

GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS

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Lecture #15: Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra, Part III

A. Evaluating *Midrash Halakha*

Integration of *Peshat* and *Derash* in Halakhic Passages

In his introduction to *Peirush Ha-katzar*, Ibn Ezra defines his relationship to halakhic *derash*:

Only when it comes to teachings, laws and decrees,
If the verse has two reasons which may please,
And the one reason relies on the scribes' expertise,
For they are all righteous, we need no guarantees,
We will doubtless rely on their truth, with strong hands and ease.
God forbid that we may involve ourselves with Sadducees,
Who say that the scribes contradict the details written in these.
Rather, our predecessors embody truth,
And all of their words are truth;
And Lord God of truth
Shall direct his servant on the way of truth

Ibn Ezra believes that it is inconceivable for the Sages' halakhic tradition to contradict the *peshat* of the verses. On this point, he argues with the Rashbam, who goes as far as to explain the halakhic verses against the tradition of the Sages. As we have explained in the previous lessons, Ibn Ezra supports the view of philological *pashtanut* and exerts great effort to explain the verses in accordance with the rules of grammar and topical logic. However, when there is a contradiction between the *peshat* and the Sages' tradition, ibn Ezra pushes the simple meaning of the words so that it will fit with the Sages' view, but he also strives to have it dovetail with the rules of grammar and language. This is what he writes in his introduction to the Torah (*Peirush Ha-arokh*), describing "the fifth among these ways":

But in commandments and laws, on our predecessors I will rely
And **I will fix the grammar of our language**, for their words are to live
by.

An example of this may be seen in his comments on *Shemot* 23:2. The verse literally reads:

Do not be after the many for evil
And do not speak up in a trial to turn
After the many to make turn.

The simple meaning of this verse is that the Torah proscribes bowing to the will of the majority (in a jurisprudential setting) for evil purposes — “Do not follow the majority to do evil. This is a warning for the judge not to be swayed by the majority opinion: Do not speak up in a trial to pervert justice, deciding on the basis of the majority.” In other words, according to the simple meaning of the verse, the final word “*le-hattot*,” to make turn, is not part of the prohibition, but rather its result: if a judge follows the majority and ignores the evidence, this perverts justice.

However, the Sages derivation from this a law flips the simple meaning of the text (although it is not directly contradictory). While the *peshat* indicates that the judge must not bow to the pressure of the majority nor be concerned about expressing a view opposed to the majority, the Sages derive from this verse that the halakhic ruling is determined by a majority vote. Thus, “*le-hattot*” is actually an imperative, and it has no negative connotation.¹ Ibn Ezra attempts to incorporate the Sages’ words in the *peshat* of the verse:

Our Sages have explained that we derive from here that the law follows the majority, and what they have transcribed² is the truth. After the verse says, “Do not follow the majority to do evil,” we may derive from this that if the majority are for the good, it is a *mitzva* to follow them.

Thus, Ibn Ezra tries to reconcile Sages’ approach with the text.

Rejecting the Sages’ View

Despite these words of Ibn Ezra expressing the unquestionable authority of the Sages in Halakha, it appears that many times Ibn Ezra veers in his interpretation from the interpretation of the halakhic ruling. Thus, for example, in the *Peirush Ha-katzar* to *Shemot* 13:13, “And every firstling donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, and if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck,” Ibn Ezra writes:

If the firstling is from a herd of cattle or flock of sheep, it is God’s, and if it is the firstling **of an unclean animal such as a donkey**, redeem it with a lamb.

According to the Sages and the halakhic ruling (see Rashi *ad loc.*; *Bekhorot* 5b; *YD* 321:1) the verse is talking about a donkey alone. Ibn Ezra

¹ This is how the debate appears in *Chullin* (11a):

What is the rabbis’ source that we follow the majority?

What is their source?! It says “Decide on the basis of the majority...”

The Talmud goes on to explain why the derivation from the verse is not appropriate for all cases.

² “The scribes” (literally, transcribers or copyists) is Ibn Ezra’s term for the Sages. Other terms are “our predecessors,” “our ancestors,” and “our sages”.

explains that the intent is to include all unclean animals,³ apparently based on the presumption that “the verse addresses reality.”⁴

How may we resolve the contradiction between ibn Ezra’s adamant commitment to the Sages’ rulings and the fact that, in many places, ibn Ezra veers from this path and explains in accordance with the *peshat* alone? This question has a number of answers, which together give a full picture of ibn Ezra’s path as it diverges from that of the Sages.

First of all, it may be that ignorance of the halakhic ruling is what causes him to interpret verses differently than the Sages. We must assume that because of ibn Ezra’s poverty and wanderings, he did not always have the books necessary for clarifying the halakhic ruling,⁵ and Ibn Ezra, unlike the French exegetes, was not a Talmudic expert.⁶ In other words, it may be that ibn Ezra did not know at all that he was explaining the text in opposition to the Sages’ view.

Furthermore, it makes sense that ibn Ezra sees himself as bound by the Sages’ legal authority, but not specifically their reading of the verses. The law itself is a tradition from the Sages, but reading the verse can be done by way of *derash*. Because of this, when the *peshat* contradicts the reading of the Sages but not the law itself, ibn Ezra absolves himself by explaining that the interpretation is an *asmakhta* (support) – that is, the Sages themselves do not believe that this is the verse’s intent, but they want to hang the law on the verse. In the language of the ibn Ezra, “There was a tradition in their hands from the Prophets, and they set the verse as a memorial and a sign for the readers.”⁷ Thus, as we have seen, ibn Ezra anchors majority rule in the verse, but in a different way than the Sages’ reading. Ibn Ezra himself expands on this issue elsewhere:

And I say that the reason is that we have in the Torah places in the Sages are known to utilize an *asmakhta*, but they know the essence of the matter.

For example, “And he will inherit it” (*Bamidbar* 27:11) is known in the transcription⁸ as [the source of] a man inheriting his wife, and they expounded this verse as a memorial, for all of Israel know the interpretation of the verse, according to its literal and simple meaning...⁹ And what is correct is that the verse [should be read]

3 In *Peirush Ha-arokh*, he reverses himself and endorses the view of the Sages.

4 There are additional examples of ibn Ezra’s commentaries rejecting the view of the Sages: *Peirush Ha-arokh*, *Shemot* 20:13, 22:13; *ibid.* 22:28 (*Ha-katzar* and *Ha-arokh*); etc.

5 This is apparently one of the reasons that ibn Ezra does not cite a great number of the French exegetes, as opposed to the Spanish exegetes and grammarians, whose work, apparently, he knew by heart.

6 This fact is evident from the absence of Talmudic citations in his commentary.

7 This is the fourth approach in his introduction to the Torah for *Peirush Ha-arokh*.

8 This refers to the tradition of the scribes, i.e., the Sages.

9 In order to understand ibn Ezra’s words, we should cite the verse in its entirety: “If his father has no brothers, you will give his inheritance to his close relative from his family, and he will

according to its simple meaning, and they supplement it with this matter of tradition.

Similarly, “And the firstborn whom she bears” (*Devarim* 25:6) has a literal meaning, but they also have a tradition (*Yevamot* 24a) teaching that the oldest of the brothers should be the levir, and they expounded this verse as a memorial and an *asmakhta*.¹⁰

Similarly, concerning “To a foreign people” (*Shemot* 21:8), they had a tradition that a man cannot sell his daughter twice (*Kiddushin* 18a), and they put the verse as a sign and a memorial. Nevertheless, its simple meaning is its literal meaning...¹¹ (*Peirush Ha-katzar, Shemot* 21:8)

In all of these examples, ibn Ezra diverges from the Sages’ interpretation, since according to him, the Sages themselves do not intent to engage in biblical exegesis; they merely want to moor a well-known law,

inherit it (*otah*)” (*Bamidbar* 27:11). There is no doubt that according to the *peshat* of the verses, the words “And he will inherit it” refer to the inheritance mentioned in the beginning of the verse. (“*Otah*” is the third-person feminine, which may refer to a female person or a feminine noun.) This is how the Sages expound it (*Bava Batra* 111b):

I might think that she shall inherit him? The verse says, “And he will inherit her” — he inherits her; she does not inherit him.

According to ibn Ezra, it was clear to the Sages that the simple meaning of the verse would be understood by all, and they decided to use the verse to anchor another law, transmitted by tradition.

10 The Torah (*Devarim* 25:5-6) says:

If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her. And the firstborn whom she bears, he shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.

Rashi understands, “And the firstborn whom she bears” in the following way: The mother referred to here is the mother of the deceased, whose widow is married by her living son, the levir. He is called the firstborn because preference is given to the oldest surviving brother, but any of the surviving brothers can fulfill this role, assuming the role of the firstborn, and “he shall succeed to the name of his dead brother,” by taking the portion of the dead brother in their father’s estate.

Nevertheless, according to the *peshat*, there is no doubt that the mother mentioned is the widow, as she is the subject of the previous verse, and this verse continues to describe her situation: “The wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger... And the firstborn whom she bears...”

According to ibn Ezra, the Sages do not reject the *peshat* of the verses, but they only use it as a framework on which to hang these laws, laws which have been accepted traditionally (see *Yevamot* 24a).

11 The verse speaks about a Hebrew maidservant: “If she is displeasing in the eyes of her master who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. To a foreign people he has no authority to sell her, as he has betrayed her” (*Shemot* 21:8). The *peshat* of the verse is that the master cannot sell his Hebrew maidservant to a non-Jew, but the Sages derive from this verse that one cannot sell a Hebrew maidservant twice (i.e., if the father sells his daughter and she is emancipated, he may not sell her again). Here as well, ibn Ezra claims that the *peshat* of the verse is accepted by the Sages, but they have made a support for the law, which is derived from the tradition, on the verse.

traditionally transmitted, in the text of the verse, apparently as a mnemonic device.

Finally, sometimes ibn Ezra holds that the Sages' interpretation is the view of a single authority (not the majority), and therefore one may reject it.¹²

B. Relationship to Karaites

Together with the great respect that ibn Ezra displays towards the Sages, he has a profoundly negative view of the Karaites. Ibn Ezra is known for his fierce war against the Karaites, but it is important to note that he does not hesitate to cite their interpretations if he believes they are correct. For example, the Karaite exegetes Yefet ben Eli and Yeshua the Karaite¹³ are quoted a great deal by Ibn Ezra. Only when the Karaite comments are opposed to the accepted law does ibn Ezra go on the offensive against them, using caustic and sharp language.

Ibn Ezra does not oppose only specific interpretations of the Karaites: he actively refutes their general view. According to his view, the truth of the Oral Torah may be established not only by finding its laws in the verses of Written Torah, but by confronting the reality of the absence of many laws in the Written Torah. These exigent rules are only found in the Oral Torah, and without their existence there is no significance at all to the laws of the Written Torah. Ibn Ezra expresses this beautifully in his introduction to the Torah, as he addresses the second way and its uselessness in terms of understanding the Jewish calendar:

For in the Torah you will not find
Even one commandment fully defined.
One of these I will relate,
For those who know it, it is great.
Indeed, one is excised for eating on the Day of Atonement,
And Passover brooks neither leaven nor, for the pure, postponement.
Seven are the days when no labor may be done;
Instead there are offerings, tabernacles and trumpets, each one.
Now, in the Torah, the rules of the year are not stated,
So how would we have the months calculated?
...Verily, the commands of the festivals bind all Israel for all time,
So why does the Torah not provide us testimony, pure and prime?
Now, for allusions we here and there must inspect;
Why is this so in our Torah, which is perfect?
This shows us that Moshe relied on the oral tradition,
Which provides the heart joy and balm for our condition,
For there is naught between the oral and written teaching;

¹² However, sometimes ibn Ezra's classification of the Sages' view as a lone opinion is in error; see for example, *Peirush Ha-katzar*, *Shemot* 21:19.

¹³ They were 10th-century Karaite exegetes.

They both are our patrimony, beyond impeaching...¹⁴

When ibn Ezra rejects the Karaite commentaries, he sometimes does so with ridicule and sarcasm towards the Karaite exegete (and in these comments, his sophisticated sense of humor is prominent). An example of this may be seen in ibn Ezra's commentary to *Shemot* 21:35 (*Peirush Ha-arokh*), "When a man's ox will injure his fellow's ox..."

Ben Zuta says that "his fellow" refers to the ox. He did not notice that it is possessive, so it is "his fellow's ox." The only fellow ox here is ben Zuta himself!

The final two words in this clause are "*shor re'ehu*." According to ben Zuta, the word "*re'ehu*" in the verse is adjectival, and it should be rendered "its fellow ox." Ibn Ezra argues that "*re'ehu*" refers to the owner of the damaging ox; the injured ox is owned by his fellow. Ibn Ezra points out that this parallels "*shor ish*" earlier in the verse, which clearly means "an ox belonging to a man;" "*ish*" does not modify "*shor*." He sarcastically concludes that only the obtuse ben Zuta himself is deserving of bovine companionship.

Ibn Ezra is equally brutal in his comments (*Bereishit* 29:17) about ben Efrayim, another Karaite exegete. The verse describes Leah's eyes as "*rakkot*" (spelled *reish-kaf-vav-tav*), weak or sensitive. He writes:

"*Rakkot*" — as its literal meaning indicates... However, ben Efrayim claims that it is missing an *alef*, and it should be understood as "*arukkot*." He was the one missing an *alef*.

Ben Efrayim believes that the word "*rakkot*" is missing an *alef*, so that it should have been written "*arukkot*" (spelled *alef-reish-kaf-vav-tav*), "long." Ibn Ezra argues that perhaps we should take the *alef* from ben Efrayim (spelled *alef-peh-reish-yud-mem*), yielding "*ben parim*" (spelled *peh-reish-yud-mem*), "son of bullocks." Once again, ibn Ezra describes Karaite intelligence as bovine.

We should note that it is a bit bizarre that ibn Ezra fights so fiercely against the Karaites, because he wrote his comments after he had moved to the lands of Christian Spain, while the Karaites were active in Muslim Spain. Perhaps it is specifically because ibn Ezra accepts the comments of the Karaite exegetes in a not insignificant number of places that he must make it clear that he is not part of the Karaite camp, and he does this through harsh criticism towards them.

C. Ibn Ezra and Rashi

¹⁴ In another place (*Peirush Ha-katzar*, *Shemot* 13:12), Ibn Ezra relates to this point concerning the *mitzva* of redeeming the firstborn:

Behold, we need to know about the redemption of the firstborn, and we cannot know it from what is written, but rather from the words of tradition.

In Ibn Ezra's introduction, he describes the fifth way (the one which he adopts):

The fifth among these ways,
The foundation of my commentary upon them stays;
And it is right in my eye,
Before God's face on High.
His awe alone I savor;
In the Torah, I will never show favor.

Generally, we may say that Ibn Ezra fears no man, and he critically analyzes the commentaries of Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon, Ibn Janach, Dunash ben Labrat and others. He praises the interpretations of which he approves and he sharply criticizes those which he finds wanting. Ibn Ezra's approach to Rashi is exceptional, because in the rare instances in which he refers to him, he does not praise him; but he also does not reject him in his characteristically caustic style, noting only that Rashi is mistaken.¹⁵ It may be that the reason for this is the respect that Ibn Ezra has for Rashi, but it is difficult to accept this for two reasons. First, there is no doubt that Ibn Ezra has a great deal of respect for Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon, but he does not hold himself back from his sharply ironic tone.¹⁶ Second, in his *Safa Berura*,¹⁷ Ibn Ezra expresses his view of Rashi, which is not complimentary at all:

There is no doubt that they¹⁸ knew that the direct way is as it is; therefore, they formulated the rule, "No verse loses its simple meaning." Thus, the *derash* is merely supplemental. The following generations made every *derash* essential and crucial, as Rav Shlomo z"l does, so that the *Tanakh* was explained by way of *derash*. Though he was under the impression that this is the way of *peshat*, **in his writings one will find only one *peshat* out of a thousand** — yet the sages of our generation boast of these books. (*Safa Berura*, Wilensky edition [Jerusalem, 5738], p. 64)

Ibn Ezra mocks not only the interpretations of Rashi, but the intelligence of a generation which cares about his homilies. If so, why does Ibn Ezra not criticize Rashi himself?

It seems that Ibn Ezra was aware of Rashi's status in France, and he was concerned that harsh criticism of Rashi would lead to his commentary being condemned, or at least rejected. Therefore, in his commentary to the Torah, Ibn Ezra keeps his silence. In the venue of *Safa Berura*, which was not designed for mass consumption but for intelligent individuals, Ibn Ezra notes

15 See *Peirush Ha-arokh*, *Shemot* 9:30, 16:15.

16 See, for example, *Peirush Ha-katzar*, *Shemot* 23:20:

"Behold I am" — So says Avraham, the noted Spaniard. Behold, I am sending forth my hand by speaking against the great man who attacked his betters verbally, and arrogance has issued from his lips.

17 This is one of Ibn Ezra's grammatical treatises.

18 This refers to Rashi's teachers.

almost off-handedly his attitude towards Rashi's comments.¹⁹ His feelings towards Rashi also explain the few citations of French exegetes in his commentaries, as compared to the great number of citations of the scholars of Muslim Spain (including Karaites, as we said above). Thus, ibn Ezra does not pick fights with the exegetes of Christian Europe for the simple reason that he has no great respect for their commentaries and does not have a common denominator with them. According to him, Karaite exegesis is better than the absurd commentaries of the traditional *parshanim*.

D. The Concept of "Sod" Covert and Overt Writing

Ibn Ezra conceals in his commentary more than his relationship to Rashi; he embraces the general phenomenon of "sod." One who reads his commentaries often encounters the cryptic phrase "Ve-zeh sod," "And this is a secret," and the like.²⁰

An example of this may be found in *Peirush Ha-arokh, Shemot 28:6*:

The matter of the *efod* and the breastplate is a deep secret, and I will only allude to the secret a bit, for one "who knows the knowledge of the Most High"...

An additional example may be in his explanation of the goat to *Azazel*:

If you are capable of understanding the secret which stands behind the word *Azazel*, you will know its secret and the secret of its name, for there are others like it in Scripture. I will reveal to you part of the secret by allusion; when you are thirty-three, you will know it.²¹

What is the meaning of all these secrets, and whom are they designed for?

In order to answer this question, we must first define precisely who the target audience of ibn Ezra is.

There is no doubt that ibn Ezra's commentaries are not designed for the simple Jew. Rashi and Ri Bekhor Shor succeed in interesting both the simple Jew and the intellectual Jew. Ibn Ezra, on the other hand, often relates

¹⁹ In this context, we might ask how the Rashbam dared to challenge the Sages and Rashi. Aaron Mondschein writes in "*R. Avraham Ibn Ezra — Ha-ish Neged Ha-zerem*," *Beit Mikra* 49 (2004), p. 147:

Rashbam comes from the "inside." As a famous master of Halakha, he stands on the same firm ground on which his potential critics stand, and by this he leaves them without proper ammunition. Not so ibn Ezra; his foreign identity card is not that of a rabbinical scholar, one whose Torah is his occupation.

²⁰ The word "sod" is applied to more than one hundred times of his comments on the Torah.

²¹ The Ramban reveals this secret in his commentary to *Vayikra* 16:8: "And behold, R. Avraham of faithful spirit conceals the matter, but I am a gossip, so I will tell his secret..." See *loc. cit.*

to matters of grammar and language in his commentary, and he makes complex mathematical calculations that may be far beyond a simple Jew's ken. Therefore, it appears that Ibn Ezra directs his interpretation to a sophisticated audience which "knows the knowledge of the Most High" (*Bamidbar* 24:16) – an audience that is unusually intelligent. The most prominent expression of this orientation is Ibn Ezra's tendency to allude to his *sod* by writing in code, expressed generally in an enigmatic style which is not easy to decipher. Similarly, the integration of extensive scientific investigations²² into his commentary may be understood only by those who are particularly intelligent.²³

The Reasons for Allusive Interpretations

Sometimes, Ibn Ezra hides his secrets because he is worried that he will be seen as a heretic. The best example is his comment to *Devarim* 1:2:

If you wish to understand the secret of the twelve, see also, "And Moshe wrote" (*Devarim* 31:22); "And the Canaanites were then in the land" (*Bereishit* 12:6); "On God's mountain, He will be seen" (*Bereishit* 22:14); "And behold his bedstead was an iron bedstead" (*Devarim* 3:11).

What is "the secret of the twelve"? Ibn Ezra explains in his commentary to *Devarim* 34:1:

"And Moshe went up" — According to my view, this verse was written by Yehoshua, because after Moshe went up, he did not write, and he wrote it by the way of prophecy.

"The secret of the twelve" is Ibn Ezra's claim that the last twelve verses of the Torah were not written by Moshe, but rather by Yehoshua. In his above-mentioned comment at the beginning of *Devarim*, Ibn Ezra uses these twelve verses as a model for a wider phenomenon of adding verses into the Torah, as spelled out in the examples which he brings there.²⁴ It is understood why

22 See, for example, his commentary to *Shemot* 12:2 (explaining the luni-solar Hebrew calendar), *ibid.* 12:40 (calculating the time of residence of the Israelites in the land of Egypt), as well as *Bamidbar* 3:39 (comparison of ratios).

23 For Ibn Ezra, Spain provides the model of the particularly intelligent, those who are fully educated: they were experts in grammar, astrology and astronomy (in that era, there was no distinction between the two), medicine, mathematics and philosophy — the disciplines which Ibn Ezra incorporates into his commentary on the Torah.

24 These are the four verses which the Ibn Ezra cites:

A) "And Moshe wrote this song on that day" (*Devarim* 31:22) — in this case, the entirety of the chapter is problematic, because all of *Devarim*, aside from the introduction and the last four chapters, is written in the first person, and the speaker is Moshe Rabbeinu. This seems to indicate that whatever is written in the third person is the work not of Moshe, but another person.

B) "And the Canaanites were then in the land" (*Bereishit* 12:6) — it appears that "then" in the verse addresses a later reader, one living in a time in which the Canaanites are no longer in the land, so at earliest it must be after the conquest of Yehoshua.

ibn Ezra prefaces his words by metaphorically swearing the reader to secrecy, because the determination that these verses were written after Moshe's death could be construed as undermining the belief that the Torah in its entirety was dictated to Moshe by God. Ibn Ezra himself believes, apparently, that one may say about lone verses that they were not written by Moshe, but this is not acceptable for the Torah as a whole.²⁵ If so, a concern that he might be labeled as a heretic motivates ibn Ezra to conceal his views here.²⁶

Peirush Ha-shelishi, the Supercommentary

We may prove this hypothesis by comparing ibn Ezra's commentary, which was written and published in France, to a later interpretation of the Torah written by his private student,²⁷ R. Yosef b. R. Yaakov of Moudeville.²⁸ Ibn Ezra dictated this to him in his twilight years in London,²⁹ but only fragments of it have survived.³⁰ This comparison teaches us that in the interpretation of the Torah written in France, ibn Ezra does not include all of his ideas.

One of the most prominent examples is ibn Ezra's understanding of the following cryptic verse (*Bereishit* 35:22): "Reuven went and slept with Bilha, his father's concubine, and Yisrael heard; and Yaakov's sons were twelve." The words of the Midrash are well-known and cited by Rashi; they detach this incident from the simple meaning of the text.³¹ This view of Rashi reflects the

C) "As it will be said today, 'On God's mountain, He will be seen'" (*Bereishit* 22:14) — it is implied that this was written during the era in which the Israelites would perform their festival pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

D) "And behold his bedstead is an iron bedstead; is it not in Rabba of the Ammonites?" (*Devarim* 3:11) — it appears that the verse comes to verify the historicity of the war against Og, King of Bashan, by noting the fact that until this very day (the time of composition), one may still see the iron bedstead, thus proving that Og was indeed a giant. From this, it is clear that the verse was not written by the generation that fought Og and saw him, but a later generation.

25 See "*Shittat Ha-bechinot*" shel Ha-Rav Mordekhai Breuer, pp. 311-2.

26 In the 18th century, there was an exchange of correspondence between Shmuel David Luzzatto and Shlomo Yehuda Rappaport, in which the former accused ibn Ezra of being a closet heretic:

What can we say when we see his cleverness, making himself a saint in the eyes of the readers of his work? He says: "Look, I am pure," and this is part of his twisty scheme. His thoughts are the opposite of his words. (*Kerem Chemed*, 5599, No. 20)

27 This is what is written in the beginning of *Parashat Vayishlach*:

And I, Yosef b. R. Yaakov of Moudeville, have heard from him the interpretation of these portions in London orally, and I have written it in my language.

In other words, the content is Ibn Ezra's, but the formulation and style is that of his student, R. Yosef b. R. Yaakov.

28 Out of gratitude for this student, ibn Ezra put together the important book *Yesod Mora*, dealing with the reasoning of the *mitzvot*.

29 On this commentary, see Aaron Mondschein, "*Shitta Shelishit Le-feirusho shel R. Avraham Ibn Ezra*," in *Or Le-Yaakov: Mechkarim Ba-Mikra U-vemegillot Midbar Yehuda* (Tel Aviv, 5757), p. 179.

30 This appears in the HaKeter edition.

31 This is what Rashi writes:

Sages' dictum: "Whoever says that Reuven sinned is solely in error" (*Shabbat* 56a). Ibn Ezra explains the verse differently:

Our Rabbis have explained this well; indeed, "The clever conceal the contemptible" (*Mishlei* 12:16).

Apparently, ibn Ezra is complimenting the Sages and conceding the point; but what does he mean by citing the proverb, "The clever conceal the contemptible"? In his commentary on *Mishlei*, ibn Ezra explains that "the clever" person is the one who knows to "conceal" an act which is "contemptible." Therefore, it may be that ibn Ezra means to tell us that the Sages in fact believe that Reuven did sin; nevertheless, they hid the sin and reinterpreted the verse in a way different from the *peshat*. In any case, it is clear that ibn Ezra utilizes his obscure language so that one cannot, God forbid, accuse him of indicting Reuven for sleeping with his father's wife; on the other hand, for those who understand the matter, he alludes to his real view by quoting *Mishlei*. In *Peirush Ha-shelishi*, the following is written about Reuven's sin:

"And Israel heard" — what Reuven did, therefore, "And Yaakov's sons were twelve" and no more. For Bilha had been desecrated, Rachel was dead, and he despised Leah and her handmaid because of Reuven. Therefore, he never again came in to a woman and did not bear children — thus, his sons were only twelve...

Apparently, Ibn Ezra in this commentary reveals what he had concealed in his earlier commentary. Perhaps in his old age, he was not concerned about airing his views; perhaps he did not think that his discussions with his student would ever be publicized.

Another *sod* of Ibn Ezra's commentary explicated by *Peirush Ha-shelishi* is how he explains Rachel's theft of the *terafim*. Rashi, faithful to his view of defending the acts of the greats of the nation,³² explains that Rachel steals the *terafim* in order to prevent her father from worshipping idols. We will examine ibn Ezra's comment on this verse:

I find it likely that the *terafim* resemble the human form, designed to receive the higher powers, but I cannot explain this in detail...

Since he disarranged his bed, the verse equates it to sleeping with her. Now why did he disarrange and profane his bed? When Rachel died, Yaakov took his bed — which had been regularly placed in Rachel's tent, not in the other tents — and relocated it to Bilha's tent. Reuven came and challenged his mother's humiliation. He said, "My mother was forced to compete with her sister; now, must she compete with her sister's handmaid?" This is why he disarranged it.

According to this, the conclusion of the verse, "And Yaakov's sons were twelve," is tied to the beginning of the verse. Rashi concludes and explains that the words, "And Yaakov's sons were twelve" are in fact the Torah's testimony establishing Reuven's innocence:

Our rabbis have derived that it teaches us that they were all equal and they were all righteous, for Reuven did not sin.

³² See lecture #6.

There are those who say that Rachel stole them to wean her father from idolatry. If it were so, why would she take them with her and not hide them beside the road?

It seems likely that her father Lavan knew the constellations, and she was worried that her father would look in the constellations to know which way they had fled...

Ibn Ezra understands that there are three approaches (“I find it likely;” “There are those who say;” “It seems likely”). We can immediately identify the second interpretation cited as Rashi’s interpretation, which he rejects for the following reason: if Rachel intends to break her father’s idolatrous habits, why does she not toss away the *terafim* along the journey?

To this question, we must add another question: is Lavan able to get other *terafim* to replace the ones she steals? Since it appears clear that he could get them, how would the theft help anyone?

Ibn Ezra posits a final explanation: the *terafim* were tools of prediction, and Rachel took them in order to prevent her father from obtaining information about their location. However, we must note that here as well, ibn Ezra uses his enigmatic style, demurring, “but I cannot explain this in detail.”

When we read his words to his student, we understand why ibn Ezra could not raise publicly his view concerning the theft of the *terafim*. We do not have in our hands the *Peirush Ha-shelishi* for *Parashat Vayeitzei*, but we do have the commentary to *Parashat Vayishlach*. There (*Bereishit* 35:2) we find: “And Yaakov said to his house and to all with him, ‘Remove the foreign gods in your midst and purify yourselves and change your clothes,’” and it is not clear what foreign gods these are. Rashi explains that the verse refers to booty from the city of Shekhem. Ibn Ezra, as cited in *Peirush Ha-shelishi*, says this:

“And Yaakov said to his house³³ and to all with him, ‘Remove the foreign gods in your midst’ — but until this point, he did not say this to them. **Now, Rachel stole her father’s *terafim*, because under their father’s law they all were, the women and the children.** This is what is written there (*ibid.* 31:53), “The God of Avraham and the god of Nachor will judge between us, the God of their fathers.”

“And purify yourselves” — wash yourselves, **because until now you have served foreign gods.** Therefore, “And change your clothes,” similar to (*Devarim* 21:13), “And she will remove her clothes of captivity,” for all of the garb and jewelry of idolaters is impure, and one may not even benefit from them. Therefore, they gave the rings to him, and Yaakov hid them.

33 Ibn Ezra is slightly paraphrasing the verse.

There is no doubt that when ibn Ezra writes “but I cannot explain this in detail” in his “conventional” commentary he means that Rachel stole the *terafim* in order to use them. Writing this explicitly might not only, God forbid, serve to strengthen the views of the heretics, it could lead to removal of ibn Ezra’s commentary from the Jewish library, and therefore ibn Ezra does not write it. At the same time, he does not want to conceal this interpretation totally, and he therefore alludes to it.

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At the end of these three lessons dealing with R. Avraham Ibn Ezra, we may reach the conclusion that his contributions are remarkable. This is not only due to the dozens of original interpretations which he crafts, but mainly because of his methodology. He advocates studying the Torah and its commentators with the Fear of Heaven on the one hand, but on the other hand critically. One must accept the truth from whoever says it, and above all one must never show favor in the pursuit of Torah.

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch