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THE APPROACH OF CLASSICAL JEWISH EXEGETES TO PESHAT AND DERASH AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF BIBLE TODAY*

One of the difficult dilemmas confronting the traditional teacher of Bible concerns his attitude to the biblical exegesis found in Talmud and midrash (and often cited in medieval biblical commentaries). The question, posed bluntly, is whether we are obliged to explain the text in consonance with Hazal's interpretation, even when it does not seem to accord with the plain sense of the verse. The problem, of course, is not limited to the teaching community, but, while the non-teacher can avoid the issue, it confronts the teacher day in and day out. If the question is answered, even partially, in the negative, there may lurk a suspicion at the back of the teacher's mind that he is doing an injustice to his students by not teaching the text in consonance with Hazal, and that he is interpreting Torah in an unauthorized fashion (megalleh panim baTorah shelo kahalakhah). It appears that most teachers attempt to follow the exposition of Hazal consistently and without deviation in teaching the legal material in the Torah.1 In teaching the narrative portions of Torah, on the other hand, many teachers make an effort to search out the plain sense of the verse (peshat) and pay little attention to the material in midrashic sources. One symptom of this approach is that in teaching narrative material more use is made of the commentaries of such masters of peshat as

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R. Avraham ben Meir ibn Ezra (ca. 1092–1167, Spain) and R. Samuel ben Meir (ca. 1090–1160; northern France). There also tend to be fewer reservations about resorting to the writings of authors who do not share a traditional weltanschauung.

Two factors appear to make for this distinction between halakhic and narrative material. The major one is that the exegesis of a verse concerned with halakhah has apparent implications for the actual fulfillment of the commandment (halakhah lema'aseh); the interpretation of narrative material has no such practical consequences. The second factor may be subconscious. There are three basic criteria according to which we can establish what is peshat and what is derash: (1) whether the explanation (and what follows it) is logically coherent; (2) whether it fits the context; and (3) whether it is compatible with the grammar of the language. The first two are primarily relevant in narrative sections where teachers are indeed reluctant to accept interpretations which are illogical or which do not fit the context. The third criterion, which is equally applicable to narrative and halakhic material, does not, unfortunately, affect teachers sufficiently. The teacher who cannot come to terms with an illogical or acontextual interpretation will readily accept a midrashic explanation with which the grammar of Biblical Hebrew is not compatible.

The following comment of R. Yosef ibn Caspi (early fourteenth century; Provence) is of interest in this context. He remarks on the opening words of Exodus 21:7, "And should a man sell his daughter":

I cannot explain the texts dealing with commandments in the fashion demanded by the normal usage of the language, for, if I should do so, I should innovate commandments and change the coin minted by the talmudic sages. Rather, we remain faithful to the custom of our ancestors who yielded to their explanations, and we, too, their descendants, shall be like them. Therefore, if in this commentary I am brief in matters concerning the commandments, then the Talmud or the commentary of Rashi, z.l., should be consulted. But in matters which do not concern the commandments, I shall favor no authority and let truth take its course.

A sharp distinction between the force of rabbinic statements pertaining to halakhic and narrative material was made clearly in the introduction of R. David Zvi Hoffmann (1843–1921; Germany) to his commentary on Leviticus. He contrasts the decisive authority of rabbinic dicta pertaining to the interpretation of verses concerned with halakhah with the force of rabbinic comments in the matter of aggadah. A commentator on the Torah's laws must yield to rabbinic exegesis in legal sections, since halakhah is Sinaitic. But one cannot insist that the interpretation of non-legal passages was given at Sinai, and there is therefore no necessity to accept them. Hoffmann finds support for
his position in the *Introduction to the Talmud* (printed at the back of the first volume of the standard Vilna Talmud and attributed to R. Samuel HaNagid):

Haggadah is any talmudic interpretation which does not concern commandments . . . and you need not learn from it anything but what seems reasonable. You should know that whatever halakhah *Hazal* maintained regarding a commandment from Moshe Rabbenu which he received from the Almighty may neither be added to nor subtracted from. But, as regards the interpretation of verses which is framed according to individual intuition and personal opinion, one need learn from such explanations only that which seems reasonable; and as for the rest, one is not dependent on them.

From Hoffmann’s comments one may conclude:8 (1) that in narrative sections of the Torah we are free to interpret as we choose without being subject to the statements of *Hazal*, and (2) in halakhic sections we are bound by what is found in rabbinic sources. Before considering whether the second thesis should be adopted in our schools, we must ask whether it is firmly grounded in the classical source. The answer, it would appear, is negative: Hoffmann’s distinction does not derive from the principles of earlier exegetes. The license to interpret the Bible in a fashion not in accord with rabbinic hermeneutics was derived by medieval exegetes from the words of the Talmud itself when it stresses that, granted the existence of rabbinic hermeneutical interpretations (*derashot*), “ein mikra yotse midei peshuto” (lit., “a text does not depart entirely from its simple sense/plain meaning”).9

This rule is adopted by all our classical exegetes, and, with the exception of R. Yosef ibn Caspi (cited above), not one of them limits its practice to aggadah alone.10 It is relevant to cite in this context the words of R. Eliyahu Mizrahi (REM; 1450–1525; Turkey) in his commentary to Rashi on Numbers 29:39.

And Rashi, z.l., because he addresses in his commentary only those *derashot* and *aggadot* which are close to the plain sense of the text (*peshuto shel mikra*), and this midrash is one of those whose which are remote from the plain meaning . . . he explained the verse according to its plain meaning, and disregarded the midrash of the Sifre. For thus he [Rashi] wrote on the passage “They heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden” (Gen. 3:8)—“There are many midreshei aggadah and other midrashot, but my concern is only with the plain meaning of a passage and with such aggadah as is compatible with the words of Scripture and its meaning [shemu’ot].” And although from these words it appears that it is aggadic statements in non-legal contexts which Rashi does not quote, but that he does cite legal midrashot although they are at variance with the plain meaning of the verse, nevertheless, since we have noted several instances where Rashi disregards legal midrashot
in order to follow the plain sense of the text, we may conclude that according to Rashi, there is no distinction between [legal] midrashim and [narrative] aggadot, both of which he feels free to disregard, interpreting the verses according to their plain sense, whenever the midrashim are not congruent with the plain sense.

With this lengthy comment, compare also REM's reaction (on Ex. 22:8) to Ramban's claim that Rashi interpreted the verse according to a minority opinion (divrei yehidim) and not in accord with the halakhah. Having shown, as above, that this position is consistent with Rashi's approach elsewhere, R. Eliyahu stresses that Ramban, too, does the same in halakhic matters, and concludes, "And one is forced to say, therefore, that none of the commentators is concerned merely to make the text fit the halakhah, whether it seems to fit or not." A brief survey of the commentaries of other Torah exegetes suffices to indicate that REM is correct in his assertion.\(^{11}\) Even Ibn Ezra, who seems to indicate clearly\(^ {12}\) that he will not deviate from rabbinic interpretation in legal matters, does not always keep his promise; the painful attempts of his supercommentators to reconcile his non-traditional interpretations with what is stated in the texts bear ample witness to this.\(^ {13}\)

Hoffmann's other thesis, that in narrative matters we are free to interpret independently of rabbinic sources, is also not accepted by the majority of exegetes. To be sure, the statement in the Introduction to the Talmud as to the non-authoritative nature of aggadah is supported by observations made by several of the geonim,\(^ {14}\) but since the opinion of the Nagid is demonstrably based on the actual words of the geonim, we must understand his rule in light of those words. A survey of their statements indicates that the geonim refer generally to a limited number of places in rabbinic literature containing bizarre stories and totally unreasonable interpretations of biblical verses. In such instances, indeed, we are not merely reinterpreting the words of Hazal,\(^ {15}\) but discounting them completely as statements inapplicable to exegesis. But these comments cannot be viewed as guiding principles, and certainly not as a standing dispensation to ignore rabbinic interpretation in our exegesis. Even Ibn Ezra, who claims to distinguish\(^ {16}\) between his acceptance of rabbinic exegesis in halakhah and his freedom of choice in aggadah, must resort to self-justification when rejecting rabbinic interpretation in aggadah.\(^ {17}\) In many places he discusses those words in Hazal seriously, and when they do not seem to him to convey the simple sense of the verse, he prefers to assume that they are not to be taken literally, but they possess an inner meaning [sod]. Other exegetes, notably Rashi, endeavor to select from rabbinic midrash that which seems to them compatible with the simple sense of Scripture.
It is obvious that our exegetes did not mean to determine practical halakhah on the basis of their interpretations, ignoring those of the Rabbis, for they certainly considered themselves bound by the halakhah of Hazal. How then, can we justify their license to interpret halakhic passages in a way which does not coincide with the midrash of Hazal? The conceptual foundation of this freedom lies in the acceptance of the principle that “there are seventy facets to the Torah” (Numbers Rabbah 13:15), i.e., that a verse has more than one meaning. Rashi formulates this principle at the beginning of his commentary to Shir HaShirim: “God spoke one which I heard as two (Ps. 62:12).’ One verse may have several meanings [te’amim], but, in the end, no verse escapes from its simple sense and literal meaning [peshuto umashma’o].”

There are, of course, occasions when two interpretations conform to the accepted rules of language and expression, and then both can be considered the simple meaning of the verse. But this is not always the case. When Rashi or some other exegete states that the midrash halakhah is not the simple meaning of the verse, he means that we are not to measure the midrash by the customary standards of textual exegesis—conformity to the established rules of language and style—and it emerges that, in the exegete’s opinion, Hazal, too, did not maintain that the midrash is the simple meaning of the verse. The zeal with which some exegetes attempt to enhance the authority of midrash halakhah by insisting that it is rooted in the language of the verse frequently causes unnecessary “twisting” of scriptural passages. There is no derogation to midrash in stating that a midrash is not the simple meaning of the verse. No other exegete pursues peshat as devotedly as Rashbam, yet he is of the opinion that “the essence [ikkar] of the Torah is to teach and inform us, through the hints of peshat, the haggadot, halakhot, and dinim.” Similarily, in his introduction to parshat Mishpatim he writes, “Let the intelligent-minded know and understand that it is not my intention to explain halakhot even though they are central, but it is my intention to explain the simple meaning of the texts.”

The relationship between the halakhah and the derashah has attracted a good deal of discussion. Did midrashim of texts serve as a creative source of halakhot, or is the basis of the halakhot to be found in the chain of tradition, with the derashot merely constituting support for the halakhot which preceded them? R. Meir Leib Malbim (1809–79; Eastern Europe), the extreme advocate of the former view, and R. Yaakov Zvi Mecklenburg (1785–1855; Germany), the author of Haketav Vehakabbalah [Scripture and Tradition], strove to demonstrate that the derashot of Hazal are anchored in the bedrock of the Hebrew language and its unique characteristics. According to Malbim
(in the Introduction to his commentary of Leviticus), "the derashah is the simple sense \textit{[peshat hapashut]} which is inevitable and implanted in the depth of the language and the foundation of the Hebrew tongue." However, despite the occasional successes of Malbim and Mecklenburg in demonstrating that the derash which, \textit{prima facie}, is far from the simple meaning of the verse, may, in fact, be in conformity with the essence of its simple meaning, they often forced conformity between the \textit{peshat} and the \textit{derashah} in instances where there was no basis for it. An unprejudiced survey of derashot on Biblical texts teaches us that the rabbinic \textit{derashot} are "divided into a variety of approaches."\textsuperscript{25} In many of them, the Sages never meant to assert that the halakhot actually are derived from the meaning of the verse.\textsuperscript{26} The same conclusion is applicable to \textit{midrash aggadah}; one who attempts to discover an interpretation of the text in each \textit{derashah} will attribute to Hazal statements which they never intended to make because, "Sometimes they explain the verse properly according to its simple meaning, and sometimes they utilize a \textit{derashah} for a deep or explicit inner meaning \textit{[sod amok o meforash]}."\textsuperscript{27}

On the basis of this distinction between interpretation (\textit{perush}) and \textit{derash}, we can understand the perplexing story in T.B. \textit{Ta'anit} 5b:

R. Nahman and R. Yitshak were seated at a meal. R. Nahman said to R. Yitshak, "Please say a word (\textit{Torah}; c.f. \textit{devar Torah, vort})." He answered, "R. Yohanan said thus, 'We do not converse during meals lest the trachea precede the esophagus [in swallowing] and cause danger [of choking].'" After they had dined, he said to him, "R. Yohanan said thus, 'Our patriarch Yaakov did not die.'" He responded, "Then did the mourners mourn, the embalmers embalm, and the buriers bury in vain?" He responded, "I am using \textit{derash} on a verse, as it states, 'And you do not fear, my servant Yaakov, says the Lord, and do not be frightened, O Yisrael, for I am about to save you from afar, and your seed from the land of their captivity (Jer. 30:10).' The verse equates him with his seed; just as his seed is alive, he, too, is alive."

The immediate difficulty with this story was perceived by commentators; of what avail was R. Yitshak's answer, "I am using \textit{derash} on a verse'? The question of R. Nahman is still in place, "Did the mourners mourn in vain, etc.?" It appears that the emphasis in R. Yitshak's response is on the word \textit{doresh}; i.e., do you think that I am \textit{interpreting} the section pertaining to Yaakov's death? I, too, know that our patriarch Yaakov died a physical death, and my intention is only to explain (\textit{lidrosh}) a verse, that is to say, to express an idea via the medium of a verse from Jeremiah.\textsuperscript{28}

It is in this spirit that we should understand the famous words of Rashi in his commentary on Ex. 6:9:

Our Rabbis explained it by \textit{derash (derashuhu)} in connection with the matter preceding, that Moshe said, "Why did you treat poorly?" (Ex. 5:22). The Holy
One Blessed be He responded, “Alas for those who are lost and cannot be found. . . .” But the midrash is not in congruence with the verse for a number of reasons. . . therefore I say, “Let the problems of a text be solved in accord with its simple sense (peshuto), each expression according to its nature, and let the derashah be derived (tiddoresh; or ‘and derive the derashah’ = tidrosh), as it is stated, ‘Are my words indeed not as fire, says the Lord, and as the hammer which shatters the rock?’ (Jer. 23:29)—splitting into several sparks.”

The derashah is not, Heaven forbid, invalid, and, according to Rashi, the idea in it is both true and important, but this derashah has nothing to do with the straightforward interpretation of the verse, i.e., the meaning which is expressed in the passage according to its simple sense, and this is the meaning which interested Rashi as a Biblical exegete.

This approach is also the only way to explain how Rashbam can write the Preface to his commentary on the Torah, “Let the intelligent understand that all of the words of our Rabbis and their derashot are true,” and can, at the same time, attack sharply rabbinic interpretations (generally to be found in Rashi’s commentary) whose source is midrash, such as Gen. 49:9, “And he who explained it as pertaining to the sale of Joseph did not at all understand the meaning of the verse or its division by cantillation.” Rashbam’s attack is not directed at the use of derash on a verse, but rather at the equation of the derashah with the simple meaning of the text.

When attempting to solve questions arising out of incongruence between peshat and derash, we cannot, especially in the classroom, easily resort to the answer “we do not rely on words of aggadah.” On the other hand, to attempt to “correct” our exegetical criteria so that they conform to the words of the midrash is improper, and, moreover, cannot succeed pedagogically. One cannot teach a student in literature and history classes, and in some Bible classes (dealing with texts where the midrash does not oppose the peshat), that he must interpret on the basis of standard criteria, but that when reading texts which have been expounded by midrash he must entirely ignore those criteria. We can resolve these incongruities only by recognizing, as we have suggested earlier, that the midrash of a verse need not be intended as the meaning of the verse. Since it is not our purpose here to deal with the methodology of midrash and aggadah, suffice it to note that in many cases those midrashim which seem, prima facie, to be fashioned out of a fundamental misunderstanding of the text, are revealed, upon further investigation, to be supplementary to the simple sense of the verse, whether adding conceptual depth to the peshat, or presenting an additional, more fundamental, interpretation side-by-side with the surface meaning of the text. The phenomenon of double meanings, whether side-by-side or one superimposed on the other,
should be familiar to students from their literature classes, and it is important to develop sensitivity to it in the teaching of Scripture, too.

We can thus place in their proper perspective many of those midrashim which make no real attempt to deal with scriptural *peshat* but rather use the verse as a vehicle for the expression of an idea. What, however, are we to say of those midrashim which apparently purport to draw inferences from close reading of the biblical text, but which cannot be said to be linguistically or logically sound from an objective standpoint? It appears to us that Rashbam, who interprets Scripture (both in narrative and legal sections) according to its simple sense more than any of our other exegetes, is the only one who has succeeded completely in freeing himself from the tension between *peshat* and *derash*. His approach provides guidelines both to us and to our students for the resolution of the complex relationships between *peshat* and *derash*.

We read in Rashbam’s commentary to the opening of Genesis:

Most of the halakhot derive from superfluities in the text or the changes from the language in which the simple sense of Scripture can be written to language from which the main point of a *derashah* can be derived; e.g., “These are the generations of heaven and earth in their being created (*bhbr’m*) (Gen. 2:4),” and the Sages interpreted by *derash*—through Abraham [*b’vrhm*] from the lengthiness of the expression, since there was no need to say “*bhbr’m*.”

He supplies further details at Gen 37:2 (whose opening words were cited above, p. 44):

The essence of Torah is to teach and inform us, through the hints of *peshat*, the *haggadot*, *halakhot* and *dinim*, by means of extended phraseology, and with the aid of the thirty-two principles of R. Eliezer the son of R. Yose the Galilean and of the thirteen principles of R. Yishmael.

According to the view of Rashbam, the simple sense of a passage and the midrash of *Hazal* are two distinct areas, two different levels of meaning. The layer of *peshat* is the meaning expressed explicitly in the verse, and which we uncover by all the accepted tools of textual exegesis. The layer of *derash* is the sense concealed between the lines and behind the words, and we expose it via the “peculiarities” of the passage and with the help of the “key principles” which *Hazal* have transmitted to us (the principles of *derash* according to which Torah is to be interpreted).

Certainly even Rashbam did not intend to say that in every case the *derashah* of a verse cannot be regarded as its simple sense, i.e., on the same explicit level of textual exegesis. The proof is that quite often Rashbam accepts the interpretation of *Hazal* as the simple sense
of the verse, whether explicitly or implicitly.\textsuperscript{39} Thus, in a passage where it is impossible to reconcile the midrash with the simple sense of the verse, we must follow the approach of Rashbam, and postulate that the midrash belongs to another category; our function in Bible classes is to explain the fundamental, plain, meaning of the text.

It should be stressed that, if, on the one hand, we accept the assumption of our exegetes (following the Talmud) that Scripture also has a simple meaning, and, if, on the other, it is clear to us that many \textit{midreshei Hazal} cannot in any way be considered the plain meaning of a verse,\textsuperscript{40} then we cannot avoid Rashbam's conclusion concerning the two layers of meaning in the text. There is no doubt, in our opinion, that such a distinction underlies the commentaries of other exegetes. Ibn Ezra, who did not formulate as clear a distinction, was compelled, on the one hand, to reject as incorrect several midrashim of Hazal on certain verses (particularly in the narrative portion of Torah), and, on the other, to indulge in forced interpretations to make other midrashim conform to the language of the text.\textsuperscript{41}

The approach of Rashbam is most convincing when we are dealing with \textit{peshat} and \textit{derash} which can stand side-by-side; it is more difficult to apply when we have before us a \textit{derashah} which presents itself as fulfilling criteria of \textit{peshat} when in our eyes it actually contradicts \textit{peshat}. This problem is most prominent in the interpretation of legal material.\textsuperscript{42} Scholars have attempted to reconcile some of the "contradictions" between \textit{peshat} and \textit{derashah} in various ways,\textsuperscript{43} such as that the \textit{peshat} determines the ideal, and the \textit{derash} the law in actuality; or that the \textit{peshat} and the \textit{derash} apply at different times, in different situations and the like.\textsuperscript{44} Whatever the explanation, the fact is that our classical exegetes permitted themselves to interpret texts according to the simple sense even when it stands in opposition to the conclusion which is demanded by the \textit{derashah} of the passage, and that they saw no contradiction in this.

From the preceding discussion, we should conclude that, if we are to emulate our classical exegetes, we have not merely the right, but the obligation to teach the Bible according to its simple sense, both in its narrative and halakhic sections. If we can succeed in severing the "indispensable" link between a correct midrash and the simple sense of a passage, we can teach \textit{peshat} without diminishing students' respect for \textit{Hazal}. If the student realizes that midrash, too, has many facets, and that in the majority of instances it was by no means the intention of \textit{Hazal} to supply a linguistic and contextual interpretation of Biblical passages, there is no danger that the stressing of \textit{peshat} in teaching Bible may cause any disrespect whatever for the words of our Sages.\textsuperscript{45}

A proper stance vis-a-vis the difference between midrashic literature and Biblical exegesis is especially important for teachers, for the
real danger in stressing *peshat* is the potential neglect of the important exegetical and conceptual material contained in the midrashim of *Hazal*. Here are but two examples of many which could be adduced.

1) In Genesis Rabbah 84:13 (ed. Theodore-Albeck, p. 1016) there is a *derashah*: “And he sent him from the Valley (*emek*) of Hevron (Gen. 37:14): And is not Hevron situated exclusively in hill-country, and you say ‘from the Valley of Hevron’? R. Aha said, ‘He went to fulfill the deep (*amukah*) purpose which the Holy One Blessed be He imparted to the good friend (*haver na’eh*; pun on Hevron) who is buried in Hevron, “And they shall serve them and afflicht them” (Gen. 15:13).’” This is not, of course, the simple sense of the verse, but there is no doubt that the thought expressed in the midrash that the dispatch of Yosef, his sale, and all the adventures of Yaakov’s sons until they descended to Egypt, which appear on superficial reading to be the result of accidental human actions, are but links in the divine plan to bring the Children of Israel down to Egypt. Indeed, the idea is stated explicitly by Yosef later (45:8), and is hinted at several times in the course of the story.47 *Hazal* found support for this basic idea in the “change of expression” in this verse (“valley” for “mountain”). Anyone who considers this midrash to be a simple sense interpretation of the words “And he sent him from the Valley of Hevron” sins against biblical style, and probably attributes to *Hazal* thoughts which never occurred to them. On the other hand, whoever ignores the words of the midrash for the sole reason that they do not reflect the simple sense of the text, sins against himself (and his students) by deliberately overlooking an idea important to the understanding of the section and its significance.

2) In Exodus Rabbah 50:3, R. Levi expounds by *derashah* “For they were bitter” (Ex. 15:23)—“The generation was bitter in its deeds.” R. Levi certainly did not intend this to be understood as the meaning of the verse, since the continuation “And he threw it into the waters and the waters became sweet” (*ibid.*, 25) shows that it was the waters which had been bitter. But the concept expressed in the words of R. Levi may indeed be the simple sense of the *episode*. The external cause for complaint was indeed the bitterness of the water, but the deeper, truer reason was the people’s own bitterness. If the waters had not been bitter, the people would surely have found another reason for complaint, as they indeed did later on. Excuses for complaining about life are not lacking even under normal living conditions, *a fortiori* in the desert.

The search for significance in Biblical texts and the educational use of the Bible cannot be accomplished without continually drawing on the material found in the sources. There are seventy facets to the Torah, and *peshat* is one of them. If “Torah is light” (Prov. 6:23), then the facet of *peshat*, too, must be enlightening.
NOTES

1. Generally via the commentary of Rashi, supplemented by the material in the Sefer Hahinnukh or elsewhere.

2. Especially when the explanation assumes illogical situations.

3. It must be further stressed that teachers (and students) are accustomed to the methodology of midrash in the teaching of halakhah from childhood, and, as a result, the approach of midrash halakhah often seems quite natural for a legal text. Such is not the case in the exegesis of narrative texts, which they are accustomed to approach with the generally accepted criteria for literary and historical texts.


5. Hebrew: nihyeh ke'ahad mimennu; literally “we shall be like one of us.” Cf. Gen. 3:22.

6. Similar is the reaction of R. Avraham ben Azriel (13th century; Bohemia) to the explanation of R. Yosef of Orleans (apparently R. Yosef Bekhor Shor; 12th century; northern France) that el mul penei hamenorah (Nu. 8:2) means toward the table which is facing (mul penei) the menorah, and not toward the central lamp of the menorah as Hazal explain: “And I am astonished at him, since he disagrees with our Rabbis in practice and not [only] in sense.” (Arugat HaBosem, ed. F.E. erbach, I, 91).


8. Yonah Immanuel has already demonstrated correctly (in an appendix to Y. Copperman’s Lifshuto shel Mikra: Collected Essays [Jerusalem, 1974]) that Hoffmann’s words have a polemic tone, since they were directed first and foremost against contemporary trends in biblical criticism; perhaps we ought not to be insistent on their exact meaning. Our concern is not with the analysis of these words, and we cite them only because they furnish teachers with a seemingly authoritative, but deceptive, view.

9. T.B. Shabbat 63a; Yevamot 11b and 24a. It is well-known that the precise intent of Hazal in the term peshuto (as well as other forms derived from the base p-sh-t, such as the Aramaic expression pashteh dikerah b'mai ketiv) is not identical with the meaning which we have in mind for this term. The most recent discussion of the subject is the detailed analysis in the first chapter of Sarah Kamin’s Ph.D thesis, “Rashi’s Exegetical Categorization with Regard to the Distinction between Peshat and Derash” (Hebrew University, 1978). For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that our exegeses generally understood the word peshat in Hazal in the way in which we use it. Moreover, regardless of the precise meaning of the term peshat, it is clear that in the rule ein mikra yotse midei peshuto it expresses the concept of multiple meanings in the biblical text. Hence, the rule grants legitimacy to exegesis which differs from that of Hazal (see below). Our goal in this essay is not to define what is peshat and what is derash, but to establish that there is a distinction between them, and that it is the privilege (and responsibility) of the Bible teacher to interpret the verse according to its simple sense, even if this interpretation does not coincide with the derash/interpretation of Hazal.

10. Just as the talmudic sages did not limit it, for they adduce this principle in relation to derashot of halakhic passages also. On R. Saadia Gaon and Ibn Ezra, see below.

11. It is well-known that Rashbam and R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, in particular, often give interpretations of scriptural texts at variance with halakhah. Examples of such interpretations from Exodus 21 can be found in M.M. Kasher, Torah Shelemah XVII, 286–312.

12. In the Fifth Approach in each of his (two) Introductions, We have written “apparently” because even in those places where Ibn Ezra expresses his almost total subjection to the halakhic exegesis of Hazal, there is reason for suspicion. So, for example, in the Short Commentary to Exodus 21:26 (ed. A. Weiser, Jerusalem, 1976, II, 295) he establishes the rule, “If the two interpretations when placed in the balance are equal, then tradition will decide the truth.” And if the interpretations are not equal, will tradition then not decide the truth?

13. Like Ibn Ezra, so too R. Saadia Gaon. In his Introduction to the Torah (see M. Zucker, R. Saadia Gaon’s Translation of the Torah [N.Y., 1959], 232), he asserts that the exegete/translator must seek an interpretation conforming to halakhah. Nevertheless, some of his translations and interpretations do not conform to the halakhic sources which we have (cf. Zucker, 442ff.).

14. Compare, for example, the words of R. Hai Gaon (Otsar HaGeonim, Hagigah, “Com-
mentaries," 59), "Be aware that the words of aggadah are not like the received tradition [shem'ah], but each authority may expound by derash whatever appeals to him, using such expressions as 'it is possible' and 'one might say,' but not rigidly defined words, and we therefore do not rely on them." See further, the responsa of R. Sherira Gaon published in Teshuvot HaGeonim ed. Harkavy, no. 353, and the editor's note, p. 370; Sefer HaEshkol of R. Avraham b. Isaac Av Bet Din of Narbonne, ed. Albeck, I, 158 (ed. Auerbach, II, 47), and the parallels listed by the editor; Otsar HaGeonim, Berakhot, "Commentaries," 91, and the parallels which Lewin lists; the words of R. Samuel b. Hofni quoted in the commentary of Radak to I Samuel 28:24 (cf. Otsar HaGeonim, Hagigah, "Responsa," 2–5).

15. As, for example, in Otsar HaGeonim, Berakhot, ibid.

16. In the Fifth Approach of his two Introductions. Incidentally, we can detect a belittling attitude (certainly following in the footsteps of the geonim quoted earlier) toward certain midrashim of Hazal and aggadot. (Cf., for example, the Short Commentary to Exodus 2:10 fin. and 13:18 fin.; Weiser, II, 241–2 and 265–6).

17. Such as that the rabbinic interpretation is the opinion of an individual (divrei yahid); cf. Gen. 40:8 and elsewhere.


19. Whose source, according to those exegetes cited above, is in the words of the Talmud ein mikra yotse midei peshuto.

20. See T.B. Sanhedrin 34a; cf. Shabbat 88b. The verses mentioned in the Talmud as implying the multiple meanings of biblical texts are (in addition to the aforementioned verse from Ps. 62:12) Jer. 23:29 (see below p. 46 and n. 21) and Ps. 68:12.

21. This is the text in our printed edition of Rashi, as it was in the Venice (1524–5) edition. In most MSS which J. Rosenthal used in his critical edition of Rashi to Shir HaShirim (Sefer HaYovel likhved S. K. Mirsky, [N.Y., 1958], 130ff.) the text reads ein lekha mikra yotsei midei peshuto umashma'o. Presumably, in such a case, peshuto and mashma'o are identical (cf. S. Kamin, op. cit., above n. 9, 84). It is clear from the continuation of Rashi's words that he does not refer with his comment to the traditional distinction between peshat and derash, but to the contrast between the overt meaning and the allegory, i.e., the explanation of Hazal that Shir HaShirim is an allegory for the relationship of the Holy One Blessed be He to Israel. We have quoted his words in their context because he explicitly connects the two statements "a verse does not entirely depart from its simple meaning" and "a single verse may have several meanings" which are cited separately in the Talmud. The combination of these two exegetical principles appears also in Rashi's responsa (ed. Elfenbein, no. 251, p. 259), "The word of our Creator is like a hammer which shatters the rock, having several meanings [cf. Sanhedrin 34a and n. 20 above], but a verse never departs from its plain sense." Compare RaN (R. Nissim b. Reuven; 14th century; Spain) in his novellae to Sanhedrin 27b, "It is possible to say that a verse does not depart from its simple meaning because the simple meaning of the verse (Aramaic: pashteh dikera) (Deut. 24:16) is that fathers should not die for the guilt of sons, and its midrash, that they should not die by the testimony of sons, and one verse may have several meanings. . . ." (Compare Ramban to Lev. 27:29).

22. Even Ibn Ezra is occasionally at fault in this regard, as are several of the Aharonim [post-1500 exegetes]. Compare the words of S.Y. Finn in his evaluation of the approach of the GRA (R. Eliyahu Gaon; 18th century; Lithuania) in his interpretation of Scripture (Kiryah Ne'emanah [Vilna, 1874], 153–4), "Our master taught us a major principle that we need not toil in vain to find a source in peshat for all the derashot of Hazal, and that we ought not 'twist the straight' as many learned men have done, who, out of zeal for the honor of Hazal, have devoted themselves to assimilating to peshat, by force, even those derashot which are most remote from it."


Up to-date bibliography and summary can be found at the beginning of Y.D. Gilat’s essay “The Midrash of Texts in the Post-Talmudic Period,” Mikhtam leDavid: Memorial Volume for R. David Ochs, z.1. (Ramat Gan, 1978), 210 ff.

25. Ibn Ezra’s expression in his Introduction to Lamentations.

26. This conclusion is in agreement with contemporary scholarly consensus regarding the relationship between halakhah and derashah. It admits of the existence of two types of derashot: 1) such as formed the halakhot and 2) such as were intended only to attach the traditional halakhah to a verse of Scripture. Scholars disagree as to the source of the difference between the derashot.


28. R. Joshua Boaz b. Simon Baruch (16th century, Italy) in his commentary to RIF, Shitei HaGibborim, Avodah Zarah Chapter I (Vilna edition, 6a) explains similarly: “He responded to him, ‘I am expounding a verse by derash.’ That is to say, ‘I also know that he died, but I intend to apply derash to Scripture where it ought to be expounded in that fashion.’ And if it is impossible for the midrash to be taken literally, there is a message (remez) in it that he did not die, as the Rabbis say, ‘The righteous even in their deaths are alive,’ for their names, memories and deeds live forever.”

29. Rashi, following Hasid, interprets the blessing of Judah to mean “You withdrew from the preying upon my son (teref-beni); Rashbam, following the cantillation which separates teref from beni, insists that the verse be translated, “You have arisen, my son, from the prey.”

30. Not only for pedagogical reasons. How can we decide whether what we have before us is tradition or an independent interpretation? When have we an individual view and when a dominant opinion? The other reasons, too, are prone to entirely subjective analysis.

31. We include such attitudes as those of the geonim (above n. 14) and the exegetes in whose views a disparaging approach toward those and other aggadot can be discerned; e.g., that the words are not received tradition (kabbalah), but an independent explanation which a sage offered on his own; they are the opinion of an individual (see above, n. 17); the intent of the words was “to grant respite to a weakened soul” (Ibn Ezra in his “ordinary” Introduction, Fourth Approach; cf. also his Introduction of Lamentations); or “to magnify and strengthen Torah” (R. Yosef Kara [11th century; northern France] to I Samuel 1:17) and other similar expressions, particularly apud Ibn Ezra.

32. This is not to say that our approach to a scriptural text should be no different from that to a literary or historical text.

33. There is, unfortunately, not much methodological material in this area, but both teachers and laymen can derive a good deal of benefit from I. Heinemann, The Methods of the Aggadah (Jerusalem, 1954), from the large amount of material collected in the various works of Professor Nehama Leibowitz, and, of course, from the various commentators on the aggadah (such as the commentaries on the aggadot in the Babylonian Talmud which are included in the Ein Yaakov) and on Rashi’s commentary to the Torah (particularly the Gur Aryeh of the Maharal of Prague).

34. The large majority of them are in the legal portion of the Torah.

35. The explanation, “the verse is only an asmakhta” may not be used in an arbitrary fashion everywhere. We have already noted that many derashot derive from exact observation of the language of the verse.

36. In latter generations, the GRA proceeded with a similar approach (cf., e.g., M.M. Kasher, op. cit. above n. 11, 302–3. Incidentally, on p. 303, the author is imprecise; the words of S.Y. Finn, cited above n. 22, are not words “in the name of the GRA,” but Finn’s conclusion from the commentary of the GRA).

37. The commentary of Rashbam to the beginning of Genesis (Bereshit through Lekh Lekha) is not found in the standard mikraot gedolot. It is printed, however, in two editions of Perush HaTorah leRashbam (D. Rosin, Breslau, 1888 and reprints, and A.Y. Bromberg, Tel Aviv, 1965).


39. I.e., where he does not suggest another interpretation in place of the one received in the sources (and generally adduced by Rashi).

40. Almost all our classical exegetes agree on this. It appears that even Ramban in his Criticisms of Rambam’s Sefer HaMitsvot, Principle Two did not intend to say that all
halakhic derashot conform to the criteria accepted by us (and by Ramban) for the exegesis of a text.

41. Even though these midrashim did not stand up to the criteria of peshat which Ibn Ezra established elsewhere in his commentary. It is possible, of course, that the exegencies of the times were the cause, but that is another subject. Also, some of our later exegetes who set out to refute the attacks on the exegesis of Hazal were often quite forced in their reconciliations of scriptural texts. As usual, “Love impairs reason” (Ahavah mekalkelet et hashurah).

42. It appears that the “contradictions” between halakhic peshat and derash raise greater problems than those between aggadic peshat and derash for two fundamental reasons: first, halakhah has accepted determinative principles, and, as a result, any simple sense interpretation from which there derives a conclusion opposed to the received halakhah requires explanation. On the other hand, when peshat opposes the aggadah, one can always claim that even in the opinion of our Sages this view was not accepted as authoritative. Second, in the aggadic portion one can generally reconcile contradictions between peshat and derash through the assertion that the derash is formulated in figurative language which is not to be taken at face value. This is not true of the halakhic material in which “the meaning is what the words say” (devarim kemashma ‘am). Of course, in the halakhic material as well there is no need to say that a simple-sense interpretation which differs from the midrash halakhah will be in opposition to the halakhah (cf., e.g., Rashbam to Ex. 21:28 with the rabbinic interpretation brought by Rashi. And see the words of RaN regarding Deut. 24:16 [cited n. 21 above]).

43. Compare Copperman, op. cit. above n. 8, 61–75. Copperman touches upon this question alongside of a more general one, namely, what is the religious (and practical) meaning of peshat interpretations in the halakhic portions of the Torah? We may note in passing that in Cooperman’s book there are treatments of several issues which have been considered in this essay, and of other important matters pertinent to our subject which have not been dealt with here. Although in certain areas there is room for respectful disagreement, Copperman’s words are worth careful reading. See M. Arend, “Peshuto She! Mikra and Halakhic Probability—Remarks on Rabbi Y. Copperman’s Essay,” HaMa’ayan 15:1 (1975), 59–63).

44. Because of this difficulty, many scholars have sought to distinguish between the right to explain the Biblical text in a way which differs from the explanation of Hazal, and in a way which contradicts it. Rather interesting in this connection are the words of Moshe Mendelssohn in his Introduction to the Be‘ur. “It has been our rule to distinguish between ‘contradictory’ and ‘alternative’ matter, for alternative matter can be simulaneously correct and true, and therefore in any place where the way of peshat only turns from and alternates with the derash, but does not oppose it, a verse does not depart from its simple meaning, and let the derashah be extracted. . . . But if the approach which seems to us to be peshuto shel mikra contradicts and opposes the received derashah which is transmitted to us by Hazal, such that it is impossible that both can be correct, for the contradictory is precluded, then it is incumbent on us to go in the way of derash, and to translate the text according to it, because we have only the traditions of our Sages, z.l, and in their light can we see light.” Our classical exegetes, at least, made no such distinction, and permitted themselves to interpret the text according to its simple meaning, even when the peshat contradicts and opposes the derash. It is a different question to what degree it is right to prefer in schools, at different levels of learning, halakhic exegesis which stands in opposition to that which is transmitted in halakhic sources. See Y. Maori, with the cooperation of A. Aaronson and S. Goldschmidt, “On the Teaching of the Halakhic Material of the Torah in State Religious Schools” (Department of Education and Culture, Center for Curricula, Jerusalem, 1973).

45. Copperman, op. cit., 15, notes correctly that from a pedagogical standpoint it is better that a student should first make contact with peshat interpretations “opposed” to halakhah precisely through the commentary of Rashi. We should add that in halakhic material, where we present a simple-sense interpretation, it is important to bring to the students’ attention the traditional midrash halakhah, as well.

46. Nehama Leibowitz has already commented on them in her lectures and study sheets.

47. Compare, for example, Ramban to Gen. 37:15.