

## THE TALMUDIC MEANING OF *PESHAT*

The author of this essay takes a new look at one of the fundamental principles of biblical exegesis. Dr. Louis I. Rabinowitz, former Chief Rabbi of Transvaal and Orange Free State, South Africa, and Professor of Hebrew at the University of Witwatersrand, now resides in Jerusalem. He is the author of numerous books and articles which have appeared in popular and scholarly journals.

The well-known statement of the Talmud *ein mikra yotze midei peshuto* (Shabbat 63a; Yev. 11b, 24a) is rendered in the Soncino translation, "A verse cannot depart from its plain meaning." This statement is cited time and again by modern scholars to prove that however great was the predilection of the Rabbis of the Talmud for midrashic and homiletical expositions of the Bible, they were nevertheless fully aware of the fact that the *peshat*, the plain meaning, was the definitive one. A study of the relevant sources, however, reveals the remarkable but undeniable fact that whatever the Rabbis meant by the word *peshat*, it is something quite different from the meaning which is given to it today, i.e., the plain literal meaning of the verse, the meaning which its author intended to convey.

To my mind this meaning of the word dates from Rashi who was the first of the rabbinic commentators of the Bible sharply to distinguish, in his classical commentary, between *peshat* and *derash*, and we have unthinkingly applied this meaning to the talmudic use of the word. It should be realized that such a distinction did not obtain in earlier ages. The Rabbis knew and practised but one method of biblical interpretation. To that method the name of Midrash was given, whether *Midrash Halakhah* or *Midrash Haggadah*, and the latter included both what

we know today as *peshat* and what we think of as “midrashic.” If, as will be shown, they did distinguish between *peshat* and the other interpretation, that distinction was not between the literal and the homiletical meanings.

In point of fact, it is only in such passages as the above-mentioned phrase is found that it is possible, although not unexceptional, to find the word *peshat* with its current meaning. The clearest example is found in *Shabbat* 63a. The Mishnah quotes R. Eliezer as permitting the bearing of arms on the Sabbath, since they are an adornment. In the subsequent discussion of the Gemara, R. Joseph explains R. Eliezer’s view by quoting the verse “Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O mighty one. (It is) thy glory and thy majesty” (Psalms 95:4). To this proof that arms are ornaments R. Kahana objects “But this verse refers to the words of the Torah,” i.e., the Torah is Israel’s weapon of defense and glory, and in reply Mar b. Huna answers, *eyn mikra yotze midei peshuto*. Clearly the *peshat* of the verse, as we understand the word today, is that a sword is a sword.

So also in *Yevamot* 11b. The Talmud applies the word *to’evah*, referring to the divorced woman who remarries her first husband after having been divorced from her second, to the *sotah* (a woman suspected of infidelity). It then queries whether in view of the fact that *ein mikra yotze medei peshuto* it can still refer to the remarried divorcee also. A similar view is expressed in *Yevamot* 24a, the *peshat* of Deut. 25:6-7 being taken to mean that the son born of the levirate marriage shall be given the actual name of deceased.

More common, however, than the sentence *ein mikra yotzei midei peshuto* is the phrase *peshatei dikra bema ketiv?* (To what does the *peshat* of this verse refer?). And here the difficulty begins, Let us consider the first example. Proverbs 23:1-2 reads, “When thou sittest to eat with a ruler, consider diligently what is before thee. And put a knife in thy throat if thou be a man given to appetite.” Rashi’s explanation is a model of what we know as *peshat*. Omitting his explanation of individual words, it reads, “When thou sittest to eat with a ruler, consider carefully with whom thou art sitting, and whether he is well- or ill-disposed towards thee. If thou seest that he is ill-disposed do not eat his

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food if thou art sensible. If thou art hungry and desirous of eating, rather put the knife between thy teeth." After that exposition of the *peshat*, Rashi, as is his wont, adds "And our Rabbis have given the midrashic explanation (*darshu*) that the reference is to a disciple sitting before his master, etc." It is an excellent example of the distinction made by Rashi, and since accepted, of the difference between *peshat* and *derash*.

This *derash* referred to by Rashi is found in the Talmud, *Chullin* 6a. R. Meir had sent R. Simeon b. Eliezer to buy some wine from the Samaritans, in the belief that it was ritually proper. An old man accosted R. Eliezer and quoted this verse to him, from which R. Meir properly understood that the wine was forbidden. The Talmud then states that the *peshat* of the above-mentioned verse refers to a disciple sitting before his master. If he knows that the master can answer any question which he puts to him, he should enquire, but if not, rather than embarrass him, he should seek another teacher.

It is thus clear that that self-same explanation which Rashi specifically calls *derash* is equally explicitly called *peshat* by the Talmud.

A similar reply is given to the same question in another passage of the same tractate. On page 135a we read that for certain reasons R. Safra refused to eat the Priestly Portion proffered to him by Raba. In a dream there came to R. Safra the verse of Proverbs (25:20) "As he that taketh away a garment, in cold weather, and as vinegar upon nitre, so is he that singeth songs to a heavy heart," and R. Safra understood from this that he had not acted rightly (See Rashi *ad loc.*). The Talmud then continues, "Abaye said to Raba, 'What does the *peshat* of this verse refer to?' and he replies "It refers to a teacher who teaches an unworthy pupil." The "heavy-hearted" person is the unworthy disciple to whom it is useless to "sing the song of the Torah."

It would be possible to suggest that to the Rabbis the whole of Proverbs consisted of instruction from teacher to disciple, on the well-known basis that "disciples are called sons and teachers, fathers" (Cf. *Sifre Va-Etchanan*, Lev. R. 11:7 and Maimonides, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:2) — incidentally an interpretation which properly belongs to *peshat* and not *derash*. Thus the whole

book of Proverbs could have been applied, as these two verses are, to the relationship between master and disciple, bringing it within the wide framework of *peshat*. Alternatively it might be suggested that the Rabbis took the word *Mishlei* in its talmudic connotation of "Parables," and with parables the *derash*, the application of the verse in a sense other than the literal, constitutes the *peshat*!

Such attractive explanations, however, cannot possibly be put forward with regard to the third and most remarkable example which is herewith adduced. The passage in question (Gen. 49:11-12) is discussed in *Ketuvot* 111b. Commenting on the words *osri lagefen iroh*, R. Dimi said, "there is not a grapevine in the Land of Israel which will not need the inhabitants of a whole city to harvest it." In further exposition of the verse, he states that the wine would be suitable even for those advanced in years (reading *leven shanim* instead of *leven shinayim*).

Now whatever one may say about the far-fetched nature of this interpretation, it must be conceded that it is at least an elaboration of the literal meaning of the verse which speaks of wine.

The Talmud continues, however, with the now stock question what is the *peshat* of the verse? And the same R. Dimi, who gives the above explanation, gives as the *peshat*, "The Congregation of Israel says to the Holy One, blessed be He, 'Lord of the Universe! Wink to me with thine eyes which will be sweeter to me than wine, and show me thy teeth which are sweeter to me than milk.'" And that constitutes the *peshat* in contrast to the previous verse which is presumably *derash*!

After that striking example, it is unnecessary to cite the other passages (*Kiddushin* 80b, *Eruvin* 23b and *Arakhin* 8b) where the deviation from what we know as *peshat* is not so striking.

There is therefore no doubt whatsoever that the word *peshat* in the Talmud had an entirely different connotation than it has since been given and it involves a rethinking of the sentence *eyn mikra yotzeh midei peshuto*. But if it did not convey the sense of the literal meaning, what did it convey?

The original meaning of *peshat* is "to stretch forth" and is most commonly found in the phrase, "stretching forth the hand" (e.g., *Mishnah Shabbat*, 1:1). From that primary meaning it is

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an easy transition to its secondary one, "to straighten" and thus "to make plain." It is in this sense that it comes to mean "to explain the Scriptures," but to explain them by "stretching forth," i.e., by giving a full and detailed exposition, or by studying them thoroughly. Thus we find the contrast between *lamad* as superficial learning and *pashat* as intensive study. In Ex. R. 47:8, on the verse, "He did neither eat bread nor did he drink water" (Ex. 34:28), the Midrash says, "but of the bread of the Torah he did eat, and of the water of the Torah he did drink. He did learn the Torah by day and *poshet* it to himself during the night. And why did he do so? In order to teach the children of Israel that they should toil in the Torah by day and night."

A similar meaning of intensive study is given in a revealing passage in the *Tanchuma* (*Jethro* 15):

It happened that R. Akiba was invited by the *chazzan* to read publicly the Scriptural lesson, but he declined. Whereupon his disciples said to him, "Our Master! Didst thou not teach us, 'For it is thy life and the length of thy days?' Why didst thou refuse to go up?" He replied, ". . . The only reason I refused to go up was because I had not gone over the reading two and three times, and no one is permitted to read the Torah publicly until he is *poshet* it to himself two and three times."

In these passages *poshet* has the meaning of extending the study of the Scriptures by repeating it over and over. It equally applies to extending the study by expounding it, and in this connection it is noteworthy that, in contrast to the current meaning, it is clearly found as synonymous and completely interchangeable with its present opposite, *derash*.

Thus, when Gen. R. (10:5) has *Rav Yanai hayah yoshev vedoresh*, the identical passage in the *Tanchuma Chukkat* 1 is introduced with the words, *Rav Yanai haya yoshev u-poshet*. In the Jerusalem Talmud the word *pashat* is found where we would expect *derash*, as in the passage (*T. J. Shabbat* 16 [15c]), "Rabbi and R. Hiyya Rabba and R. Ishmael b. R. Jose were sitting and *poshtim* in the Scroll of Lamentations on the eve of *Tisha Be-Ab*." The most conclusive evidence, however, is provided by a

passage in *Yerushalmi Horayot* 3 (48b).<sup>\*</sup> Rabbi Chanina ben Chama saw all the people of Sepphoris hastening to the *Bet Hamidrash* of R. Benaiah. Inquiring about the reason, he was told that his disciple, R. Yochanan, *yativ ve'doresh* (was sitting and expounding). Whereupon R. Chanina blessed God for having vouchsafed to him to see the fruits of his labors during his lifetime, since *ve'khol agadata poshte leih chutz mi-Mishley ve'Kohelet* (he [R. Chanina] had taught him [R. Yochanan] all of Aggadah [with the exception of that pertaining to the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes]).

In this passage the word *poshet* is explicitly applied to Aggadah and R. Yochanan is a *doresh* of what R. Chanina used to *poshet* to him. *Peshat* thus stands as a synonym of *derash*. And the only possible meaning which can be given to it in the Talmud is "the usual, accepted traditional meaning as it was generally taught." Thus when an Amora came with an original interpretation which differed from that traditional one, the Talmud asks what that *peshat*, the usual meaning was. But in that meaning there was no distinction between what we call today *peshat* and *derash*.

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<sup>\*</sup> The reading is more accurate than the parallel passage in Talmud *Yerushalmi Bava Metzia* 2 (8a).