

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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**GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS**  
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**In Memory of Sheine Hendele Bas Greiman z”l**  
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**Lecture #11:**  
**R. Yosef Bekhor Shor**

**A. Introduction**

R. Yosef of Orléans, northern France, was a 12<sup>th</sup>-century *parshan* who has become known through the generation as Ri Bekhor Shor.<sup>1</sup> He was a Tosafist, a student of Rabbeinu Tam,<sup>2</sup> and he was influenced mainly by Rashi’s commentary and the commentaries of Mahari Kara and the Rashbam. Nevertheless, Ri Bekhor Shor blazed a trail of his own in biblical exegesis.

We do not know anything about his life story. Apparently, he was born around the year 1140, and his correspondence with Rabbeinu Tam indicates that they had great mutual respect and friendship.

In addition to his biblical and Talmudic commentaries, Ri Bekhor Shor was a liturgical poet, composing elegies and penitential prayers.<sup>3</sup> From the contents of these works, we can learn about the great suffering of the Jewish people in his time. Ri Bekhor Shor’s poetry also appears in his commentary on the Torah, which is filled with passion and rich stylistic flourishes. In addition, Ri Bekhor Shor writes a small poem of between four and eight lines at the conclusion of each Torah portion in the books of *Bereishit* and *Shemot*, as well as *Parashat Balak*. The subject of each poem is a topic addressed in the portion or the longing for redemption; in general, every line rhymes with

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1 The source of the name is Moshe’s blessing to the tribe of Yosef (*Devarim* 33:17): “The firstborn of his ox (*bekhor shoro*) is his glory, and the horns of the aurochs are his horns; with them he will gore together the ends of the earth.” Apparently, R. Yosef used this appellation himself. Thus we find, for example, in his commentary to *Devarim* 10:10: “I, Bekhor Shor, give a sign...”

2 Scholars dispute whether the Ri ben R. Yitzchak (or “the Ri of Orléans”) mentioned by the Tosafists is the same person as Ri Bekhor Shor. Most assume that they are identical; see E. E. Urbach, *Baalei Ha-Tosafot*, pp. 132-140.

3 Five of his poems have survived, most of which deal with the troubles of the Jewish nation in exile and the anticipation of redemption. One of the most famous poems is recited as part of the penitential prayers of Erev Rosh Hashana in Ashkenazic communities: *Adon Mo’ed Ke-Tikach*.

the name of the portion.<sup>4</sup>

Ri Bekhor Shor, like his predecessors Mahari Kara and Rashbam,<sup>5</sup> was a member of the *peshat* school in 12<sup>th</sup>-century northern France, but in the commentary of Ri Bekhor Shor, we do not find any explicit methodological statements. Nevertheless, it is definitely possible to identify characteristic themes that are prominent in his commentary.

## B. Attitude Towards *Derash*

In order to understand the attitude of Ri Bekhor Shor to aggadic material, we must compare his path to that of his predecessors. Recall that Rashi, for different reasons, adopts aggadic material even when it does not dovetail with the *peshat*. Mahari Kara and the Rashbam, however, oppose this unequivocally, and their inclination is to ignore *derash* entirely. It appears that Ri Bekhor Shor forges a path that is a sort of middle way between Rashi and the pursuers of the *peshat*, the Rashbam and Mahari Kara. On the one hand, Ri Bekhor Shor aims to explain the verses without non-biblical information; on the other hand, when the *derash* is appropriate for explaining the *peshat* and for the general context of verses, or when one may explain it as being in keeping with biblical reality, Ri Bekhor Shor will not hesitate to bring a *midrash*. Sometimes, Ri Bekhor Shor will cite *derash* and act as a defender of the Sages, providing reasons why their words have a certain basis in *peshat*. When the *drash* reflects an accepted tradition among the Sages, Ri Bekhor Shor accepts their words.

Let us demonstrate this phenomenon:

1. During the plague of darkness, the Torah notes: “For all the Israelites, there was light in their residences” (*Shemot* 11:23). The Sages famously explain that at the time of the plague of darkness, the Israelites did not suffer, even those who were among the Egyptians. Ri Bekhor Shor first brings his view:

This was in the land of Goshen, in which they lived; however, the land of Egypt was dark for everyone, even Israelites.

According to Ri Bekhor Shor, the meaning of “in their residences” is the region inhabited by the Israelites, namely Goshen. Thus, the verse indicates

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<sup>4</sup> A stunning example of his talent can be found in the concluding poem of *Parashat Vayera*, which begins with the words “*Vayera elav*.” In this six-line poem, Ri Bekhor Shor uses six different definition of the word *elav* or *eilav*:

My God will builds its porticos and **its lintels** above [part of the Temple, mentioned in juxtaposition with the doorposts; see *I Melakhim* 6:31];

His powerful and **his mighty ones** [see *Yechezkel* 17:13] assemble in the court thereof.

And we will offer there, before Him, His lambs and **His rams** like a turtledove.

His terebinths and **His oaks** [see *Yeshayahu* 1:29] will bear fruit in love,

And the fatlings of the flock wear **its tallow** like a glove,

As I complete the section of “*Vayera elav*.”

<sup>5</sup> See lessons 8-10.

that in this place alone, the Israelites had light; those who were in the land of Egypt proper had to deal with the darkness. After he provides his explanation according to the way of *peshat*, Ri Bekhor Shor adds:

Still, our Rabbis say that there was light for the Israelites even in Egypt, so that they could look in to see what the Egyptians had in their homes. Thus, “in their residences” would mean wherever they resided, even in Egypt.

Thus, Ri Bekhor Shor attempts to explain how the explanation of the Sages fits in with the *peshat*, despite the fact that he himself explains otherwise.

2. In the opening of *Parashat Vayera* (all subsequent citations are *Sefer Bereishit* unless otherwise noted), the Torah says, “And he saw, and behold, three men...” (18:2). Ri Bekhor Shor explains that the verse is referring to actual human beings:

According to the *peshat*, these were actual men, for we have not found angels eating, drinking, and sleeping in a man’s home as they sleep in Lot’s house...<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, there is an accepted tradition of the Sages that these were angels, and therefore Ri Bekhor Shor adds the following sentence:

But we should not refute the words of our Rabbis, because they too are like prophets who know everything that happens in the land.<sup>7</sup>

However, in many cases, Ri Bekhor Shor does not cite *midrashim*; instead, he explains according to the way of *peshat* alone.

### C. The Torah Does Not Provide Extraneous Information

Another principle in Ri Bekhor Shor’s exegetical approach is that the Torah does not provide superfluous information. Sometimes, we find in *Tanakh* verses that appear to provide extraneous data about the characters. According to Ri Bekhor Shor, the information is in fact essential; it comes to teach us something about the characters. We will demonstrate this phenomenon:

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6 There is no doubt that the impetus for his explanation is Jewish-Christian polemics, and Ri Bekhor Shor is challenging here the Doctrine of the Trinity, as he writes in the continuation of the story (19:1):

“And the two angels” — And from this verse is a refutation of the sectarians who say that these three men were the Trinity; one may refute them: If so, where is the third? There are only two parts, as it is said, “And the two angels.”

See also R. Avraham ibn Ezra’s commentary to 18:1.

7 Perhaps Ri Bekhor Shor alludes here that in fact his view is that the truth lies with the view of the Sages, but he is compelled to explain according to the *peshat* because of his opposition to the Christians.

1. Ri Bekhor Shor explains the fact that Avraham takes all of his property with him to the land of Canaan (“and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Charan;” 12:5) as follows:

This teaches that he had faith in God’s promise, not like a person who says: I will go now and take some of my possessions – if He will do to me as He says, well and good, I will send for the rest of it; and if not, I shall return. Rather, he took everything with him, because he was certain that God would do as He had said.

In other words, the Torah tells us that Avraham took with him all of his possessions in order to teach us about Avraham’s true and unshakable confidence in God’s promise; he would not leave any possessions in Charan as insurance, should he be compelled to return there.

2. The Torah describes the first encounter of Yaakov and Yosef in Egypt in the following way: “And he came up to greet Yisrael his father, to Goshen; and he appeared to him, and he fell on his neck, and he wept excessively on his neck” (46:29). The words “and he appeared to him” seem extraneous, as it is clear that Yaakov saw his son if he fell and wept upon his neck. Ri Bekhor Shor explains this detail:

Because it says below (48:10), “And Yisrael’s eyes grew heavy from old age; he could not see,” it says here, “And he appeared to him,” to inform us that he still saw well, and he enjoyed [Yosef’s] appearance and visage.

In other words, the verse stresses that despite the fact that Yaakov later went blind, Yaakov still saw well at this time, and therefore relished the appearance Yosef.<sup>8</sup>

#### **D. Explaining Verses in the Stated Context**

Ri Bekhor Shor goes to great lengths to explain the verses in their specific context. We will note a number of examples:

1. In the commandment of circumcision, the blessing appears, “And I will multiply you very greatly” (17:5). Why is it specifically keeping this commandment that will allow Avraham to merit this blessing? Ri Bekhor Shor explains:

So that you will not say: perhaps it will render me impotent; on the contrary, it will not make you impotent, it will make you more virile...

2. At the end of *Parashat Noach*, we first encounter Avraham’s family: “And Avram and Nachor took wives. The name of Avram’s wife was Sarai... Now Sarai was barren; she had no child” (11:29-30). Ri Bekhor Shor explains

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<sup>8</sup> As it is stated in the next verse, “And Yisrael said to Yosef, ‘I may die this time, after I have seen your face, for you are still alive.’”

this about the verse:

“Now Sarai was barren; she had no child” — This tells us how beloved Avraham Avinu was, because he left all of his father’s inheritance, and everything which he had there, and he went as God commanded. If he had left there a son or a daughter to inherit his portion in his father’s house, this would not have been such a great matter, but now he abandoned and left everything, running after God’s command.

In other words, the point of mentioning Sara’s barrenness is to mark Avraham’s greatness in relinquishing his father’s estate without leaving a son or a daughter who could receive the inheritance, as he goes to fulfill God’s command.

3. In a similar way, Ri Bekhor Shor explains the mention of Avraham’s age in 12:4 (“Avram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Charan”):

It counts Avraham’s years, to tell you that his father was still alive, but he did not worry about his father’s love, nor any other thing; [he sought] only to run after God’s commands.

We should note that regarding this point, Ri Bekhor Shor uses the reverse method of Mahari Kara and the Rashbam. While they explain many verses as introductions to what follows,<sup>9</sup> Ri Bekhor Shor specifically exerts himself to explain the verses in the context in which they are brought, even in cases in which it appears that they are meant to serve as an introduction (see, for example, his commentary to 35:22). We should note that Ri Bekhor Shor does not negate the principle of foreshadowing, and he sometimes does explain according to this principle (e.g., 9:18), but there is a definite tendency to reduce its use and to explain the verses in their context.

## **E. Characters’ Actions and State of Mind**

One of Ri Bekhor Shor’s most notable innovations is his attempt to explain the verses based on understanding the state of mind of the human actors. There are numerous examples of this:

1. After Yitzchak touches Yaakov and hears his voice, he still suspects that something is up, and therefore requests, “Draw close and kiss me, my son” (27:26). Ri Bekhor Shor explains this in the following way:

His heart still troubled him, saying:<sup>10</sup> I have two signs for this, one of which is the voice, which is similar to that of Yaakov, and one of which is the hands, which are similar to those of Esav, and I do not know which one to rely on. I must use a third sign: the scent of Esav is the scent of the field, and that of Yaakov is not the scent of the field. I will

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<sup>9</sup> See lessons 8 and 10.

<sup>10</sup> That is, Yitzchak said in his heart, to himself.

kiss him [and thereby smell him]; if his scent is the scent of the field, this must be Esav, and if not, this must be Yaakov, because I will follow the majority of signs, and therefore he said, "Draw close and kiss me, my son," and he smelled the scent of his clothing. Then he decided that it was Esav, and he blessed him.

2. Another example is his explanation of the fact that Tamar chooses to seduce Yehuda specifically at the time when he is shearing his sheep (38:13):

At the sheep-shearing time, they were happy and would make big meals... When a person rejoices, his lusts overwhelm him, and therefore she chose for herself sheep-shearing time.

3. The Torah tells us that Yosef's brothers hated him because of his first dream (37:8). Why should Yosef be held guilty for a dream he has? Does he decide what to dream? Ri Bekhor Shor explains this in the following way:

Because they said, "As you lay in bed came thoughts" (*Daniel* 2:29); this is how you plot to dominate us, because our father loves you, and what you think about during the day, this is what you dream of at night.

## F. Biblical Reality

Ri Bekhor Shor is accustomed to explain verses according to the reality of the biblical era, at least according to the reality that he recognizes. It is important to note that it is difficult to know whether Ri Bekhor Shor explains the verse according to the reality of his own era (assuming that in the time and region of Scripture, conditions were similar) or if he assumes what the reality was during the biblical era, and explains the verses accordingly. We will see a number of examples of this:

1. When Moshe sees the Burning Bush, God says to him (*Shemot* 3:5), "Take *ne'alekha* off your feet." Ostensibly, if the term *na'al* (here in the second-person possessive) means "sandal" or "shoe," Moshe would understand that God is talking about the coverings on his feet. Thus, "Take your shoes off," "*Shal ne'alekha*," should have sufficed. Therefore, Ri Bekhor Shor explains that there is also a hand covering termed a *na'al* – namely a glove. God is telling Moshe that it is only his foot-coverings which he must remove, because only these are dirty:

"Take your coverings..." – Because the foot-covering treads everywhere, sometimes in dirty places, it is not appropriate to bring it a holy place.

"Off your feet" – Because even that which is on the hand is simply called a "covering," and this is what Boaz gives to the redeemer (*Ruth* 4:7-8), and it is *gant* in Old French.<sup>11</sup> In fact, we find that the nobility still use their *gant* to transfer property. Therefore, He must say "off your

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<sup>11</sup> A gauntlet, the glove that medieval knights were accustomed to wear, was, for the most part, made of metal.

feet,” so that he will not think that He is speaking of the one on the hand.

In this case, it is clear that Ri Bekhor Shor explains the verse according to the reality of his own era. In the following examples, it is more difficult to know whether we are talking about the reality of his time or the reality of biblical times.

2. In the commandment of circumcision, God says to Avraham, “And I will put my covenant between me and you” (17:2). Ri Bekhor Shor explains the meaning of the covenant:

I will put a mark in your flesh, as a sign that you are my servant; so will My covenant be. This is the way of servants, who have a sign on their clothing to show that they are servants and bound to their masters... Here too, God marks our flesh, because we are his servants, in a place that a person cannot shed or cast off of himself.<sup>12</sup>

3. When Yitzchak seeks to bless Esav, he says to him, “Prepare for me delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die” (27:4). Why is there a need for a meal at the time of the blessing? Ri Bekhor Shor explains this in the following way:

It is the way of the aristocrats to prepare a feast when they receive a noble title.

Ri Bekhor Shor maintains that that biblical reality (presumably similar to his own era) supports this; when a person receives an aristocratic title, a feast is prepared for the event, and Yitzchak requests the feast in order to memorialize Esav’s new title.

4. Why does Rivka love Yaakov (25:28)? Ri Bekhor Shor explains:

He was a shepherd, dealing with the settling of the world, and it is the way of women to love one who raises lambs and kids.

In other words, while Esav is a hunter of coarse manners, Yaakov is a shepherd with a gentle soul, and therefore Rivka prefers Yaakov.

5. In another insight into pastoral mores, Ri Bekhor Shor manages to justify the absence of Reuven from the sale of Yosef, exploring the meaning of what is told to us about the brothers before his sale: “And they sat down to break bread” (37:25):

“And they sat down to break bread” — It is the way of shepherds that some of them eat while others stand over the animals, and then the

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<sup>12</sup> In the continuation of the passage of circumcision, he explains the punishment of excision for someone who violates the covenant (17:14): “According to the simple meaning, he will be cut off and excised from the others that are marked as my servants; he is not marked, so he cannot be reckoned as my servant.”

others eat; but their way is not for all of them to eat together. Yehuda and some of his brothers were eating, while Reuven and some of his brothers were watching the sheep; therefore, Reuven did not know about the sale.

## **G. The Simple and the Logical**

Many times, Ri Bekhor Shor provides a simple reading of the verses that is so convincing that after reading his words, one is hard-pressed to understand the text in any other way. For example, Ri Bekhor Shor explains the words of Pharaoh's ministers, "And there is no one to interpret it" (40:8), in the following way:

This is because we are in the prison, for if we were not in the prison, we would go to the adepts and the sages.

In other words, in prison, there are no interpreters of dreams available.

Another example may be found a few chapters later, when Yosef reveals himself to his brothers, saying to them, "Draw close to me" (45:4). What is the meaning of this request? Rashi's words are well-known: "He summoned them with mild, supplicatory language, and he showed them that he was circumcised." Ri Bekhor Shor, on the other hand, follows the path of the *pashtan* and attacks two difficulties. First, why does Yosef ask his brothers to approach him, instead of approaching them himself? Second, why should they have to approach him when they are all in the same room? This is how he explains it:

He could not draw close to them, because they were many, and if he came close to one, he would distance himself from another.

This was in order to say quietly, "I am Yosef your brother, whom you sold" — lest a person from outside hear, which they might notice, causing them to be shamed.

## **H. Attitude towards Miracles**

Ri Bekhor Shor believes that God directs the world in a natural way as much as possible, and the use made of miracles is the absolute minimum. We will see a number of examples of this:

1. Addressing the sixth plague in Egypt, that of *shechin*, Ri Bekhor Shor explains why Moshe and Aharon must fill their hands with furnace ashes and throw them heavenward (*Shemot* 9:10):

"And Moshe will throw it heavenward" — So that it will fall on man and animal and they will be burned by it, causing blisters, for when someone is burnt, blisters arise from the burnt spot. In any case, the verse talks about *shechin*, which implies [being hurt] not directly by fire, but rather its byproducts...

Now, two handfuls of fire could not be enough for all of Egypt, and because of this, the *shechin* comes of itself, not because of the fire. **Nevertheless, God does not want to change the custom of the world, and He acts partially according to the custom of the world,** and therefore He commanded to cast embers [smoking ashes] upon them.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, the point of throwing ashes in the air is to cause something similar to *shechin* in a natural way; the miraculous element is the quantity — the fact that a few handfuls are sufficient to bring *shechin* over all of Egypt. Ri Bekhor Shor even adds a general determination when it comes to miraculous phenomena: **“So you will find that in most miracles, God does not change the custom of the world.”**

2. Ri Bekhor Shor makes clear his approach to miracles in *Shemot* 16:25, analyzing the incident at Mara, in which God sweetens bitter waters by having Moshe throw a piece of wood into them:

“And God showed him a tree” — If it was the will of God, He could sweeten the water without a tree, but **the way of God is to perform miracles by the way of the world.** We put the sweet types in a bitter substance to sweeten it.

According to Ri Bekhor Shor, the wood is naturally sweet, and Moshe uses the sweetness of the tree in order to temper the bitterness of the water. God performs the miracle using the way of nature, sweetening the wood to the extent that it would suffice for all the water at that location.<sup>14</sup>

3. The widely accepted explanation for the fate of Lot’s wife (19:26) is that she is punished and turned suddenly into a pillar of salt because she disobeys the angels’ commands. However, Ri Bekhor Shor explains otherwise:

She was gazing [around her] and delaying [as she was distracted by what was happening], so that she was not walking quickly... until she fell behind him, and the spreading cloud caught her and dropped on her sulfur and salt, because wherever the sulfur would fall, the salt would fall with it.

According to Ri Bekhor Shor, this is not a miraculous punishment, but a natural result of the sulfurous-saline cloud which was raining down destruction on the Jordan Plain (cf. 19:24 and *Devarim* 29:22).

## I. The Reasons for the Commandments

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<sup>13</sup> Ri Bekhor Shor assumes that we are talking about glowing embers, not ashes from a long-dead fire in a furnace that has cooled.

<sup>14</sup> The issue of strengthening the miracle is not mentioned here, but this is what his words imply.

Ri Bekhor Shor is not the first exegete to delve into the reasons for *mitzvot*, but we can certainly see in his commentary an expansive and consistent approach to the question of the reasons of *mitzvot*. It is possible that this should be viewed as an element of his polemical bent, as Christianity gives symbolic and allegorical meanings to the *mitzvot*, claiming that the fulfillment of *mitzvot* may be replaced with faith and good works alone. Indeed, Ri Bekhor Shor's definition of *mitzvot* stresses the pragmatic significance of their fulfillment. We may see a number of examples of this:

1. Ri Bekhor Shor (*Shemot* 30:1) explains the (psychological) need for an offering in the following way:

If a person sees and knows that he has achieved atonement for his sins, realizing that he is now pure, he is more careful to avoid sinning... However, if he does not know that he has achieved atonement, if he sins today and tomorrow thinks, "I am befouled by sins," he no longer guards himself...

We may use this metaphor: a person who has clean, spotless and fresh garments, as long as his garments are unsullied, he is careful to avoid dirt and filth; once they have been befouled, he is no longer careful... To this Shlomo refers when he says (*Kohelet* 9:8): "At every time, let your garments be white."<sup>15</sup>

In other words, the aim of the offerings is to give a feeling of atonement to a person so that he will avoid sinning in the future, because a person who sees himself as a sinner will not hold himself back from additional sins.

2. Ri Bekhor Shor explains the reason for the prohibition of crossbreeding in the following way (*Vayikra* 19:19):

If one mates a donkey with a horse... and produces a mule, which I did not create, he has altered Creation.

Later on, Ri Bekhor Shor explains that the reason that these species are infertile is that they were not made by God at Creation, and therefore they do not merit the blessing of "Be fruitful and multiply":

The blessing does not apply to them. The mule will never bear a child, nor will any other crossbred animal.

According to this explanation, we can also understand the introduction to the prohibition of crossbreeding, "Keep my decrees," as Ri Bekhor Shor writes: "Those decrees, which I issued already during the six days of Creation,

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<sup>15</sup> See also his commentary to *Vayikra* 2:13:

Everyone knows that God does not need any aroma or any act of offering, but it is for Israel's benefit. When one sins and brings an offering, he achieves atonement and knows that he is clean; consequently, he is more careful about avoiding dirtying himself with sin, just like a man who has clean clothes avoids mud, but when they are filthy, he does not care...

must not be altered.”<sup>16</sup>

3. Regarding the prohibition of *orla*, the first three years of a tree’s fruits, Ri Bekhor Shor (*Vayikra* 19:23) explains:

One is not to benefit from its fruit, because it is not the way of the world that one should benefit from it until one makes a tribute (*le-hadrin*)<sup>17</sup> from it to the Omnipresent. Now, the beginning of each yield must be brought to the Omnipresent as a tribute, and the first three years it only yields a small amount, which is not worth bringing before the Omnipresent, and one is not permitted to precede me...

In other words, the reason to avoid eating *orla* is that one cannot partake before one brings the first fruits to God, and one cannot bring the first fruits before the end of the years of *orla*, because the yield is too poor in these years.

4. We have already seen that in the view of Ri Bekhor Shor, the reason for the *mitzva* of circumcision is to put a mark of servitude upon God’s people. He adds (17:1) that the feminine parallel to the *mitzva* of circumcision are the laws of menstruation:

The menstrual blood, which the women watch carefully in order to tell their husbands at what times they are permitted — this is their blood of the covenant.

## J. **Midrash Halakha**

We have seen that the Rashbam, for the most part, tends to explain the verses only on the basis of *peshat*, without taking into account the halakhic ruling. Ri Bekhor Shor, on the other hand, is much closer to Rashi’s approach in the halakhic realm, and he is generally wont to explain the verses following the Sages.

Indeed, in his commentary to *Bamidbar* 12:8, he vociferously opposes the Rashbam’s view of the *mitzva* of *tefillin*,<sup>18</sup> according to which the intent in the verses is not to delineate the practical *mitzva* of *tefillin*, but rather to stress the importance of remembering God’s words constantly:

In addition, there are people of our nation who express doubts about *tefillin*, *mezuzah*, and covering the blood [of slaughtered birds and beasts]. They say that “And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a frontlets between your eyes” (*Shemot* 13:16) is similar to “Set me as a signet on your heart, as a signet on your arm” (*Shir Ha-shirim* 8:6), which does not refer to an actual sign on one’s arm or heart; so

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<sup>16</sup> See *Kiddushin* 39a, *Sanhedrin* 60a, and particularly *Yerushalmi Kilayim* 1:7.

<sup>17</sup> The word means to give a tribute (*doron*), and it seems to me that Ri Bekhor Shor invented this conjugation, *le-hadrin*. See also his commentary to *Bamidbar* 8:11.

<sup>18</sup> See lecture 10.

too, these are not actually *tefillin* and *mezuzah*... Woe is to them who insult the Torah (see *Avot* 6:2), for they too are destined to be judged for this!

However, there are some isolated cases in which Ri Bekhor Shor explains in a way that does not follow the Halakha.<sup>19</sup> For example, when it comes to the Hebrew slave who is supposed to go free in the seventh year, Ri Bekhor Shor (*Shemot* 21:1) explains, in opposition to the halakhic ruling, that the verse is referring to the universal sabbatical year (not the seventh year of his personal term of servitude):

He cannot plow and sow and reap and pick, so he does not need his services so greatly; therefore, he must send him away.<sup>20</sup>

Later in the same chapter (v. 9), Ri Bekhor Shor explains the verse, "The ox shall be stoned, and also its owners shall die," in a way contrary to Halakha:

According to the simple meaning, sometimes one is liable for another's death: for example, if he sends it to go knowingly, in order that it might kill someone whom he hates, and this in fact happens, then one is liable for this death, because it is as if he has killed him with his own hands...

In other words, according to Ri Bekhor Shor, since the verse says, "And also its owners shall die," it must be referring to a situation in which the owner of the ox is liable to the death penalty. In his view, we are talking about a situation in which the owners free the ox with the intent that it will kill a certain person. This is opposed to the view of the Sages, who explain "And also its owners shall die" as a death penalty in the heavenly court.<sup>21</sup>

## **K. Anti-Christian Commentaries**

We have seen in previous lessons that there is a certain inclination by biblical exegetes in medieval France to explain verses in terms of Jewish-Christian polemics. This is one of the causes of the development of the school of *peshat* in 12<sup>th</sup>-century France; the dogged pursuit of *peshat* was motivated,

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<sup>19</sup> We should not see in this any inconsistency: the sharp opposition of Ri Bekhor Shor to the commentary of the Rashbam on the *mitzva* of *tefillin* does not emerge from the fact that the Rashbam opposes the halakhic ruling, but from the fact that the Rashbam explains a practical *mitzva* in an allegorical way. Ri Bekhor Shor spends a great deal of time combatting Christianity, which explains all of the *mitzvot* in an allegorical manner, which motivates his opposition to the above-mentioned commentary of the Rashbam. See below in this essay.

<sup>20</sup> I have heard many teachers and students err about this law, believing that Hebrew slaves are freed in the sabbatical year, while Halakha mandates that each goes free in the seventh year of his servitude. Perhaps the source of their error is the universal emancipation of slaves in the jubilee year; from this, they applied the freeing of servants to the sabbatical year.

<sup>21</sup> Even in cases which are similar to those presented by Ri Bekhor Shor; see the Rambam, *Hilkhot Rotzei'ach U-Shemirat Ha-Nefesh* 2:13, 3:11.

among other reasons, by the need for a response to the phenomenon of Jewish-Christian polemics. One of the main claims of Christianity is that one should explain the *mitzvot* in an allegorical way, so that the commandments do not in fact have any pragmatic meaning. In order to contend with this claim, the methodology of *peshat* was developed, which strips away the meaning of the allegorical interpretations and gives the verses concrete significance. The exegesis of *peshat* is based on the language and context of the verses, and in this way, it counteracts the Christian interpretations of the Torah.

This tendency is prominent particularly in the commentaries of Ri Bekhor Shor. S. A. Poznanski writes:

Note that we see here that Ri Bekhor Shor dedicates a place in his worldview to the matter of anti-Christian polemics. In fact, we find interpretations in his works “as a refutation of the sectarians” more so than all who precede him...

He responds to almost all of the verses which the Christians cite as the foundations of their religion, particularly those used to prove the Doctrine of the Trinity...

Thus, he will contend against the making of statues and images... and against Jesus being born without a father.<sup>22</sup>

We will bring a number of examples of this:

1. In his commentary to 19:1, “And the two angels came to Sodom,” Ri Bekhor Shor gives a classically anti-Christian commentary:

“And the two angels” — And from this verse is a refutation of the sectarians who say that these three men were the Trinity,<sup>23</sup> as one may refute them: if so, where is the third? There are only two parts, as it is said, “And the two angels,” etc. Furthermore, it says, “And God sent us to destroy it” — now, which one sent? Are they not equal?

2. In 24:2, when it comes to Avraham making his servant swear by placing his hand under his thigh, Ri Bekhor Shor writes this:

Now, the sectarians say that this was because of their shame that Jesus came from there. But we may refute them: he was not conceived from a man, according to their words, so they should have sworn on the womb of a woman!<sup>24</sup>

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Let us complete this lecture with the poem that Ri Bekhor Shor writes

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22 S.A. Poznanski, *Mavo al Chokhmei Tzarfat Mefarshei Ha-Mikra* (Jerusalem, 5725), p. LXIX.

23 That is, the Christian Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

24 See also his commentary to *Devarim* 6:8.

at the end of *Parashat Bo*:

He Who inclined His ear to His people and listened so,  
To see it and know it as exile's pains did grow;  
Heart torn, soul brought low,  
Strength and power upon him you did bestow.  
For you are its Redeemer, King and Savior, we know,  
And you saved it from every evil and every blow.  
As I complete the section of "*Bo el Paro*."

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch