

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093 718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

Parashat Beshalah Part IIIA On Interpreting Midrash, General Remarks

In their comments on Moses' raising his hands in the battle with Amalek (Exod. 17:8-13) the Tannaitic sages illustrate their unwillingness to accept a Torah passage literally when it conflicted with their sense of logic and common sense. They ask in the usually legalistic Mishnah: וְכִי יָרָדוּ שָׁל מִשָּׁה עוֹשׂוֹת מִלְחָמָה אוֹ שׁוֹבְרוֹת מִלְחָמָה (Is it Moses' hands that make the war or break the war? [*m. Rosh. Hash. 3:8*]). Of course not! Although the Torah teaches that on occasion G-d overrides the rules of nature and performs a miracle, when doing so He abides by "rational" standards. The miracle is not casual or random, it fits into the natural order, it is not performed for trivial purposes, it suits the overall context and accomplishes G-d's stated objective. He does not do things that do not make sense to the human observers. According to the sages, to explain that the battle would fluctuate according to Moses' raising and lowering his hands does not meet what they believe are G-d's criteria for performing a miracle. Hence, they interpreted the passage allegorically.

That discussion concerned a biblical passage. Surely the principle that guided the sages in interpreting Torah passages should apply to interpreting their own statements!

In this study we will address the subject of rabbinic Midrash and Aggadah (the latter term usually designated for talmudic "midrashim") in the light of five of the leading authorities of the late Gaonic period and that of the early *rishonim*, the tenth through the twelfth centuries. They are not in agreement with each other on all points but they contain a common denominator regarding Midrash and Aggadah. We will excerpt several relevant statements from them. In the second section we will survey a cross-section of *midrashim* and *aggadot* drawn from the Talmud and classical compendiums of

this material restricting ourselves to those associated with *Parashat Beshalah*. It is our intention to point out that it is often clear from a careful reading of them that the authors did not intend their words to be interpreted literally.

Rab Sherira Gaon (906–1006, head of the Pumbedita Academy) wrote: "Those points brought out from scriptural verses called Midrash and Aggadah are assumptions. Some are accurate – such as Rabbi Judah's statement that Simeon's portion was included in that of Judah, for we find it corroborated in the book of Joshua – but many are not... We abide by the principle, "According to his intelligence is a man commended" (Prov. 12:8). As to the aggadot of the students' students – Rabbi Tanhuma, Rabbi Osh'aya, and others – most of them [the realities] are not as they expounded. Accordingly we do not rely on aggadot. The correct ones of them are those supported by intelligence and by Scripture. There is no end to aggadot" (*Sefer Ha'eshcol, Hilkhos Sefer Torah*, p. 60a).

Rab Hai Gaon, son of Sherira (939–1038, head of the Pumbedita Academy): "Aggadah and Midrash, even concerning those written in the Talmud, if they do not work out properly and if they are mistaken, they are not to be relied upon, for the rule is, we do not rely on Aggadah. However, regarding what is ensconced in the Talmud, if we find a way to remove its errors and strengthen it, we should do so, for if there were not some lesson to be derived it would not have been incorporated. Concerning what is not in the Talmud, we investigate – if correct and proper we expound and teach it and if not we pay no attention to it" (*Sefer Ha'eshcol, Hilkhos Sefer Torah*, p. 60a).

Rab Hai Gaon also stated: "You should know that aggadic statements are not like those of *shemu'a*

(“heard,” a passed-down statement). Rather, they are cases of each individual expounding what came to his mind, in the nature of ‘it can be said,’ not a decisive matter. Accordingly we do not rely on them” (Comments on *b. Hagigah*).

Rab Shemuel ben Ḥofni Gaon (960–c.1034, head of the Sura Academy), in his *Introduction to the Talmud* (published at the end of *Masekhet Berakhot*, erroneously attributed to Shemuel Hanagid, translated and abridged by Rab Shemuel ben Ḥanania in the 12th century), stated: “Aggadah constitutes all the explanations in the Talmud on any subject that does not refer to a misvah. You do not learn from them except what seems acceptable to the mind...Concerning the expounding on scriptural verses, each [sage] expounded what chanced to him and what he saw in his mind, so what is acceptable to the mind we learn from and the rest we do not rely upon.”

Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164) in his Bible commentary often alludes to the importance of recognizing the inapplicability of *midrash* to understanding the intention of the Torah. For example, concerning the variant between the two Decalogue passages in the Torah, wherein one states “*zakhor* (remember) the Shabbat day to keep it holy” while the other has “*shamor* (observe) the Shabbat day to keep it holy,” he comments:

...the sages said זָכוֹר וְשָׁמֹר בְּדָבוֹר אֶחָד נִאֶמְרוּ, that “*zakhor* and *shamor* were said in the same pronouncement” (*b. Shebu*. 20b)...Heaven forbid saying that they did not speak correctly for our minds are meager in comparison to their minds, but people of our generation think that their words were intended to be taken literally which is not the case...It is not possible that *zakhor* and *shamor* were uttered simultaneously except as a miracle, but we must admit that even so there is a question, why was it not written *zakhor v'shamor* in both the first and second formulation? And what about those other verses [of Decalogue variants], were they also said simultaneously...? Why did the sages not mention those, for they are more astonishing, how can they even miraculously be uttered at once, many verses whose meaning is not the same as is the case with the two words *zakhor* and *shamor*?...And in the first formulation Hashem did not say “that it should be well with

you,” so did He simultaneously say it and not say it?...And [concerning reversed sequence] did He simultaneously utter a statement one way and also the opposite way?

The mind cannot bear the thought of such literal interpretations...for every miracle Hashem performed through Moses there is some remote resemblance in reality that the intelligent will understand, but this claim that Hashem spoke *zakhor* and *shamor* at one instant is so amazing that it would be more fitting to be written in the Torah than all the other wonders and miracles that were written...And if we say Hashem’s speech is not like human speech, how could Israel have understood Hashem’s words? For if a person hears *zakhor* and *shamor* at the same instant he would not understand either. Even one word like *zakhor*, if he does not hear the *zayin* before the *khaf* and they before the *resh* he would not understand what the speaker is saying...if we say it was a miracle that *zakhor* and *shamor* were uttered at the same time, how did the ear hear them? If we say that also was a miracle...why did the sages not mention that miracle, a greater one than speaking two words at the same time?...

The explanation is that when Hashem uttered *zakhor* (to remember the Shabbat day) everybody understood it means in order to observe it, so [in Deuteronomy] Moses wrote *shamor*.

The Rambam (Moses Maimonides, 1135–1204), in a number of statements, addressed the basic concept Ibn Ezra was dealing with in the previous citations. He explicitly pointed out that situations that in and of themselves, *by definition*, are impossible to exist, cannot exist. In his words: “It is no deficiency in the One [G-d] that He does not conjoin contraries in one substratum, and His power is not affected by this and by other similar impossibilities.”* “We do not attribute to G-d, may He be exalted, incapacity because He is unable to corporify His essence or to create someone like Him or to create a square whose diagonal is equal to its side.”** “It has then become clear that, according to every opinion and school, there are impossible things whose existence cannot be admitted. Power to bring them about cannot be ascribed to the deity...Accordingly they are necessarily as they are...”***

The Rambam wrote extensively concerning the interpretation of rabbinic Midrash and Aggadah. In his *Introduction to Pereq Heleq* he points to the fact that the Mishnah sages themselves assume that even the Torah text must be read with logic and common sense. When confronted with a passage that looked impossible to take literally they resorted to allegorical interpretation. He cites several examples. In 1 Chronicles 11 the text relates some amazing deeds of King David's warriors, such as killing a lion in the pit on a snowy day, which the sages took allegorically. The narrative of the book of Job, that means to say the very existence of that man, and the account of resurrection in the book of Ezekiel (chapter 37) were also interpreted allegorically by some sages. How much more so, he asks, is it imperative to be rational when dealing with their own teachings, the aggadic and midrashic statements of rabbinic compendiums?

Regarding those who interpret all aggadot and midrashim literally, he states:

...they destroy the Torah's glory and darken its brilliance; they make G-d's Torah the opposite of what was intended. He stated in the perfect Torah regarding the nations who hear about all these statutes, that they will say, "What a wise and insightful people this great nation is" (Deut. 4:6). But when the nations hear how this group relates the words of the sages in a literal manner they will say, "What a foolish and ignorant people this insignificant nation is." Most of these expounders explain to the public what they, themselves, really do not understand. Would that they be quiet or say, "We do not understand what the rabbis mean in this statement or how to interpret it." But they think they understand and endeavor to make known according to their poor understanding – not according to the sages' intention – and expound at the head of the assembly the *derashot* of tractate *Berakhot*, the chapter *Heleq* and other sources, literally, word by word.

Introduction to Pereq Heleq

In his *Guide* he added:

[Our Sages] use the Bible text as a kind of poetical language [for their own ideas], and do not intend thereby to interpret the text...This style was widespread in ancient days; all adopted it in the

same manner as poets...Our Sages say, in reference to the words, "And a paddle (*yated*) thou shalt have upon thy weapons (*azeneka*)" [Deut. 23:14]. Do not read *azeneka* "thy weapon," but *ozneka*, "thy ear" – if you hear a person uttering something disgraceful, put your fingers into your ears. Now, I wonder whether those ignorant persons [who take the Sages literally] believe that the author of this saying gave it as the true interpretation of the verse quoted, and as the meaning of this precept...I cannot think that any person whose intellect is sound can accept this. The author employed the text as a beautiful poetic phrase, in teaching an excellent moral lesson...poetically connected with the above text. In the same sense you must understand the phrase, "Do not read so, but so," wherever it occurs in the Midrash.*****

The formulations of the sages teach all sorts of valuable lessons. Frequently, they use the Torah text as a springboard to elaborate an idea or as a mnemonic device to anchor an insight and assist in its being remembered. In doing so they are often engaging in moral education and inspirational edification that in their days would have been difficult to accomplish in a straightforward manner. As long as the reader or listener realizes that a proposed interpretation of a text is not necessarily its true meaning, the interpretation often having no genuine (*peshat*) connection to the actual intention of the relevant verses, and that the highly improbable, often fantastic and sometimes impossible realities portrayed are not literal, no harm is done and a benefit is derived from the lesson.

It may also be that some sages, contrary to the Rambam's opinion, employed such methods even when they knew their audience thought that the literal message they expounded was intended to explicate the actual meaning of the passage. It appears that there were cases when they felt it necessary to do so. This would have been probable when they were dealing with minimally educated people who lived in social contexts that precluded them from access to scientific knowledge about realia or historical knowledge about events. Such people already believed in the fantastic, such that their taking an impossible interpretation literally created no conflict for them and only provided the benefit of the lesson.

It is the case today that numerous traditional adherents of the Torah were taught and teach to uncritically subscribe to a literalist view of Midrash and Aggadah and take the details as factual. Some are greatly disturbed by other approaches despite the many writings of our greatest rabbinical authorities, including the *geonim* and *rishonim* cited above. Since the methodology employed in our Torah studies accords with the general perspective of the nonliteralists, this is an appropriate opportunity to comment on the matter.

With the enormous advances in knowledge in recent times the situation is radically different from what it had been in past centuries. The most basic general education in modern times – indeed, merely being an alert individual living in present-day society – provides an immense amount of information in many areas and insight into many subjects that the *midrashim* and *aggadot* continually touch upon. An average person cannot but be deeply impacted by this knowledge, as elementary education, interaction with others, and the mass media are involved in this process. And many people are now accustomed to read widely and critically, think rationally, and approach knowledge with intellectual integrity. Today, as has been the case for well over a century, taking midrashim literally tends to cause sincere individuals prodigious conflicts between their religious faith and their knowledge of reality.

Attempts to avoid the difficulties have generally promoted apologetics with numerous false harmonizing resolutions. For many, particularly the more educated and rationally oriented, and most seriously for those with intellectual integrity, these explanations have served to merely postpone the problems for a time.

All this has contributed to mass defection from tradition on the one hand and to the development of

defensive measures to prevent exposure to contradictory knowledge on the other. The latter often includes discouragement, if not prohibition, of advanced general studies, insisting the Torah be studied without the benefit of modern scholarly research as well as strictly limiting interaction with and participation in the life of the wider society. Of course, such measures create further serious, negative consequences, impacting the psychological, social and economic well-being of many. The solution requires that it should be acknowledged that the authorities cited above were basically correct and whatever consequences stem from that recognition must be confronted.

The teachings of the sages are often clearly recognizable as nonliteral to anyone who acknowledges that it is possible that they may be so. We will provide a sampling of different types of midrashim and *aggadot* that expounded on *Parashat Beshalah* that teach many wonderful and extraordinary lessons but which upon thoughtful consideration of text, theme and time frame will be seen as clearly not the intended meaning of the verses they are attached to. We will thus illustrate an important aspect of classic rabbinic methodology and help clarify the main point discussed above.

Endnotes

* Moses Maimonides *The Guide for the Perplexed* (translated by Shlomo Pines, University of Chicago Press, 1974) I:75, p. 224.

** *ibid.* p. 226

*** *ibid.* III:15, p. 461

**** Moses Maimonides *The Guide for the Perplexed*, (translated by Michael Friedlander, Dover Publications, 1956) III:43, pp. 353-4 (slightly abridged)