

The Requirement of Peshat and the Challenge of Derash

By: ABRAHAM KELMAN

וידבר אלקים אל משה ויאמר אליו אני ד'. (וארא ו:ב)

“And God spoke to Moshe and said to him, I am Hashem.”

Rashi (*Va'era* 6:2) explains that the Divine term *Elokim* is used in the beginning to indicate displeasure at Moshe for having asked so boldly, “Why did you harm this people?” and the name *Hashem* is used at the end to affirm “That He will surely reward those who walk before Him.” Then Rashi (*Va'era* 6:9) quotes from *Sanhedrin* 111a where the verse is explained somewhat differently.

In the second interpretation Moshe is criticized more harshly and compared unfavorably with the *Avot* (Patriarchs). *Hashem* says to Moshe, “You have complained because of your apparent lack of success with Pharaoh, but the *Avot* did not see the fulfillment of all their promises, yet they remained ever faithful and unquestioning.” *Hashem* also says to him, “Alas for those who are lost and are not found.”

Rashi (*Va'era* 6:9) then makes the following comment: ואין המדרש מתישב אחר המקרא —“This midrash does not really explain the verse accurately.” He then goes on to explain the difficulties. Rashi concludes, “Therefore I say, let the verse be explained according to the *peshat*, but the *derash* also has its place.” Now the question arises, if Rashi is not completely satisfied with the *derash*, the aggadic interpretation, why quote it altogether? Why not simply let the *peshat* stand as the only explanation? By including both the *peshat* and the *derash*, Rashi teaches us a very important lesson.

There are two approaches to the study of Torah, and Rashi himself exemplifies both. He was the master *pashtan* or *parshan*, always trying to find the simplest, most logical explanation of the text, but

Abraham Kelman is the founder and dean of Prospect Park Yeshiva in Brooklyn and the *rav* of its congregation.

he also brilliantly selected midrashim to provide additional interpretations.

What is the difference between *peshat* and *derash*? *Peshat* represents the correct ordinary interpretation of the text based upon the proper understanding of the words. It also explains the Law as it is written, in conformity with the rules of language, structure, and the teachings of the Oral Law. *Derash* has another role. It seeks to penetrate into the inner meaning of the words. It postulates that there are mysterious and hidden meanings in the words of the Torah that are deeper than the superficial appearance of the text. It is what we call *sisrei* Torah, the mysteries of the Torah.

Aggada may be compared to the soul, in contrast to the *peshat*, which is identified with the body of the Torah. The aggada is not circumscribed. Like the *neshamah*, it goes more deeply and is unlimited in its scope. A common theme within *derash* is that man should strive to do more than the letter of the law. A number of examples will illustrate this point.

We are to be charitable, and the halakhah is very specific in its definition: one should give ten percent for charity. If a person so desires, he may give up to twenty percent, but not more. (The Maharal says that the *gematria* for $\eta\kappa\delta\zeta$ contains both choices. The difference from the ζ (90) to the κ (100) is 10%. The difference from the δ (4) to the η (5) is 20%.) There was a *tanna* by the name of R. Elazar ish bar Tossa who gave away almost everything he owned. On one occasion, when his daughter was to be married, he took money to buy her a trousseau. The *gabbai zedakah* saw him and ran away because he knew R. Elazar would give him all the money. R. Elazar pursued the *gabbai* and made him take all the money except for one $\zeta\upsilon\zeta$ that he left for his daughter. Our sages tell us that he bought grain for that $\zeta\upsilon\zeta$, threw the sack of wheat into his storage place and, miraculously, the storage place filled up with wheat. He then forbade his family to have any benefit from this miraculous occurrence (*Ta'anit* 24a.) His concept of *zedakah*—an aggadic point of view—is vastly different from the demands of the *peshat*.

Another example: The Torah tells us that when Moshe arrived in Mitzrayim, Aharon came forth to meet him. Hashem had assured Moshe that Aharon would not be unhappy with his coming; on the contrary, the Torah testifies that “he will see you” — $\text{וְשָׂמַח בְּלִבּוֹ}$ — “and he will rejoice in his heart.” Only the A-mighty could make such a promise knowing what goes on in a man’s heart.

Ḥazal tell us that the meeting of Aharon and Moshe was a wonderful encounter of deep sincerity and mutual love (*Shemot Rabbah*). What could be better than what the verse describes? Yet the aggadic comment on that verse is different. In *Midrash Rabbah*, *Ruth* 5, Aharon is criticized by implication. The Midrash states that had Aharon known what the Torah would say about him—that ‘he will go forth and rejoice in his heart’—he would have done even more. He would have gone out and welcomed Moshe with timbrels and dancing. The *peshat* is content to describe the joyous meeting and to tell us that Aharon would rejoice in his heart. The aggada wants more. It wants Aharon to show an even greater sense of ecstasy and exhilaration at the coming of Moshe.

Another example of the difference between *peshat* and *derash* is to be found in the mitzvah of *kibud av va'em*. The Torah requires every person to respect his father and mother. The Rabbis defined this to mean that one must provide food and drink and help one’s father and mother to go in and come out. This is how the Rabbis interpreted the meaning of the word *kabed*.

However, there is a second approach that comes under the category of *derash*. In the Talmud (*Kiddushin* 31a) the sages discuss to what extent one should honor one’s parents. An example is given of Dama ben Nesina, a non-Jew in the city of Ashkelon, who would not sell a precious stone to replace the one that was missing from the *Kohen Gadol’s* breastplate. His father was asleep, the key to the vault under his pillow. It was a tremendous monetary loss, but he would not awaken his father. Here we are introduced to a concept of *kibud av* that is far higher and more demanding than the usual interpretation of *peshat*.

Our tradition has always projected both these approaches. The halakhah sets certain standards but our sages also often urged us to reach higher. This is called *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*, a standard of behavior beyond the confines of the law. This approach is a summons to us to strive for higher levels of achievement and not be content with the minimal requirements of the law.

Yeshiva education should concentrate on both aspects. We have to teach the basic rules of the *Shulhan Arukh*, the Code of Law, but we also have to inspire our students to set even higher standards. These higher standards are not meant for the majority. We are looking for the *yehidei segulah*, the exceptional ones. They are the ones who will become the models, the pace setters, the leaders of *Klal Yisrael*.

Such people may be small in number but their influence will be of enduring significance.

To get back to our original question, Rashi chose to highlight the distinction between the *pesbat* and *derash* in this particular text. Moshe Rabbeinu goes on his mission to Pharaoh and is rebuffed. Even more distressing to him, Pharaoh worsens the conditions for the people of Israel. Their workload becomes unbearable. How does a leader react? Moshe, at first, could not contain himself and he cried out in bitterness and despair, “Why, oh G-d, have you sent me?”

This is the ordinary, one might say, normal reaction of a sensitive person. Following the dictates of *pesbat*, Moshe’s response was acceptable. But there is another choice, that of *derash*, that demands unlimited and unquestioning faith. From this point of view, Moshe was expected to summon all his spiritual strength and remain confident in Israel’s redemption even in this dark moment.

In the framework of the *pesbat*, although Hashem feels disappointment in Moshe—mildly implied by the words *Vayedaber Elokim*—in his words to Moshe he placates and reassures him that His promise will be kept. “*Ani Hashem*”: My word will be fulfilled and I will confirm and carry on the covenant I made with the Patriarchs. Not a word of rebuke here. *Hashem*, who knows the hearts of men, knows full well that the words of Moshe were spoken out of anguish and deep love for his people. According to the *derash*, however, Moshe is admonished, albeit gently, for speaking sternly and is compared unfavorably with the Patriarchs.

Moshe is capable of both approaches. As the writer of the Torah, he must live by the words of the Torah (*pesbat*). As the masterful leader of eternal significance, he must keep his life and actions in line with the lofty concepts of *derash*. The Torah is one. ❧