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Review Essay

WHAT IS THE *PESHAT* ON THE MEANING OF *PESHAT*?

Opening the Gates of Interpretation: Maimonides' Biblical Hermeneutics in Light of His Geonic-Andalusian Heritage and Muslim Milieu

By Mordechai Z. Cohen
(Leiden and Boston, 2011)

We were brought up in our early education with the expression in Rashi, *ein mikra yotse mi-yedei peshuto*, a biblical verse does not leave the realm of its *peshat* (Gen. 37:17, 15:10, Exod. 12:2). Rashi uses the expression *le-fi peshuto* or a variant of the word *peshat* 75 times in his commentary on the Tanakh as a meaning of the verse worthy of discussion in contradistinction to the *derash* (Gen. 1:4, 2:5, 9:7, 14:13, 14:15 etc.). We usually interpret this to mean 'a biblical verse never loses its plain literal meaning,' i.e. its *peshat*. The verse may have additional interpretations, but the *peshat* always remains as the meaning of the verse. Cohen's book is about Maimonides' definition of *peshat* based on his own writings, cultural setting, and Geonic-Sephardic tradition.

Talmudic Sources

Cohen provides a very thorough analysis of the Talmudic sources for the *peshat* principle.¹ The Talmud speaks about the text itself without any indication of the primacy of *peshat*. The straightforward sense of *peshat* is just another interpretation among many applied to the text without any preference. One can speak about the text itself, i.e., the plain sense of the words in contrast to the Rabbinic interpretation, and at the same time not prefer either one as the primary meaning of the words. *Peshat* is the

¹ *Shabbat* 63a, *Yevamot* 11b, *Yevamot* 24a.

straightforward sense but it is not the primary meaning. Cohen concludes that in Talmudic usage *peshat* is the straightforward sense of Scripture without implying any idea that *peshat* is the primary meaning of the word or text either philologically or contextually or in agreement with Rabbinic interpretation.²

Geonic-Andalusian Tradition

The story of the development of the meaning of Peshat as we know it begins with R. Saadia Gaon (882-942). R. Saadia Gaon translated the Torah into Arabic and he made use of different methods that provide a license to translate the Torah more freely. Understanding these methods is key to making sense of the subject of the book under review here, namely the tradition that leads up to Maimonides' unique definition of peshat. The terms used for *peshat* and *derash* in Arabic reveal some nuances that help refine the definition of *peshat*. For example, Eve is described in the Torah as, *em kol hai* – literally, mother of all living things. Does that mean she was the mother of the lion and the cow in addition to mankind? R. Saadia, therefore, translates this as, *um kul na'tik*, mother of *all speaking beings*, i.e. mankind. The Arabic term for this type of exegesis is *ta'wil*, non-literal interpretation. Scholars – both modern and traditional – agree that R. Saadia wrote a free translation of the Torah that takes into consideration the opinions of the Rabbis, philology, and context.³ Thus, in R. Saadia, we see that the Hebrew term *peshat* has dual meaning, both literal and non-literal i.e. translation containing interpretation. In Arabic they are represented by two words, *za'hir* and *ta'wil*, respectively.

Cohen provides an important contribution to an understanding of Maimonides' use of Arabic terms, their origins, historical development, and their nuances that are not captured in the Hebrew terms. Hence, as part of this review I will discuss Cohen's analysis of key terms in greater detail below.

² Mordechai Z. Cohen, *Opening the Gates of Interpretation: Maimonides' Biblical Hermeneutics in Light of His Geonic-Andalusian Heritage and Muslim Milieu* (Leiden and Boston, 2011), 350-358.

³ *Opening the Gates of Interpretation*, 40; Joshua Blau, "On Sa'adya Gaon's Pentateuch Translation," [in Hebrew] in *Rabbi Mordechai Breuer Festschrift*, ed. Moshe Bar-Asher (Jerusalem, 1992), 633; Moshe Zucker, *Rav Saadya Gaon's Translation of the Torah* (Hebrew; New York, 1959), 266-279. I am grateful to R. Simon Basalely for a reference to the *Ben Ish Hai's* remarks on *Parshat Ki Tetsei* which agrees with this description of R. Saadia's commentary. The *Ben Ish Hai* discusses the non-literal aspect of the translation and its fidelity to rabbinic interpretation.

The Talmud says that translating Scripture in a literal fashion is a fabrication that does not represent the true meaning. The translation has to contain traditional rabbinic interpretation to be correct:

R. Judah says: Someone who translates a verse according to its literal meaning is a fabricator... What does R. Judah mean when he says translation? He means our translation, [i.e. translating according to Onkelos].⁴

Curiously, Cohen does not mention the earlier Targum Onkelos tradition as a precursor to the Geonic-Andalusian approach. Maimonides, on the other hand, does cite Targum Onkelos – older and more authoritative – for the precedent-setting non-literal translation of corporeal descriptions of God and His actions.⁵

The geonim R. Saadia and R. Samuel ben Hophni (d. 1013), Judah Ibn Hayyuj (late 10th century), Jonah Ibn Janah (early 11th century), Moses Ibn Ezra (1055 – 1138), Moses Ibn Gikatilla (mid-eleventh century), Judah Ibn Bal'am (mid-eleventh century)⁶ and Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089 – 1164)⁷ were all major figures in the Geonic-Andalusian (Jewish-Muslim Spanish) tradition on *peshat* that culminated with Maimonides. Cohen portrays these authors, their historical context, their interpretations and their impact on Maimonides.

Arabic *Za'hir* as Hebrew *Peshat*?

Four key terms in Arabic that receive detailed treatment by Cohen are: *ta'wil*, *za'hir*, *tafsir*, and *tafsir marwi*. *Ta'wil* is interpretation beyond the *za'hir*, apparent sense. *Ta'wil* conveys the true meaning of the text, as opposed to literal translation. Maimonides held that this is what is expected of scholars who interpret the Torah for the general populace, that they have an obligation to convey the true meaning of the text based on *ta'wil* – not *za'hir* – when the apparent sense makes no sense.⁸

⁴ *Kiddushin* 49a, *Berakhot* 8a, and Rashi ad. loc.

⁵ *Guide of the Perplexed*, I:21.

⁶ Ibn Gikatilla and Ibn Bal'am are the only two commentators that Maimonides recommends. See "Treatise on Resurrection" in *Letters and Essays of Moses Maimonides*, ed. and trans. I. Shailat, (Jerusalem 1987-1988), 329. *Maimonides' Treatise on Resurrection*, Elimelekh Polinsky trans. (New York, 1982), 40.

⁷ Abraham Ibn Ezra was the only one in this list that wrote his commentaries in Hebrew. As a result, he became the conduit for the transfer of the Geonic-Andalusian heritage to the Ashkenazic world.

⁸ *Opening the Gates of Interpretation*, 478; *Guide of the Perplexed*, II:29; *Treatise on Resurrection*, Shailat ed., 325; *Treatise on Resurrection*, Joshua Finkel ed., Proceedings of American Academy for Jewish Research (New York, 1939), 12. Polinsky ed., 37.

TRADITION

Regarding *tafsir* and *tafsir marwi*, Maimonides defines these terms in relation to the Torah when he says:

Know that every law that God revealed to Moses was only revealed to him with its *tafsir*. God told him the text (*nass*), and then told him its *tafsir* and *ta'wil*... And they (i.e. Israel) would write the text and commit the [interpretive] tradition (*naql*) to memory. And thus the Rabbis, peace be upon them, say: the Written Law (*Torah she-bi-khetav*) and the Oral Law (*Torah she-be-al pe*)...⁹

I shall give you an example: God told him [i.e. Moses] “You shall live in booths seven days” (Lev. 23:42) ... This law [*shari'a*; i.e. text of the Written Law] was given to him [Moses] with its *tafsir*. And thus the 613 commandments were recorded in written texts (*nusus*), and the *tafsir* was transmitted (*marwi*) orally.¹⁰

Surprisingly, Cohen does not mention or discuss Maimonides' use of *peirusush* and *beiur* in MT where Maimonides states:

Kitvei ha-kodesh kulan u-feirusheihen u-veiureihen asur lesorfan o leabbedan....

All holy writs, **their interpretation, and elucidation**, are forbidden to be burned or destroyed....¹¹

Interpretation and elucidation are usually identified with *Targum* and *Torah she-be-Al pe*, respectively.¹² Maimonides says in his Introduction to the Mishnah:

We shall teach the precise *tafsir* of the Mishnah and *ta'wil* of its matters, for if you would ask even one of the greatest scholars about the *tafsir* of a law in the Mishnah, he would not be able to tell you about it unless he recalls the Talmudic discussion about it...¹³

⁹ *Introduction to the Mishnah*, Shailat ed., 327 (in Arabic); 27 (in Hebrew). According to J. Kafih's translation, *tafsir wa-ta'wil* are *peirusush u-bei'uro* as we see later in the passage cited below from *Mishneh Torah, Yesodei ha-torah* 6:8.

¹⁰ “Introduction to the Mishnah” in *Maimonides' Introductions to the Mishnah*, I. Shailat ed. and trans. (Jerusalem, 1992), 328 (in Arabic); 28 (in Hebrew).

¹¹ *Mishneh Torah, Yesodei ha-torah* 6:8. *Shabbat* 115a. *Megilla* 3a.

¹² *Avodat ha-Melekh, Mishneh Torah, Yesodei ha-Torah* 6:8.

¹³ Shailat, *Mishnah*, 358 (in Arabic) *tafsir al-Mishnah ala al-hakikah wa-ta'wil ka'lama'ba*, 62 (in Hebrew) *peirusush divrei ha-Mishnah al nakhon u-veiur devareha*.

Cohen says regarding this passage:

Maimonides differentiates between two aspects of interpretation: *tafsir/peirush* and *ta'wil/bei'ur amukot*, the former being a simple explanation of the words of the text, the latter a deeper analysis of the implications they communicate or that can be inferred from them...¹⁴

I believe Maimonides is making the same distinction with his usage of these Hebrew terms in MT: *peirusheihen* and *beioreihen*. This dichotomy between *peirush* and *beiur* in Maimonides' Hebrew – when Hebrew is the original language – agrees with Cohen.

Cohen surveys the full range of genres on which Maimonides wrote, including: halakha, philosophy, *ta'amei ha-mitsvot* (rationales for the commandments) and *mashal* (proverbs and allegory) in Proverbs, Job, and Song of Songs. In this brief review I will limit my remarks to the *peshat* approach on the subject of halakha.

Maimonides' Principles for Taryag and Peshat

In the *Sefer ha-Mitsvot* Maimonides excludes *mitsvot* derived from rabbinic rules of interpretation from the count since they are not explicitly stated in the Torah.

According to principle #2 in the book of Commandments:

The principle that the [Rabbis], peace be upon them, taught us is that: “a biblical verse does not leave the realm of *peshat*.” The Talmud in many places inquires when they found a verse from which many matters are deduced by way of commentary (Ar. *sbarh*) and inference: [But] “the verse itself (*gufeh de-kerā*), of what does it speak?”¹⁵

Anything which you do not find as an explicit text (*nass*) in the Torah and you find that the Talmud deduces it through one of the thirteen *middot*, if they [i.e. the Rabbis] themselves clarified and said that this is a Torah principle (*guf Torah*) or that this is a biblical law (*de-orayta*), then it is proper to enumerate it, since the transmitters of the tradition said that it is biblical (*de-orayta*). But if they do not clarify this and do not say anything explicit about this, then it is rabbinic (*de-rabbanan*); lit. of the Rabbis, since there is no text (*nass*) indicating (*yadullu*) it.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Opening the Gates of Interpretation*, 476.

¹⁵ *Opening the Gates of Interpretation*, 293, Joseph Kafih (ed. and trans.) *Maimonides' Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, (Jerusalem, 1971), 14.

¹⁶ *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, Kafih ed., 13.

Nahmanides is very critical and argues that according to Maimonides' view, the truth is the *pesbat* of Scripture (*pesbateih de-kerā*) alone. This would uproot the thirteen *middot* by which the Torah is interpreted and most of the Talmud based upon them.¹⁷ The Rabbis did not say *ein mikra ela ke-peshuto* (“a biblical verse means nothing but its *pesbat*”). Rather, Nahmanides argues, both *pesbat* and *derash* are true. The mitsvot derived from the *derashot* of the Rabbis are equally valid as biblically required. At the same time, Nahmanides held that *pesbuto shel mikra* is the primary basis of halakha.¹⁸

Cohen's *Pesbat* on the Meaning of *Pesbat*

Cohen's approach offers a different perspective on Maimonides that mitigates the criticism of Nahmanides. The case of Kiddush¹⁹ is a good illustration of Maimonides' re-definition of *pesbat*. Maimonides opens the gates of interpretation to accept the *derash* of the Sages as *pesbat*. Maimonides regarded *kiddush* as a biblical obligation based on the verse, “Remember the Sabbath Day to sanctify it” (Exod. 20:8); **remember**, meaning: **pronounce** it sacred and great, and that is the commandment of “the sanctification of the day” (*kiddush ha-yom*).²⁰ Ibn Ezra says “sanctify it” merely means not doing work on that day.²¹ According to Ibn Ezra, in the Rabbis' view it means recitation of Kiddush is an *asmakhta*, not a *de-orayta* law. Nahmanides²² agrees with the explanation of Ibn Ezra that sanctification means rest on the Sabbath. But Nahmanides disagrees with Ibn Ezra and holds that the verse requiring the recitation of Kiddush is more than an *asmakhta*; it is indeed a biblical law derived by the Rabbis. Nahmanides holds that the text bears two meanings: *pesbat* and *derash*, both equally valid. For Ibn Ezra, there can only be one *pesbat* that is *pesbuto shel mikra*, i.e., that the Sabbath is a biblical day of rest. In contrast, Maimonides held that since there can be only one *pesbateih de-kerā* – and to be biblical, Kiddush has to be based on the text – then, the *derash* of the Rabbis in the form of the *asmakhta* has to be the *pesbat*, as well. Maimonides has taken

¹⁷ H. D. Chavel (ed.) *Sefer ha-Mitsvot im Hassagot ha-Ramban* (Jerusalem, 1981), 45.

¹⁸ *Hassagot*, Chavel ed., 37.

¹⁹ *Opening the Gates of Interpretation*, 377f.

²⁰ *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, Pos. #155. Kafih ed., 138. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Shabbat* 29:1.

²¹ Abraham Ibn Ezra” Short Commentary to Ex. 20:7; Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Yesod Mora ve-Sod Torah*, 2:15.

²² H. D. Chavel (ed.), *Peirush ha-Ramban al ha-Torah*, (Jerusalem, 1976), Ex. 20:8, Chavel ed., I, 401.

the definition of *peshat* to a new level by identifying it with the *derash* and maintaining its obligation as biblical and part of the count of the 613. So, in practice, we see that Maimonides expanded and opened the gates of interpretation for *peshat* to include rabbinic derivation when the Rabbis bestow *de-orayta* status to a *mitsva*.

In conclusion, Cohen's work makes a valuable contribution to scholarship and to the wider reading public interested in Jewish thought, biblical exegesis, halakha, and the Geonic-Sephardic traditions in the interpretation of Scripture. In the past those who studied Maimonides in the original Judeo-Arabic simply assumed that *peshat* was the equivalent of *za'hir*, the literal sense. Cohen proves that this view needs serious revision in light of more recent research based on a different model of analysis. The new model that Cohen adapts to his analysis of *peshat* is to understand the definition of *peshat* in Maimonides' own terms, cultural setting, and scholarly tradition.

Maimonides was original in the way he felt that the *peshat* and halakha are integrated with each other. *Peshat* and derivation of halakha are not separate worlds in which both can be right, stand alone, and disagree at the same time. Cohen summarizes and puts into context the work of modern Jewish scholarship on *parshanut* regarding *peshat* from the Geonic period through the time of Maimonides.

In addition, Cohen adds many useful insights of his own to critically evaluate the opinions of his predecessors and contemporaries in modern scholarship. At a time when popular methods of interpretation like *gematriyyot* are often the main method of interpretation in *divrei torah* and *vertlach* and serve as an entertaining substitute for *peshat*, this is a breath of fresh air. This book is highly recommended for offering an understanding about the true meaning of *peshat* in its full, expanded sense beyond literal meaning. This gives us an approach to our *kitvei ha-kodesh* that derives the truth about the meaning of the Torah and *mitsvot* through the principle and methods of *peshat*.