

GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS

By Dr. Avigail Rock

Lecture #19: Ramban, Part III

In the previous lecture, we dealt with the philosophical aspects of the Ramban's writings. In this lesson, we will deal with additional characteristics of the Ramban's commentary on the Torah.

A. The Secret Torah — "*Al Derekh Ha-Emet*"

One of the hallmarks of the Ramban's commentary on the Torah is the use of the words "*al derekh ha-emet*."¹ *Derekh ha-emet* is literally the "way" or "path of truth;" although it contrasts with *derekh ha-peshat*, it certainly does not indicate that "the simple way" or "the path of simplicity" is untrue. When the Ramban prefaces an explanation with these words, his intent is to cite a commentary based on *sod* (literally, secret), the hidden, mystical elements of Jewish tradition.² The *peshat* explanations of the Ramban do not require a special background; one need only be familiar with the text of the Torah. His Kabbalistic commentaries, on the other hand, cannot be understood by a reader unschooled in fundamental Kabbalistic concepts,³ and it seems that the Ramban indeed intends that only individuals with a background in Kabbala will understand his words:⁴

Behold, I come with a faithful covenant, and it is what gives appropriate counsel for everyone who looks at this book. **Do not formulate an approach or conceptualize a matter based on the allusions that I write of the secrets of the Torah! I make it known unequivocally**

1 This phrase appears more than a hundred times in his commentary.

2 The Ramban's philosophy of *sod* is not equivalent to that of what is familiarly called "Kabbala," which began developing at the end of the 12th century.

3 Moshe Halbertal investigates the Kabbalistic elements of the Ramban's philosophy in his comprehensive essay, "*Al Derekh Ha-Emet: Ramban Vi-Yetzirata shel Masoret*" (Jerusalem, 2006). On p. 11, he writes:

Between the lines of his rich commentary on the Torah, the Ramban scatters Kabbalistic allusions crowned with the title "*derekh ha-emet*." Thus, he creates an unusual connection, formulating an approach to two different audiences. Most of the students of this commentary, who cannot penetrate the veil of the Ramban's allusions, see in the opening "*al derekh ha-emet*" a sign to skip ahead, until the commentary will return to the level of the revealed. Moreover, in the Ramban's study hall, there were apparently those who drank thirstily his revealed teachings, while studiously avoiding the level of *sod* in his thought.

4 Sometimes, immediately after the commentary "*al derekh ha-emet*," we may find the terms "*sod*" or "*ha-maskil yavin*," "the educated will comprehend."

that one cannot conceive a matter, nor know it at all by any view or understanding, save by the mouth of a wise Kabbalist to the ear of an educated Kabbalist... (Ramban, Introduction to the Torah)

Thus, the Ramban formulates or employs a type of code. This allows him to disseminate his words while concealing them from anyone who is not an expert in the discipline of Kabbala, anyone who did not learn it “by the mouth of a wise Kabbalist.”

A commentary by way of *sod* appears as an alternative after the Ramban brings the commentary of *peshat*, and generally the Kabbalistic explanation will not be advanced as the sole explanation.

One example of this may be found in *Shemot* 2:23-25. The verse there describes the difficulty of the enslavement in Egypt and the cry of the Israelites. Verse 25 notes, “And God saw the Israelites, and God knew.” The biblical exegetes deal with the question of the meaning of God’s knowledge at this point. Does God, as it were, discover something, alerted by the cry of the Israelites, which He had not known earlier? This flies in the face of God’s omniscience! Therefore, the Ramban writes:

This is correct ***al derekh ha-peshat***, for at first He was hiding His face from them, and they were devoured,⁵ but at this point God hears their cry and sees them. This means that He did not hide His face anymore; He acknowledges their pain, everything done to them and everything needed for them...

After this commentary *al derekh ha-peshat*, the Ramban adds an explanation according to *sod*, in which the Ramban coyly alludes to the mystical elements of the Torah:

Al derekh ha-emet, this verse has one of the greatest secrets of the mysteries of the Torah... and this verse is explained in the Midrash of Rabbi Nechunya ben Ha-kaneh (*Sefer Ha-Bahir*, no. 76). You will understand it from there.

B. Citation and Incorporation in the Commentary of the Ramban

At this point, it is worth dedicating a number of lines to the Ramban’s method of citing verses and Jewish sources. In his essay on the topic, Ephraim Hazan differentiates between citation and incorporation in the Ramban’s commentary.⁶ The Ramban often brings sources from the Sages and Scripture in order to prove and strengthen his words. In these cases, the citation is introduced with one of the following phrases: “As it is written,” “As is written,” “As it says,” etc. In addition to citation, the Ramban often use the technique of incorporation, a style of writing in which the author integrates into

⁵ This follows the verse in *Devarim* 31:17; we will explain this matter in detail below.

⁶ Ephraim Hazan, “*Kavim Achadim Li-Leshono shel Ramban Be-Feirusho La-Torah — Le-Darkhei Ha-Shibbutz Ve-Shilluvei Ha-Mekorot Bi-Khtivato*,” *Mechkerei Morashtenu* I (5759), pp. 163-174.

his text a verse or a statement of the Sages, in full or in part, without notifying the reader that this is a quote.

Granted, this technique predates the Ramban considerably; nevertheless, in the Ramban's writings it becomes amazingly frequent, giving a unique significance to his words. Sometimes, the Ramban relies on the reader's expertise and does not even exert himself to interweave the entire verse; instead, he only writes out the beginning. However, in order to understand the idea completely, one needs to be familiar with the entire verse.

In order to demonstrate this, we will look at the Ramban's incorporation in his commentary to the verse referred to earlier (*Shemot* 2:25).

This is correct ***al derekh ha-peshat***, for at first He was hiding His face from them, and they were devoured.

The Ramban is referring to the following verse (*Devarim* 31:17):

Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they will be devoured. And many evils and troubles will come upon them, so that they will say in that day, "Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?"

This incorporation allows us to descend to the depths of the Ramban's commentary: the troubles of the Jewish nation are an expression of God's distance from them, and thus the Ramban can explain "And God knew" as noting that God stops hiding His face.

C. Psychological Sensitivity

An additional important characteristic of the Ramban's commentary is its psychological sensitivity. The Ramban explains the verses using an analysis of the motivations of the dominant personalities, based on his reasoned assessment of the characters and the situations in which they find themselves. One of the most famous examples appears in the emotional encounter between Yaakov and Yosef in Egypt, after more than two decades of separation:

Then Yosef prepared his chariot and went up to meet his father Yisrael in Goshen. He presented himself to him, and he fell on his neck and he wept on his neck exceedingly. (*Bereishit* 46:29)

The pronouns of the second half of the verse are excruciatingly abstruse. Who presents himself to whom? Who falls on whose neck? Who weeps on whose neck? In each case, the singular pronoun is used, so that the verse must be referring either to Yosef or to Yaakov in each case, but who is who?

The Ramban explains this in the following way:⁷

The verse mentions that when he presented himself to his father, who looked at him and recognized him, his father fell on his neck and wept on his neck excessively, **just as he would cry over him constantly until this very day, when he could not see him.** After this, he said (v. 30), “Now let me die, since I have seen your face.” **It is well-known who is prone to tears: is it the aged father who finds his son alive after hopelessness and mourning, or the youthful ruling son?**

According to the Ramban, it is more logical to assume that the elderly Yaakov cries upon encountering his lost son, not “the youthful ruling son” who does so.

An additional example of the use of psychology in the Ramban’s commentary can be found in the Ramban’s explanation of Pharaoh’s decrees. Pharaoh turns to his people with the words, “Come, let us outsmart them” (*Shemot* 1:10), and the Ramban relates to the question of why Egypt’s ruler has to “outsmart” his Hebrew subjects. Why does he not simply kill the ones whom he wants to kill? What is the meaning of the different decrees, culminating in the final solution of throwing the boys into the Nile (*ibid.* v. 22)?

This how the Ramban responds to this question:

Pharaoh and his wise counselors did not consider striking them down by the sword, for this would be a profound betrayal – to unjustifiably exterminate a nation which came to the land by the command of a preceding monarch. Furthermore, the common people would not allow the king to commit such violence, for he consulted them, even though the Israelites were a great and mighty nation who might wage a great war against them. Rather, he said that they should do it in a wise way, that the Israelites would not feel that they did it with enmity, and therefore he put work levies upon them...

Afterwards, in secret, he commanded the midwives to kill the males upon the birthstones, and even the mothers would not perceive it. Finally, he commanded his nation, “You shall cast every male born into the Nile” — you yourselves. The issue is that that he did not wish to command the executioners to kill them by Pharaoh’s sword or to throw them into the Nile; rather, he said to the nation that when each of them might find a Jewish boy, he should cast him into the Nile. Should the boy’s father cry to the king or the municipal authorities, they would say that he must bring witnesses, and they would then avenge him. However, when the king loosed the reins, the Egyptians would search the houses and enter there at night in disguise and remove the boys

⁷ He does this after citing and rejecting Rashi’s words.

from there. This is why it says, “And she could no longer hide him” (ibid. 2:3).⁸ (Ramban, *Shemot* 1:10)

In his commentary, the Ramban explains the psychology that Pharaoh uses in order to convince his people to collaborate in this genocide. Pharaoh needs to “outsmart” Israel because the Israelites will not go like lambs to the slaughter; conversely, the local Egyptians will not consent to the injustice of committing genocide against the Jewish people. By his scheming – by introducing gradual changes in their relationship to the Israelites and creating an environment in which the Egyptians themselves may act against the Israelites – the final goal can be accomplished: exterminating every newborn male.⁹

Let us look at a final example. Rachel turns to Yaakov and dramatically declares, “Give me children; if not, I am dead” (*Bereishit* 30:1). The Ramban plumbs the depths of Rachel’s words in order to explain Yaakov’s outrage:

In truth, her intent was for him to pray for her, but that he must pray for her until she would have children **in any case**; otherwise, she would kill herself in pain...

She thought that in his love for her, Yaakov would fast and wear sackcloth and ashes and pray until she would have children, so that she would not die in her pain.

“And Yaakov’s anger was kindled” (ibid. v. 2) because the prayer of the righteous is not in their hands, that it may be heard and answered in any case. However, she spoke in the way of longing of beloved wives in order to intimidate him with her death; therefore, his anger was kindled...

According to the words of the Ramban, Yaakov’s anger is not about the actual request, but the mistaken view of prayer. Rachel believes that the prayer will be efficacious “in any case,” that God will certainly respond to the prayer. The Ramban also points to the emotional situations of Yaakov and Rachel in describing Rachel’s desperation and understanding the sharp response of Yaakov.

D. *Serus Ha-Mikra*

⁸ These words, stated eight hundred years ago, are still applicable to our generation, and they could have been stated equally about the laws of the Third Reich.

⁹ We should note that the words of the Ramban do not come to explicate a local problem of a certain word or verse. He is analyzing a complex intellectual issue, explaining the rationale behind Pharaoh’s decrees and the progressive nature of Pharaoh’s decrees. For this aim, the Ramban uses many verses, all of which come together to form a fabric to resolve the verses. This is an additional example of one of the characteristics of the Ramban’s commentary, which we studied in the first lesson dealing with him (#17) — the commentary is a specific and comprehensive work, in which the Ramban uses specific verses as jumping-off points to discuss general issues.

Another exegetical tool employed by the Ramban in his commentary is *serus ha-mikra*, the inversion or transposition of the verse. Sometimes, in order to understand the intent of the verse, one should read it as if the sequence of the words is different.¹⁰

Serus ha-mikra is not the Ramban's invention. This technique already appears in the *beraita* of the thirty-two principles of R. Eliezer ben R. Yosei the Galilean as number thirty-one: "The preceding element which comes later in the text." However, there is no doubt that the Ramban makes broad and significant use of this principle in his commentary on the Torah.

One of the central places in which the Ramban uses *serus ha-mikra* is his commentary to *Bereishit* 15:13: "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land not theirs, and they will be enslaved and subjugated for four hundred years:"

"Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners" — This is an inverted verse, and it means: "your offspring will be sojourners in a land not theirs for four hundred years, and they will be enslaved and subjugated." However, it does not explain how many days of servitude and affliction there would be...

The point of the verse is that God is declaring that even though He says (*ibid.* v. 18), "To your seed I have given this land," "Know for certain" that before they receive it, "they will be sojourners in a land not theirs for four hundred years," and they will also be enslaved there and subjugated.

¹⁰ Nechama Leibowitz explains the term *serus ha-mikra* well:

We should note that the term, "invert the verse and explicate it," is only a technical term, commonly used by the sages of Israel. Its meaning is the following: this verse should be understood by altering the sequence of the words, thereby making it easy to understand it. **In any case, one should not understand the expression as endorsing textual criticism** [emphasis mine — A.R.], as if the verse is somehow corrupted and requires emendation. In our case, its meaning — as we explained above — is only this: the verse is arranged according to a certain sequence, totally correct and logical, but in order to understand the chronological sequence of events fully, one should rearrange the phrases and read them in an opposite or different direction. (Nechama Leibowitz and Moshe Ahrend, *Peirush Rashi La-Torah* [Tel Aviv, 5750], vol. 1, p. 215)

In her book, *Iyunim Chadashim Le-Sefer Shemot* (Jerusalem, 5756), p. 157, n. 8, Nechama deals with the problematic nature of the requirement of rearranging the verse in order to explain it. Ultimately, she resolves the matter in the following way:

More than once, the Ramban employs this concept, which is certainly one of the principles of *peshat*. We must remember that the logical order of the words, putting next to each other the phrases which are close to each other logically, is only one of the possible sequences of the words. There is a rhythmic or musical sequence, and there is also a didactic sequence, which lays out that which is important both at the beginning and at the end in order to make it prominent, highlighting what distinguishes them — and psychological and aesthetic factors may sometimes overpower the logical proximity.

Meir Raffeld, "Ve-Harbeh Mikraot Mesurasot Yesh Ba-Katuv," *Pirkei Nechama* (Jerusalem, 5761), pp. 273-275, attempts to understand the aim of the Giver of the Torah in writing the verses in a way differing from the logical sequence.

The difficulty in the verse is the statement that the nation of Israel will be sojourners and slaves for four centuries; in actuality, the period of servitude was significantly less than that. Therefore, the Ramban suggests reading the verse in the following way: “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land not theirs for four hundred years, and they will be enslaved and subjugated.” In other words, the time period of “four hundred years” relates not to the servitude and affliction mentioned immediately before it, but rather the sojourning described before them.

Since this is the first place in the Torah where the Ramban uses the term “*mikra mesuras*,”¹¹ the Ramban explains at length the principle of *serus ha-mikra* and he brings a collection of examples of difficult verses from Torah and *Neviim* which may be resolved using this principle:

Many inverted verses may be found throughout Scripture. For example, “The Hebrew slave came to me, whom you brought to us to laugh at me” (ibid. 39:17); similarly, “And all the land came to Egypt to procure to Yosef” (ibid. 41:57); similarly, “For whoever eats leaven, that soul will be cut off from Israel, from the first day until the seventh day” (*Shemot* 12:15)... And many are like this.

The Ramban cites a number of examples, and we will look at the first, taken from the words addressed to Potifar by his wife: “The Hebrew slave came to me, whom you brought to us to laugh at me.” It is clear that Potifar did not procure a slave with the aim of making sport of his wife, and the technique of *serus ha-mikra* makes clear the intent of the verse: “He came to me to laugh at me — the Hebrew slave whom you brought to us.”¹²

E. Abbreviation and Elaboration

When there is a certain lack of correlation between the initial description of an event and the later recapitulation of the same event, the Ramban explains the lack of correlation using the following rule: “It is the way of the verses to abbreviate it in one place and to elaborate in another place.”¹³

For example, when Yosef’s brothers regret selling him, they say, “In truth, we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us” (*Bereishit* 42:21). The difficulty of this is that in the description of the sale of Yosef (ibid. ch. 37), the Torah never tells us that Yosef begs his brothers for mercy.

11 In his commentary to 8:2, the Ramban uses the terminology “its meaning is as if it were inverted,” but this concept is not the same as the concept of “*mikra mesuras*.”

12 Another possibility of inverting the verse is: “The Hebrew slave whom you brought to us came to me to laugh at me.”

13 The Sages put it this way, “The words of the Torah are scant in one place and ample in another place” (Yerushalmi, *Rosh Hashana*, ch. 3, 58).

The Ramban (42:21) suggests three answers for this, and the third is, “It is the way of the verses to abbreviate it in one place and to elaborate in another place.” The Torah does not see any need to state all of the details of the events twice. Instead, it may tell at the time of the event some of the details and at a later point it may reveal other details, and the student is invited to connect all of the dots. We may add that specifically because the narrative will appear later, the Torah may truncate its initial description.¹⁴

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There are many other exegetical rules that the Ramban cites, but unfortunately, we cannot mention all of them. There is no doubt that the Ramban is one of the most influential figures in terms of shaping the world of biblical exegesis and the Jewish worldview generally.

Let us conclude with some words of the Ramban that are particularly appropriate for this season of the year, celebrating the rebirth of the nation of Israel in its land:

These words promise that the future redemption will come, a promise more complete than all of Daniel’s visions. And this is what it says here (v. 32), “So that your enemies who live there will be desolated” — this is in fact good news, cheering the exiles: our land does not accept our enemies, and this is a great proof and promise for us. For you will not find in civilization a land which is as good and broad, and which was always settled, yet is so devastated... For from the time we left, it has not accepted any nation or state; though all of them try to settle it, they do not succeed... (Ramban, *Vayikra* 26:16)

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

14 The first answer of the Ramban is that it is clear that Yosef must have begged for his life, and there is no need to write this:

...Because it is known naturally that a person will beg for his life when it comes into others’ hands to do evil to him, and he will make them swear by the life of their father and do everything in his power to save his soul from death...

In another place, the Ramban expresses this rule in the sentence: “The verse will abbreviate the matter which is understood.”

The second answer of the Ramban is that “the verse wishes to abbreviate their iniquity;” in other words, the Torah does not hide the fact that Yosef begs his brothers for his life, but it relates this fact in a later place so as not to emphasize the cruelty of the brothers.