

Dr. Shoshan teaches at the Rothberg International School at The Hebrew University and writes for Yeshivat Har Etzion's Virtual Beit Midrash. He is the author of *Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah* (Oxford: 2012)

MIDRASH MATTERS

Rabbi Yaakov Beasley's article on contemporary approaches to Tanakh study and his spirited exchange with Rabbi Yaakov Blau in recent issues of *Tradition* demonstrate the vitality of Tanakh education within the Modern Orthodox world.¹ However, it is precisely the key point of agreement between the two authors that reflects a weakness in the way in which *Tanakh* is currently studied in our community. Both authors advocate the teaching of *peshat* at the expense of the study of midrash.

Rabbis Beasley and Blau each identify their various approaches with the broader concept of *peshat*, be it in the classical sense of the *Rishonim* or in the revised sense advocated by contemporary "neo-*pashtanim*. *Pashtanim* seek a direct encounter with the text in which the weight of traditional interpretation has at best a voice, but not a veto. Instead, the *pashtan* adopts a form of the doctrine of *dibra Torah ke-leshon benei adam*. The sacred text is to be understood utilizing the same tools used to understand mundane texts. In the case of the medievals, this means primarily linguistic tools such as the study of grammar and cognate languages. The moderns have added to this an array of approaches including literary criticism and historical analysis.

The reasons for this emphasis on *peshat* among contemporary Modern Orthodox educators are not hard to find. In part, it is a response to the dominant mode of biblical interpretation in much of the Orthodox world today. This approach might be described as a 'dogmatic' or 'naïve' embrace of midrash. It sees the text of the Tanakh as fundamentally indecipherable without the aid of the Oral Torah. In this view, the Written Torah presents the events of the sacred history in – at best – a fragmentary and

¹ Yaakov Beasley, "The Return of the Pashtanim," *Tradition* 42:1 (2009), pgs. 67-83. Yaakov Blau and Yaakov Beasley, "The 'New School' of Bible Study: An Exchange," *Tradition* 42:3 (2009), pgs. 85-94.

TRADITION

distorted manner. “The Midrash,” often identified with Rashi’s citations of Hazal and/or the interpretations found in the Bavli, narrates a complete and lucid account of these events, which effectively supersedes the text of the written Torah. This approach certainly has its roots in traditional Jewish biblical interpretation, going back to the Second Temple period. However, it negates the entire tradition of *peshat* interpretation and ignores much of the variety and complexity of midrashic literature. It is hardly surprising that serious students of Tanakh and *parshanut* have rejected this method and are attempting to swing the pendulum in the opposite direction.

On a more fundamental level, *peshat* approaches are crucial in order to maintain the viability of Tanakh study in the modern world. *Peshat* allows the student to maintain a rational-empirical approach to the text and adapt contemporary methods of reading into his or her approach to *parshanut*. Modern Orthodox Jews have every reason to be partial to the *peshat* tradition.

Nevertheless, *peshat*-centric approaches can have the downside of leading to the neglect of midrash.² The issue is not simply that students will remain ignorant of the midrashic tradition. Rather, excessive emphasis on *peshat* can lead to a loss of respect and denigration of midrash and hence, God forbid, of Hazal themselves. The rhetoric of *peshat* tends to be one which delegitimizes other interpretations and approaches. *Peshat* and *derash* are often used in common discourse as synonyms for “right” and “wrong” interpretations of the text. This is expressed in the quip attributed to Nehama Leibowitz *zt”l*, “The difference between *peshat* and *derash* is: *peshat* is what I say, *derash* is what you say.” Students raised on the rigors (or perceived rigors) of a *peshat* methodology are likely to view midrashic interpretations as either incomprehensible, naïve, or simply wrong.

Furthermore, *peshat* possesses an essentially universalistic impulse. Almost all forms of *peshat* have emerged from historical encounters with non-traditional or non-Jewish approaches to the Bible. *Pashtanim* tend to seek out methods that will resonate across ideologies and cultures. The question that needs to be raised here is, what makes these approaches Jewish? How does this sort of study distinguish us from others who seek out the meaning of Scripture, be they modern academic scholars or textually oriented Church Fathers? In sum, *peshat* approaches bring the student

² *Mari ve-rabi* R. Shalom Carmy has recently raised similar concerns in these pages. Shalom Carmy, “A *Peshat* in the Dark: Reflections on the age of Cary Grant,” *Tradition* 43:1 (2010), pgs. 1-6.

closer to the Word of God, but can have the impact of distancing him or her from the covenantal community that emerges from that Word.

To be sure, some of those teachers and scholars who fall into the category of “neo-*pashtanim*”, do make use of rabbinic and midrashic texts in their analyses of the Tanakh. Their approach tends to be a synthetic one, seeking to integrate the insights of Hazal into their efforts to plumb the depths of the biblical texts. This approach, though certainly legitimate and of value, can have the consequence of blurring the distinction between *peshat* and *derash*. In some cases, students do not get a sense of the sort of pure *peshat* approach advocated by Rashbam, i.e., one in which the reader attempts to approach the text completely free of rabbinic biases. On the other hand, the study of midrash in these approaches is often subordinated to our pursuit of the meaning of the biblical text. This produces a skewed view of midrash which sees it as being of value only to the extent that it aids in our pursuit of *peshat*.

I advocate a bifurcated approach in which students become independently familiar with the realms of both *peshat* and *derash*. Students need to study and understand each approach on its own terms. They need to learn that our tradition is multi-vocal, embracing several different approaches to the biblical text. As such, midrash needs to be studied as its own independent discipline. In what follows, I will outline an approach to understanding midrash that I believe is best suited for the Modern Orthodox community.³

First and foremost, no less than *peshat* methodologies, a midrashic approach to Tanakh entails a vigorous encounter with the details of the text. The difference between the two approaches lies in the set of tools, methods, and assumptions used to approach the biblical text and interpret its complexities. The body of literature we call midrash includes texts that were composed and edited over the course of a millennium, in locales across the Jewish world. As we would expect, there is great diversity among these works. Nevertheless, there are certain central traits

³ This account reflects my understanding of the basic conclusions of the quarter century or so of academic midrash scholarship. Key works in this field include, Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, *Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), Yonah Fraenkel, *Darkhe Ha-Agadah Veba-Midrash* ([Israel]: Masadah : Yad la-Talmud, 1991), James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House : The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts*, 1st ed. ([San Francisco]: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), and David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies*, *Rethinking Theory* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1996). Readers should also be aware of Simi Peters, *Learning to Read Midrash*, 1st ed. (Jerusalem; New York: Urim Publications, 2004).

TRADITION

which can be seen a defining the classical midrashic collections of the *Tannaim* and *Amoraim*, and they apply to a large degree to later *midrashim* as well. Perhaps the two most fundamental principles of midrashic interpretation which distinguish it from the *peshat* approach are known as “omniscience” and “the unity of Scripture.” “Omniscience” refers to Hazal’s insistence on interpreting each and every detail of the text. Every word, letter, grammatical form – even the absence of some expected data – is subject to investigation and interpretation. What differentiates this approach from medieval or modern textual scrutiny is the fact that these latter methods tend to seek out the simplest and most empirical meaning of a textual anomaly. For instance, a strange grammatical form will be shown by the *pashtan* to in fact be standard in certain unusual situations. The *darshan*, on the other hand, seeks to leverage these problematic or apparently extraneous aspects of the text in order to maximize the significance of the verse for the reader. Textual anomalies are not explained away as products of obscure rules, but rather are sources of new *halakhot* or additional dramatic details.

“The unity of Scripture” refers to Hazal’s belief that every verse in Tanakh can and should be read in light of every other verse. This means that all contradictions between different parts of Tanakh need to be harmonized. In contrast, a pure *peshat* approach, such as that of Rashbam, will be far more comfortable in allowing such contradictions to stand, focusing instead on the meaning of each verse in its local context.

Hazal’s belief in the organic unity of Tanakh is also expressed in the way in which they tend to isolate individual verses from their immediate contexts, preferring instead to interpret a verse in light of a passage on the other side of Tanakh. Thus, in the *petihota* form, which typifies classical Amoraic *midrashim*, the midrash will often focus on the first verse of the weekly Torah reading, discussing it not in context of the *parasha* at hand, but in relationship to a salient verse in a book such as Psalms, Job, or Proverbs. The sequential order in which the verses appear in Tanakh remains important, but it is secondary to the effort to find linguistically and thematically linked verses elsewhere in the canon. This contrasts especially with modern literary approaches, in which the immediate context of a verse is central to the way in which it is interpreted.

The study of midrashic approaches to the text can help students to be more sensitive readers of the Tanakh and more critical consumers of *peshat* interpretations. Midrash makes the reader more aware of the ambiguities and potentialities of the biblical text. Many conventional *peshat* approaches, with their emphasis on seeking out *the* meaning of the text,

often see these ambiguities as obstacles to be overcome rather than as opportunities to be explored. Ultimately, advanced students should have a hermeneutic framework in which *pesbat* and *derash* are not seen as opposites but as part of a single continuum of interpretive strategies. Thus the investigation of textual ambiguities using the tools of the *pashtan* can slide imperceptibly into a midrashic expansion of the text, while the study of midrash can yield insights into the *pesbat* of the text.

Unlike *pesbat* however, midrash is not simply an attempt to wrest meaning from the text of the Tanakh. The *Geonim* already recognized that it is a mistake to understand midrash as an exclusively hermeneutic endeavor. Midrash is a rich discourse that contains within it multiple concerns and agendas. Hazal often have ideological and pedagogical agendas in their *midrashim*. These agendas address a wide range of issues, including the ethical, theological, social or political. These positions do not necessarily emerge directly from the biblical text. Their authority is ultimately rooted in the independent process of *Torah she-be'al peh*. Nevertheless, Hazal weave these messages into their discussions of biblical verses and narratives.⁴ Similarly, Hazal also have aesthetic concerns, such as the telling of a well crafted story, the creation of the intricate poetic symmetry of a *petihta*, or even the fortuitous turn of phrase in an aphorism. Hazal were interested in beauty as well as truth.

Midrash thus needs to be taught as a multifaceted discipline that spills over beyond the concern with the biblical text – into a literary and ideological discourse of its own. The ways in which these texts and ideas are best communicated to students of varying abilities and background, from pre-school to post-high school programs, needs to be determined by professional educators in the field. There is much work to be done here. The issues range from: how to present *parasha* stories in pre-schools and in early elementary school to how to study legal passages of the Torah with advanced high school students. Ultimately, however, the implementation of any curriculum or teaching method depends on having knowledgeable

⁴ This is not the place to enter into the discussion of whether or not Hazal themselves distinguished between *midrashim* that directly reflect the meaning of the text and those that reflected homiletical interpretations meant to convey messages that were not necessarily reflected in the text at hand. I tend to think that Hazal did not generally make such distinctions, though I think there is still work to be done on this question. The distinction I am making between “textual” and “ideological” agendas in midrash would likely have been rejected by Hazal themselves. It does, however, reflect our modern understanding of the midrashic process. The classic article on Hazal’s distinctions between different types or levels of interpretation is Raphael Loewe, “The ‘Plain’ Meaning of Scripture in Early Jewish Exegesis,” *Institute of Jewish Study, Papers I*, 1964, pgs. 140-85.

TRADITION

and effective teachers in the classroom. As such, it is crucial that those preparing to be teachers of Tanakh or *Torah she-be'al peh* develop a solid background in the study of midrash and related issues.

Beyond its inherent importance, the teaching of midrash in our community can also have a broader value. Teaching both *peshat* and *derash* together can help inculcate students with the values of interpretive and methodological pluralism. There is no single authentic Jewish approach to understanding the Divine Word. At the minimum, there are two distinct approaches, each rooted in different values and assumptions and leading to very different conclusions. The midrash itself often presents multiple interpretations without any effort at establishing one of them as the normative approach. Individuals educated to embrace a range of approaches and interpretations will be more open to the range of legitimate halakhic and hashkafic worldviews that exist today.⁵ In this era of increasing ideological simplicity and stridency, there is great need to revive a more nuanced and tolerant attitudes towards both our classical texts and towards contemporary issues. Though the study of both *peshat* and *derash* is hardly the solution to these problems, it might help cultivate the sorts of habits of the mind that are particularly lacking at the current time.

⁵ To be sure, this openness can and should be taught when engaging in halakhic topics as well. As I have argued previously, pluralism is central to many major streams of halakhic thought. See my "Of Kabbalists and Kings: Rav Moshe Feinstein and Halakhic Pluralism," *Text and Texture*, June 23, 2010, found at <http://text.rcarabbis.org/?author=124>.