expert in Aramaic and Arabic.⁵

Ribag wrote seven books dealing with grammar and language. They were written in Judeo-Arabic, and only some of them were translated into Hebrew, mainly by R. Yehuda ibn Tibbon. Some of his compositions are glosses and addenda to his predecessors' works.⁶ In the framework of this series, we will deal with Ribag's magnum opus, *Machberet Ha-Dikduk*. (We will use ibn Tibbon's Hebrew titles, as these are most familiar to the modern reader.) *Machberet Ha-Dikduk* (Tract of Investigation) is considered the most important of his creations, in terms both of its scope and its influence on the Hebrew language and biblical exegesis.

Machberet Ha-Dikduk

Machberet Ha-Dikduk is divided into two parts, both translated by ibn Tibbon: the first is known as *Sefer Ha-Rikma* (the Book of Many Colors), while the second is known as *Sefer Ha-Shorashim* (the Book of Roots).⁷

The focus of *Sefer Ha-Rikma* is linguistic: to examine the biblical text and to formulate rules that are tied to its language and its forms of expression. These rules, as we shall see later, help us understand the language of *Tanakh*. Ribag brings many examples from *Tanakh* to illustrate each linguistic phenomenon, sometimes relying on a halakhic Midrash in which the Sages take a similar approach to that of his own proposal. Ribag was the first grammarian to craft a

conjugations and all of its forms... And I will in each case speak of the *peh* of the verb, as this is parallel to the *peh* of *p-a-l* ("work," the standard verb).

4 Judah ben David Hayyuj (circa 945-1012) was one of the leading Hebrew grammarians and philological exegetes in Spain; his main innovation was that in Hebrew, all roots have three letters.

5 Aside from autobiographical points scattered in the various works of Ribag and ibn Tibbon's notes, we do not know much about the events of Ribag's life.

6 For example, in his *Sefer Ha-Hassaga*, Ribag offers his glosses on the words of R. Yehuda ben Hayyuj; in *Iggeret Ha-He'ara*, he defends his positions against R. Yehuda ben Hayyuj's supporters.

7 Ribag explains the meaning of the names of these works at the end of his introduction to *Sefer Ha-Rikma*:

Because of its many topics, I have named it *Sefer Ha-Rikma*, as its chapters may be compared to a series of terraces or structures, in which are planted many and sundry varieties of flowers; in this way it is similar to the embroidering of a garment of many colors. In the second book, we will recount the roots mentioned throughout Scripture, and therefore I have called this second part *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*.

comprehensive and thorough methodology, encompassing all of the spheres of linguistic expression and including exceptional cases.

In his introduction to *Sefer Ha-Rikma*, Ribag explains his motivations for writing it. Three distinct impetuses may be identified:

1. **Basic understanding of the Hebrew language is an urgent concern.**⁸ While the Arabic language is widely studied, he notes, Jews simply chant, mouthing the words without understanding anything about the study of linguistics.
2. **Understanding language is the basis of all knowledge.** All communication is effected by language, and every deficiency of linguistic comprehension will necessarily bring about a deficiency in understanding the content.⁹
3. **One cannot understand the Torah without understanding its language.** In order for us to fulfill the will of God, which is expressed in the Torah, we must understand the science of language.¹⁰

8 Speaking of the Muslims, Ribag writes:

And I have seen that the people among whom we live exert themselves to attain the wisdom of their language... but the speakers of our language, in our generation, have already cast this wisdom behind their backs, and they have set this issue outside of their hearing. In fact, they treat it lightly, considering it superfluous and pointless. As a result, they remain bereft of its felicities and empty of its beauty; indeed, they have divested themselves of its ornaments. We have come to a point of individual expression and personal speech, but we do not pay attention to this, and we are not exacting about it, as if language has no order to be restored and no boundary to be demarcated. Instead, they have sought from the language whatever is easy for them to expropriate and expound. They pay no heed to its roots, nor do they care about its branches.

Ribag uses the phrase “divested themselves of its ornaments” in keeping with the verse describing the serious ramifications of the sin of the Golden Calf: “And the Israelites divested themselves of their ornaments from Mount Chorev” (*Shemot* 33:6), which means, “They removed the adornment which they had received at Mount Chorev” — that is, the Torah. Ribag claims that in his time, the Jews have similarly removed from themselves the adornment of being well-versed in biblical Hebrew.

9 In the words of Ribag:

Because the work of linguistics is a tool for everything expounded and a preface for everything researched, the effort was to reach its end and to stand on all of its issues, and the desire is to reach the edge and to know what is complete from it and what is not complete, the full and the deficient, and the true language and the language of transfer... As we will find it of the abridged and the deficient, it will be the lack of understanding of the researched and the abridgement of knowledge of that which is sought.

10 These are his words:

Because the reward of the Creator, may He be praised, the good in everything the man will acquire for himself in his world, and the honored in everything which is destined for him in his end, and reaching this will not be completed unless one understands what is written in the prophetic books and the fulfillment of their *mitzvot* and their admonitions, and it will not be feasible to understand what is written in these books except by the wisdom of the language, so that the obligation of a man's toil and fixing this wisdom and his strengthening to acquire it and improve it and be precise in its issues and to know the plots of its words is a greater obligation and the need for it very strong according to the quality of the degree of that which is sought and the great value of the researched... All

Sefer Ha-Rikma is divided into forty-six chapters (literally, “gates”), and every chapter deals with another linguistic topic. The issue is explained concisely at the beginning of every chapter, followed by Scriptural examples for illustration.

We will examine a number of issues from *Sefer Ha-Rikma* to see how grammatical analysis influences biblical exegesis.

B. SELECT TOPICS FROM SEFER HA-RIKMA

The Lamed of Substitution

In Chapter 6, in explaining the concept of prefixes, Ribag notes one of the meanings of the letter *lamed* when it is added to the beginning of the word:

The *lamed* indicates exchange or substitution, instead of saying “in place of.” For example, the *lamed* as used in the verse, “And the bricks were as stone (*le-aven*) for them, and the asphalt was as mortar (*la-chomer*)” (*Bereishit* 11:3).

In other words, the meaning of the *lamed* at the beginning of a noun may be “for” or “in place of.”

Ribag brings another example from the verse in *Parashat Vayera* in which God orders the Binding of Yitzchak: “And bring him up as a burnt offering (*le-ola*)” (*Bereishit* 22:2):

A *lamed* used similarly may be found here: “And bring him up as a burnt offering (*le-ola*) on one of the mountains...” For I believe that God, may He be blessed and praised, when He wanted to show to all creation the travails of Avraham, peace be upon him, and the rewards He gave him for his suffering, He spoke to him with a phrasing that encompassed two understandings.¹¹ One of them is what the masses will understand, and the second is what individuals may understand in it, and this is what “And bring him up as a burnt offering” accomplishes.

The masses’ understanding is what is connoted by the verse’s simple meaning – that is, to offer him as a sacrifice... However, its individual meaning¹² is the following: bring him up there, on one of the mountains, in place of a burnt offering — that is, God wants Avraham to bring Yitzchak up to the mountain to Him at the time that God will desire that Avraham bring him a sacrifice.

the more so, this valuable, respectable wisdom which causes to understand the words of God, which helps to do his *mitzvot* and brings us closer to His reward and distances us from His punishment.

11 In other words, it is ambiguous terminology.

12 In other words, this is the meaning that an individual may assign to it.

Avraham initially applied the masses' meaning, and God foresaw that this common meaning was what would initially occur to him, but He wanted to show people his travail and the rewards He gave him for it, and when Avraham achieved the matter that God wanted from him, namely bringing his son up to the mountain, the Blessed One called from the heavens: That will do, Avraham.

Ribag claims that it is never God's intention for Yitzchak to be slaughtered. He commands, "And bring him up as a burnt offering," knowing that Avraham will interpret the phrasing of the command in the usual meaning (what the masses would understand). However, the true meaning, God's true intent in this command, is for Avraham to bring Yitzchak up to the mountain in place of an *ola* – that is, in such a way that he will be considered by God as an *ola*. (Otherwise, it may be that God would have phrased the command without the *lamed*.)

After this, Ribag draws the following conclusion as regards the eternal nature of the Torah:

This is it, and may the Lord God grant you success in it, for in my mind, it is a pleasing matter, fine and wondrous, though no one else seems to have apprehended it... But this will negate the confusion of one who demands that we accept the Torah's mutability.

There is no question that Ribag is responding here to a common Muslim claim that the incident of the Binding of Yitzchak proves that God changes His mind; just as God rethinks His command to sacrifice Yitzchak, they argue, so He may rethink the commands of the Torah, exchanging Moshe's revelation for Muhammad's. Ribag counters that, in actuality, God does not change His mind over the course of this story; He never commanded Avraham to kill Yitzchak. This is a good example of a confluence and cooperation between the science of language, biblical exegesis, and the sphere of faith and philosophy.

Derekh Ketzara

An exegetical trait that Ribag deals with at length is *derekh ketzara*, which he defines as, "what is used in a deficient state." This is how he explains the phenomenon in Chapter 25:

Know that the Hebrews very often subtract and take away from phrases rather than completing them, in truth, for the sole purpose of lightening and shortening them, with the speaker's intent remaining clear...

In this chapter, the Ribag cites all of the types of abbreviations used in biblical Hebrew, but we will note and cite only two examples.

- A. Sometimes, Ribag claims, the word “*min*” (from) is missing. For example, in *Shemot* 19:12, the verse literally reads: “Keep yourselves going up the mountain or touching its edge,” but the meaning is, “Keep yourselves **from** going up the mountain or touching its edge.”¹³
- B. At other times, the verse uses parallel clauses, but only specifies a modifier in one. An example of this is found in the verse (*Devarim* 33:6), “May Reuven live and not die; and may his men be numbered.” Ribag argues that it should be understood as, “May Reuven live and not die; and may his men **not** be numbered,” as “not” in the beginning of the verse is meant to apply to both clauses.

Synecdoche

Chapter 28 of *Sefer Ha-Rikma* deals with metonymy, meaning a word that is written in Scripture when another, related word is meant: “Although this word is stated, the intent is for something else.” Ribag notes a number of types of this phenomenon; we will deal with one specifically, synecdoche, in which we find “the general in place of the specific” or the reverse.

“To a foreign people he has no authority to sell her, as he has betrayed her” (*Shemot* 21:8) — the intent [of the verse] is “to a man” [and should be understood as, “To a foreign man...”]. This is certainly acceptable, because a “people” is certainly a collection of persons. A similar instance of this type is what is stated (*Bereishit* 20:4), “Will you kill even a righteous nation”?¹⁴

Syntactic Inversion

A final topic that we will deal with is the inversion of syntactic order in *Tanakh*, which is discussed in Chapters 31-32 of *Sefer Ha-Rikma*. This is how Ribag defines this phenomenon:

Know that the inversion of their words will be in two ways: one of them is grammatical and the second is logical. When no doubt may enter one’s mind, it may be written in the standard way or inverted.

In other words, *Tanakh* is free to express itself even in a way that differs from the normal, as long as the content is still understood. Ribag will change the sequence of the verse in cases in which the Scriptural context obligates one to rearrange it. For example, taking the verse, “And all the land came to Egypt to

13 Following this rule, Ribag, explains the verse (*Kohélet* 12:12), “More than them, my son, be careful, making many books, endlessly” in the following way: “Be careful **of** making many books.”

14 Accordingly, the term “*goy*” should be rendered “person,” rather than “nation,” the meaning it appears elsewhere in *Tanakh*, and the reference here is to Avimelekh. This is opposed to Rashi, who writes: “Perhaps this is Your way — to destroy nations for no reason?” In other words, “*goy*” here means “nation,” as in the rest of *Tanakh*.

procure to Yosef (*li-shbor el Yosef*)” (*Bereishit* 41:57), Ribag rearranges the sentence and reads it in the following way: “All the land came to Egypt, to Yosef, to procure.” In other words, the phrase “to Yosef” is to be seen as the object of the verb “came,” not the object of the verb “to procure.” The motivation for this rearrangement is that the phrase “*li-shbor le-*” or “*li-shbor el*” can mean selling to a buyer¹⁵ or buying for another,¹⁶ but not buying from a seller.¹⁷ The brothers are not coming to sell to Yosef or to buy something on Yosef’s behalf, but to buy from Yosef, so the Scriptural context requires this rearrangement.

One may also rearrange the verse, according to Ribag, when compelled to do so by external considerations of logic that have nothing to do with the context of the verse. For example, the verse describing the fate of the leftover manna, “And it bred worms and it rotted” (*Shemot* 16:20), is rearranged by Ribag to say, “It rotted and it bred worms.” He explains why:

For rotting is born of decay, which is the generator of the worms; [decay occurs] before the worms are generated, because the generator must precede that which is generated.

We will conclude with one final example from the Binding of Yitzchak in *Parashat Vayera*, the difficult verse describing Avraham’s actions after God orders him not to harm Yitzchak:

And Avraham lifted up his eyes and he saw: behold, a ram *achar*, caught in the thicket by its horns. Avraham went and took the ram, and he offered it as a burnt offering instead of his son. (*Bereishit* 22:13)

The word “*achar*” literally means “after” or “behind;” some render it, based on context, as “behind him” or “behind it,” despite the absence of any pronoun. Ribag, on the other hand, rearranges the verse: “And Avraham lifted up his eyes, and after [he lifted his eyes], he saw: behold, a ram caught in the thicket by its horns.”¹⁸

We have seen a number of examples of Ribag’s great contributions in the sphere of understanding biblical grammar and biblical exegesis. Now, we will turn to *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*.

C. SELECT TOPICS FROM SEFER HA-SHORASHIM

15 The root is usually used for this purpose in the causative conjugation, but in one place we find it even in the simple conjugation (*Bereishit* 41:56): “And he provided for Egypt.”

16 E.g., *Bereishit* 43:4: “And we will procure food for you.”

17 Buying from a vendor is described as “*lishbor mi-*”; e.g., *Bereishit* 42:3: “To procure provisions from Egypt.”

18 This proposal is already voiced by Targum Onkelos on the Torah.

In his introduction to *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*, Ribag sets before the reader the aim of his book:

This book, which we have called *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*, contains most of the Hebrew roots that we find in Scripture, and we will explain their definitions as well as their connotations, as proves necessary.

The book is built in an alphabetical structure; for every root, Ribag cites the different conjugations in which the root appears and the different meanings of every root. If Ribag has already dealt with a certain root in another of his works, he does not go on at length about it in *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*. Ribag does not list every appearance of each root in *Tanakh*, but he does bring a number of examples for every root.

For the purpose of identifying the roots of words in the Torah, Ribag first and foremost turns to Scripture itself, afterwards to the language of the Sages and to Aramaic, and only as a last resort, if it still proves difficult to identifying the root, he refers to Arabic cognates. Ribag seems to sense the reader's hesitation to use Arabic, so he establishes that he stands on the shoulders of giants in doing so:

In order to explain some of the roots, I will bring proofs from whatever I may find in Scripture, and what I will not find in Scripture for this purpose, I will bring proofs from whatever I may find in the Mishna and the Talmud and the Aramaic language. In this, I follow the Hebrew tradition, in the footsteps of the al-Fayyumi dean [R. Sa'adia Gaon], may his memory be a blessing, who cites evidence concerning the seventy unique words from Scripture,¹⁹ Mishna, and Talmud... However, if it should happen that I can find no evidence from any of the above-mentioned sources, but I then discover evidence in the Arabic language, I will not hold myself back from bringing a proof from that which is revealed through it. (Introduction to *Sefer Ha-Rikma*²⁰)

Ribag continues to criticize those who avoid using Arabic in order to understand the language of Scripture (ibid.):

I will have no compunctions about bringing evidence from that which is evident in it, for this is the practice of men of our generation whose minds are weak and whose knowledge is puny.

Similarly, Ribag claims that those who avoid using Arabic for this purpose are in fact sanctimonious:

19 Here he refers to R. Saadia Gaon's list of unique words in Scripture.

20 The end of the introduction to *Sefer Ha-Rikma* deals with *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*.

This is true all the more so for one who seeks to demonstrate his righteousness and swathe himself in the cloak of saintliness, in his limited understanding.

We will analyze a number of examples from *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*:

- I. **The meaning of the word “ki.”** Reish Lakish’s famous dictum (*Rosh Hashana* 3a, et al.) declares that the word “ki” has four meanings.²¹ Ribag claims that there is yet another meaning of the word – “although” – and he brings a number of examples of this usage. In *Shemot* 34:9, Moshe asks, “Let God please walk in our midst, *ki* it is a stiff-necked people;”²² Ribag explains that this should be translated: “Let God please walk in our midst **although** it is a stiff-necked people.”²³ Another example which proves this claim is God’s declaration after the Flood: “I will no longer curse the ground because of man, *ki* the inclination of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (*Bereishit* 8:21). The word *ki* does not fit into any of the four explanations brought in the Talmud, but it works out well according to Ribag’s approach: “I will no longer curse the ground because of man, although the inclination of man’s heart is evil from his youth.”
- II. **The meaning of the root *peh-lamed-alef*.** In *Bereishit* 18:14, God questions Avraham about Sara’s laughter at the idea of her having a child, challenging him: “*Ha-yippaleh?*” The biblical exegetes try to explain this term. Rashi and ibn Ezra, following Onkelos, translate it as “covered,” “hidden,” yielding the awkward translation: “Is any matter hidden from God?” Based on biblical parallels,²⁴ Ribag reaches the conclusion that every time the root appears, it means “great.” Thus, the meaning of the sentence is: “Is any matter greater than God?”

D. THE FATE OF HIS WORKS

Unfortunately, with all of the importance of *Sefer Ha-Rikma* and *Sefer Ha-Shorashim* in expanding our understanding of the biblical text, these books have been pushed into a lonely corner of the Jewish bookcase.

It appears to me that the time has come to reclaim these books from the dust and to give them their proper place of honor among the other medieval commentaries. Indeed, it is worthwhile to include the Ribag’s commentaries in

21 They are: if, perhaps, but, because.

22 Rashi, the Rashbam, ibn Ezra and the Ramban all struggle to explain this verse.

23 Ribag adds, “To counteract the criticism of ‘a stiff-necked people,’ he preempts this by saying, ‘Let God please walk in our midst.’”

24 For example, *Iyov* 5:9 describes God as the one “Who does great, unsearchable things; wonders without number;” similarly, the Psalmist says (*Tehillim* 131:1), “I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wondrous for me.” In each case “*nifla*” (wonder, wondrous) is used as a synonym for “great.”

the study of *Tanakh* generally and the study of the weekly Torah portion specifically.

(Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch)