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THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF THE *PESHAT**

I

Like poetry and prose, *peshat* and *derash* are not opposites that are distinguishable from each other with utter clarity. Rather, they are two poles of a single continuum. In every act of exegesis there is some encounter between the exegete and the text, and every interpretation is the product of their mutual relations. The distinction between *peshat* and *derash* lies in the different weight given to the two components of interpretive activity. The interpreter by way of *peshat* must transform his personality and what he knows from elsewhere into an instrument for eliciting what is actually in the text, while the interpreter by way of *derash* may enrich the text with what he brings with him, or with what he reveals between the lines.

The *pashtan*, attentively listening to the text and striving for objectivity, is bewildered at what he sees as the confident subjectivism of the *darshan*. He is inclined to thrust at him the words of Rabbi Ishmael to his colleague Rabbi Eliezer: "You are saying to Scripture, 'Be silent, while I make a *derash*!'" The *darshan*, on the other hand, seeking to give voice to the verses out of an intimate relationship with them, fears that there is nothing in the *pashtan's* objectivism but

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spiritual indifference and lack of creativity. He would incline to identify with the response uttered by Rabbi Eliezer: “You are a mountain palm!” (whose fruit is so meager that it may not be brought as *bikkurim*).¹ Yet, woe to the *pashtan* who completely effaces himself before the text, and woe to the *darshan* who completely silences it. The former would deplete his *peshat* interpretations of all living meaning, and the latter would drain his *derashot* of their status as an interpretation of Scripture.

The *peshat*'s claim to lay bare the actual sense of the text lies in the rigorous method it employs. Accordingly, Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra did well to characterize *peshat* as the “straight” (that is, correct) explanation that “by the cords of grammar is bound/and fit in the eyes of knowledge is found.”² He means to say that it is bound by the rules of grammar and rhetoric on the one hand and by critical reasoning and logic on the other. Midrashic striving after the multiple meanings of the text and for solutions to questions of the hour, however, is more or less liberated from these two constraints, as it rests on intuitive certainty and unmediated contact. The method it employs is incomparably free: interpretive strategies are variegated and subject to change and combination; rules of language and rhetoric are flexible; when evidence is wanting, a mere foothold will do; and it is permitted to sail far beyond the limits of everyday reason. Truth to tell, by dint of the fact that philological standards change and the subjective factor fluctuates—which must necessarily occur with all matters of reasoned opinion—it is all too frequent that interpretations once presented as *peshat* have been rejected later as *derash*. Nevertheless, the boundary between *peshat* exegetes and *derash* exegetes is firm and solid, owing especially to the high methodological consciousness that compels the *pashtan* to put exegetical inquiry always ahead of expounding a lesson. *Peshat* exegetes are obliged to maintain a clear distinction between the question, “What precisely does the text say?” and the question, “What does the text come to teach us?” and to preserve a gap between them lest premature application distort exegesis. It is the glory of *peshat* interpreters that they shun arbitrary interpretation and stand guard against pressing spiritual demands, which are apt to twist the line of truth. But this is also their weak point: they insist on the truth at the price of diminishing their message.

The *darshan* may never rest content with merely interpreting the words of the text; he must dare to make it speak out. When he does it well, he becomes a partner in the creative process: “Even that which a veteran student will one day teach in the presence of his rabbi has already been said to Moses at Sinai” (Talmud Yerushalmi, *Pe'ah* 2:4). Such a creative partnership cannot properly develop within the

narrow domain of a confining method (“One cannot argue rigorously with *derash*”), for such mighty bridging over the abyss of time cannot often be done unless the grip of the past is loosened. These two aspects of midrashic exegesis were analyzed and illuminated by Isaac Heinemann as “creative philology” and “creative historiography.”³

The *pashtan*’s freedom is essentially intellectual. By virtue of his understanding and on the strength of his exegetical principles he may sometimes permit himself to assert that a certain part of the tradition is not anchored in the text. The *darshan*’s freedom, however, is essentially artistic. By virtue of his own inspiration and organic continuity of the generations he will sometimes dare to rewrite Scripture by the device of *al tikrei* (“Do not read [x but rather y]”) and to convert the past into the present on the model of “Esau = Rome.” Accordingly, the criteria of *peshat* exegesis are its methodological credibility, the measure of its correctness and its illuminative power. The criteria of midrashic exegesis, however, are its poetic truth, its wealth of ideas and its spiritual power.

This much is certain: Even if we cannot always reach agreement on whether a particular interpretation of a verse is *derash* or *peshat*, there is a firm fundamental distinction between these two modes of exegesis. *Derash* is not *peshat* that has missed the mark, just as labelling an interpretation *peshat* does not determine its correctness. We have here two different methods, each one of which demands its own truth-standard. Clearly an interpretation that has not met the criteria of one method has not by this negative fact met the criteria of the other. Yet, unfounded *peshat* is commonly put down as “only *derash*” just as convincing *derash* is often praised as “the actual *peshat* of the text” (*omek peshuto shel mikra*). Even though there are, of course, some true points of contact between the two methods, this misleading rhetoric had best be avoided, for not only do we by this endow *peshat* with pride of place, we challenge the very legitimacy of *derash* as a method of exegesis.

II

The advantages of *derash* for the life of Torah and *mitsvot* are many and weighty. The nature of halakhic midrash as “legal interpretation” that is necessary for any legal system has been superbly presented by E. M. Lifschitz in his inspired monograph on Rashi.⁴ Whereas “exegetical interpretation”—that is, *peshat*—strives to understand a specific law in its first usage on the basis of linguistic probability and in the light of historical circumstances, “legal interpretation” strives to explicate the law according to its current binding meaning on the

basis of its conformity with other written laws and the interpretations and decisions of the oral tradition. One cannot attain harmonization and actualization without relying on linguistic and stylistic manipulations that extend the communicative power of the text beyond what is reasonably expressed by “ordinary language” (*leshon benei adam*).⁵ This departure from the limits of *peshat*, however, is balanced, in his view, by the third feature of “legal interpretation”: objectivization, achieved by forgoing considerations of exegetical reasonableness—which are, in the end, subjective enough, as the radical differences of opinion among the *peshat* interpreters themselves attest—relying instead on the binding results of the current judicial ruling.⁶ In the eyes of a sitting judge the words of the law have been freed from their historical meaning and have taken on independent life in the light of which he must render a decision. Hence, the current meaning of the words—present in the text only in potential—is favored and preceding interpretation is overcome through firmly trusting in that which the spirit of the law requires for the present situation. Such exegesis is entirely legitimate on the level of legal interpretation; but it is very problematic for the *peshat* exegete.⁷ We shall return to this question below.

Whoever compares the Torah commentary of Rashi—who combines with his non-rigorous *peshat* reasonable *derash* that is compatible with it—to the exclusively *peshat* commentaries of Rashbam and Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra senses at once the contrast between the abundance of thought and feeling in the former over against the dry mundaneness of the latter. One modest example will suffice. On the words “and they brought it down to us” (Deut. 1:25) which Moses said about the spies, Rashi brings the delightful midrash from the *Sifre*—“This teaches that the Land of Israel is higher than all the lands,” a midrash whose hold on the consciousness and daily language of the Jewish people is still strong today. From the silence of the Rashbam on this it would be best not to draw any conclusions. Ibn Ezra offers the topographical-geographical explanation, which is correct but prosaic: “. . . and the truth is—it is because they were in the Negev.” Similarly, Rashi adduces Midrash Tanhuma concerning Dathan and Abiram’s sharp refusal “We shall not go up” (Num. 16:12). This is Rashi’s formulation: “Their own mouth defeated them, since for them there is only going down.” Their sin is thus tied to their punishment on the assumption that “they made a prophecy without realizing it.” This connection receives corroboration later on in the text: “They and all that was theirs *went down* live into Sheol” (v. 32). Yet even here Ibn Ezra offers a topographical solution—“The Tent of Meeting [to which they were summoned by Moses] was probably in a high location in the

camp”—and, alternatively, a stylistic one—“or, whoever goes to worship God or to the chosen site is called ‘one who goes up’ (an *oleh*)” (v. 12). Rashbam opts for the second alternative and buttresses it with convincing arguments: “. . . ‘going up’ is regularly employed of going to the judges: ‘And his sister-in-law will go up to the city-gate’ (Deut. 25:7); ‘The Israelites went up to [Deborah] for judgment’ (Judg. 4:5); ‘And Boaz went up to the city-gate’ (Ruth 4:1).” The aggadic midrash, then, endows these words with an additional expressive dimension while the *peshat* exegetes feel obliged to establish their meaning on the informational plane alone. The fact that Rashi’s commentary has earned him pre-eminence among Torah interpreters attests to the great educational and spiritual significance that generations of Jews have attached to the *derashot* that became the possession of all thanks to their inclusion in his commentary.

The drawing power of *derash* is also fed, in a negative way, by the hidden, and sometimes explicit, fears of *peshat*. First of all, one might be put off by a rigorous method that on principle compels us to reject any interpretation—no matter how dear to our hearts—that cannot stand up to its strict criteria. Whereas the *darshan* is rewarded well for his interpretative creativeness (*derisha*), the *peshat* exegete must all too often rest content with the reward of restraint (*perisha*). The former is afraid of vacuum and seeks to fill it,⁸ while the latter must be on constant guard against over-interpretation, even if his reticence brings bitter disappointment to his readers.

We shall illustrate this with two examples. On the text “Jacob was greatly afraid, and it distressed him” (Gen. 32:8), Rashi adduces a midrash from the Tanhuma that articulates, I think, the essence of the Jewish ethics of warfare: “‘He was afraid’—lest he be killed, ‘and it distressed him’—lest he have to kill others.” Rashi does not designate this interpretation as *derash*, and those who study him correctly deduce that the intention of the double phrasing in the text is, in his opinion, to teach about the two different fears that filled Jacob’s heart. Not one of the *peshat* exegetes, however, from Rashbam to S. D. Luzzatto, relates to this doubling and accordingly does not need this midrash in order to explain it. The only exception is Radak, who opens his interpretation with a *peshat* explanation—“Doubling of the meaning with different words, to [indicate] the extent of [Jacob’s] fear”—and joins the midrash to it, as an additional dimension, designating it as *derash*. There is no doubt that the silence of the commentators stems from their agreement with the stylistic perception to which Radak gave expression: under the circumstances related in the story, doubled language indicates the extent of the fear and nothing more. Thus, stylistic and psychological considerations undermine the textual basis on which an interpreta-

tion of such great moral significance stands, depriving it of the status and force of *peshuto shel mikra*—the *peshat*. Clearly the weight of such deprivation is greater the stronger our dedication to *peshat*.

Now the second example. For many years I had thought, in my naiveté, that the accepted interpretation of “We shall do and we shall listen” (Exod. 24:7)—according to which our ancestors pledged in the Sinai Covenant to perform the *mitsvot* even before understanding them—is perfect *peshat*. (The stem *sh-m-* in the Bible also has the sense of “understanding,” as in “so that they could not understand [*yishme’u*] each other’s language” [Gen. 11:7].) And when I first saw a completely different interpretation in the commentary of Rashbam, I felt a certain rancor toward him for having the nerve to rob the *peshat* of so valuable a part of the Jewish faith. Some years later I found that the accepted interpretation, which appears in many midrashim, is not adduced by a single *peshat* exegete, including Rashi (evidently influenced by Onkelos, who rendered “We shall do and we shall accept”). In fact, one can sustain it only by wrenching the words “We shall do and we shall listen” out of their narrative context and setting them up as an independent, timeless general assertion that does not relate to a specific historical pledge. Regarded as Oral Torah, of course, the proposition loses none of its force; but it cannot be denied that its foundation in the Written Torah has been weakened by the exegetical determination of the *peshat* interpreters. By their alternative explanations or their silence they convey something like what Luzzatto wrote concerning the midrashic exegesis of Targum Jonathan and Rashi to Isa. 5:18: “This is a fine and true lesson, but it is not what this verse means.”

You will say: there are seventy faces to the Torah, and when one interpretation cannot be considered to be the *peshat*, it is still anchored in the text through *derash*. This answer is valid only in the eyes of exegetes like Rashi and Ramban for whom the power of *derash* is as strong as the power of *peshat*.¹⁰ But that is not the case for such “pursuers of *peshat*” as ibn Ezra and Ralbag, who for all intents and purposes neutralized the exegetical force of *derashot* by viewing them as no more than prooftexts for the halakhot transmitted by tradition.¹¹ Rambam did not go to the extreme they did, but he honored laws based upon *peshat* as *mitsvot mi-de-oraita*, relegating what was derived by the thirteen principles of exegesis of Rabbi Yishma’el to *mitsvot de-rabbanan*, even though “they themselves explicitly stated that this is the Torah itself [*guf torah*] or that this is *de-oraita*” (*Sefer ha-Mitzvot, shorsh 2*). The controversy on this issue is complex and involved, and so it must suffice for us to delineate the following paradox. So rigorous a *peshat* exegete as ibn Ezra, for whom *derash* is no more than a non-philological prooftext,

follows on principle in the legal part of the Torah the traditional halakhic interpretation, feeling obliged to show that it can be harmonized with the *peshat* of the text; Rashi, who views *derash* as a reliable, cogent exegetical method, is not too diffident to admit on occasion to the gap between the traditional halakhah and the *peshat*, since this gap is bridged by means of *derash*. In any event, it takes great fortitude to go the way of Rashbam, who adheres to the *peshat* with utter consistency, completely confident that the *midrash halakhah* will not be undermined by the opposing *peshat* because pride of place is granted to the midrash from the outset: “the *derashot* are primary,” “a halakhah uproots [i.e., takes precedence over the *peshat* of] Scripture.”¹²

Whereas the *darshan* can uphold the *peshat* as one of the many faces of the Torah, it is not easy for the *peshat* exegete to recognize the legitimacy of *derash*. *Derash* is generous, and all it denies is the *peshat*'s claim to exclusivity; however, the persistent quest for a single, *peshat*, truth can only with difficulty be reconciled with a recognition of the validity of another method. Different *derashot* on one verse complement each other since “These and those are the words of the Living God”; but different *peshat* interpretations cancel each other. A dispute among *darshanim* enhances the Torah, while a dispute among *peshat* exegetes increases confusion because it places the burden of judgment on the reader.¹³ The way of *peshat* strives for certainty, but it is in fact riddled with doubts that are not resolved¹⁴ and with problems to which there is no traditional response.¹⁵ It is precisely the *peshat* interpreter, who trusts in the power of knowledge, who is driven to utter “I don't know.” Characteristic in this regard is ibn Ezra's acerbic rejection of Rav Saadia Gaon's identifications of nationalities, toponyms, fauna, and minerals in his *Tafsir*: “He has no tradition [of interpretation] . . . and he has already erred in some of them, as I shall explain *ad locum*. We should not, then, rely on his fantasies. Perhaps he did thus for the honor of God's name since he translated the Torah into Arabic language and script, so that they will not say that there are in the Torah *mitsvot* that we do not know” (commentary to Gen. 2:11). Indeed, it is not only to Gentiles that it is hard to admit to our limited understanding of the Torah; it is even harder to admit it to ourselves.¹⁶ The Torah of the midrashists is harmonious and uplifting while that of the *peshat* exegetes is, to a greater or lesser extent, cut with pain.

This and more. In addition to philology, *peshat* is also bound by realism. Just as the *peshat* exegete assumes that the Bible's language is subordinated to the rules of grammar and the manner of discourse of “ordinary language” [*leshon benei adam*], so does he relate to the personalities of the Bible as to ordinary people, examining that which

is related in it in light of his own familiarity with reality and life experience. This realism the Rashbam calls “expertise in how people conduct themselves” [*beki’ut derekh erets shel benei adam*] (commentary to Lev. 13:2). It is clearly reflected in the exegetical use that Rashbam made of his knowledge about bowmanship in order to explain “And his bow remained firm” (Gen. 49:24); and in ibn Ezra’s turning to “Arab custom” [*minhag ha-yishme’elim*] to elucidate the background of the prohibition of seething a kid in its mother’s milk (shorter commentary to Exod. 23:19), or to his own life-experience with Jewish-Gentile relations to clarify the derision of the Servant of the Lord: “It is well known that there are many nations in the world who think that Jews are made differently from other creatures and ask: Does the Jew have a mouth or an eye? So [is it] in the land of ‘Ishmael’ and ‘Edom’” (commentary to Isa. 52:14).

Nowadays the study of Biblical realia has expanded and ramified to far-reaching extents, and the *peshat* exegete is not limited to drawing analogies to the past from the present and to the laws of the nations against which the Torah speaks from the customs of one’s neighbors. Nevertheless, the ever-increasing possibilities of realistic interpretation also increase its problems. *Darshanim* did not all interpret the patriarchs typologically (wresting from them their individual personalities) and idealize the heroes of Israel (exempting them from human weakness and sin)¹⁷; and *peshat* exegetes did not all adopt a consistently realistic approach to the patriarchs, who should serve as models for the generations of Israel.¹⁸ But in this area the latter are far more disadvantaged than the former. Whereas the midrashists are free to choose texts and to combine, without compunctions, realistic with symbolic argument, *peshat* commentators must relate to the entire unit and present comprehensive interpretations that stand on a unified plane of relation and rest on a single and unified method. Therefore, when the *peshat* exegete feels pressed, for theological reasons or pedagogical needs, to cover up the sin of an exemplary character, he has no recourse but to compromise his customary methodological standards or to depart from his usual guidelines of what is realistic. Such contamination of the *peshat* enterprise occurs for the most part unwittingly, but whoever notices it bitterly recoils from it as an “apologetic excuse” whose damage to the credibility of the commentary is severe.¹⁹

The shunning of apologetics, which is characteristic of the contemporary *peshat* exegete, and the intensification of the realistic outlook through numerous scientific discoveries, place us today before the opposite danger: hyper-realism. For as much as realism is able to give life to Biblical personalities and events, it also tends to reduce them to our own dimensions. In his caution against idealiza-

tion the exegete is liable to be caught in standardization, to blur the one-time greatness of a marvelous person or a sublime situation. By eschewing otherworldly spirituality too much, he is apt to cling to complete banality, forcing on the Bible a level of expectation that is derived from his own secular existence. The golden mean between these two dangers is not always apparent, and discretion is often left to the exegete. Behind this subjective factor, however, there is a wide area of agreement as to what may be taken as concrete reality and as plausible event. Thus, for example, a *peshat* exegete may not resort to any form of metaphorizing that would detract from the gruesomeness of the wish, "Happy is he who takes hold of your little ones and dashes them against the rock" (Ps. 137:9).²⁰ Similarly, the repulsive concreteness of David's delivering two hundred Philistine foreskins to Saul as a bride-price is far more terrible to us than it was to the *peshat* exegetes who lived in the diaspora. Their realistic, commonsensical approach led them to stress as much as possible the natural and rational elements in the Bible's description of miracles and to avoid having to acknowledge the historicity of those that were not expressly mentioned.²¹ But their approach did not cause them to doubt the reality of a report like the one related in 2 Chron. 13:17, according to which no fewer than half a million northern soldiers died in the war between King Abiah of Judah and King Jeroboam ben Nebat of Israel. The *peshat* exegete must uphold the actuality of certain passages in spite of the grave evaluative difficulties that stem from this actuality, and he must suspect the historical reality of other passages in spite of the challenge to faith that is entailed by this doubt. Such is the *peshat's* power over the exegete!

III

If the *peshat* that was established by Jewish Bible savants in the Middle Ages is so problematic, the scientific *peshat* that was developed by non-Jewish scholars is all the more so. Indeed, whereas from Rav Saadia Gaon to Rabbi Isaac Abravanel Biblical exegesis in the *peshat* mode was carried out by Jewish scholars, in the modern era pre-eminence has distinctly passed to Christian scholars. As a result of this protracted neglect of *peshat*, we face today a highly refined and ramified Biblical scholarship that is gentile in most of its assumptions and perspectives and that is not infrequently hostile to Judaism and Israel in its approach and conclusions. Even liberal Protestant scholars with an extremely critical approach generally share the basic Christian assumption that the "New Testament" is superior to the Hebrew Bible, which only prefigures it. This funda-

mental assumption of the moral, spiritual, and religious superiority of the "New Testament" imposes a more or less negative attitude onto the scholar who is caught almost automatically in the simplistic confrontation between the letter of the law and the duty of the heart, justice and love, ethnic particularism and universal message, and the like. Yehezkel Kaufmann succeeded in alerting us to the vagaries and distortions in understanding fundamental issues in the Bible that stemmed from this Christianizing perspective (of which the scholar is not always aware and which in principle contradicts the historical approach, which is supposed to distinguish carefully between early and late and to avoid measuring the earlier by the standards of the later). *Peshat* exegesis was taken up again among the Jews only with the Emancipation and national revival and could not but take on the character of a reaction to Christian Bible scholarship without any possibility of directly linking up with the classical Jewish exegesis that left itself far behind. In consequence of this break, we shall have to forbear another long era.

The great achievement of the new Bible scholarship is in its tremendous expansion of philological, historical, and literary knowledge, as well as in its methodological refinement. However, the rewards of such a great systematization are liable to turn to losses when the development of method becomes an end in itself. When this happens the text is shunted into a corner, and the passion to innovate engenders guesswork that hangs by a thread and hollow argumentation. The boundary between real and imaginary problems is often quite thin. And at the scholar's door there lies in wait the temptation to seek pegs on which to hang his pseudo-scientific *derashot*. When a true scholar wants to find more than there really is in the Scriptures, in order to span the huge gaps in our historical knowledge or in order to find a basis for an appealing theory, we find an outward similarity to *derash*. Our curiosity about the Biblical period is great, and our aspiration to achieve a comprehensive theoretical synthesis is strong, but the hard information we can extract from the Bible and from its contextual world is extremely little. In the face of this crying disproportion it should be no wonder that so many results of Biblical criticism cannot be regarded as established, seeing as a great deal of conclusion rests on a little bit of Bible. Yehezkel Kaufmann called such research "scientific poetry"; others label it "scientific *derash*." The opposition between "poetry" and "*derash*" on the one hand and the adjective "scientific" on the other is so striking that their conjunction is perforce ironic. Nevertheless, when poets, storytellers, and philosophers expand what the text conveys in order to bridge the gap of time between them and the text and to find in it vital relevance to a contemporary existential problem, we have here a real case of

