

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

PARSHAS VAYECHI

“Yaakov our father never died”

Concept: The Worlds of Pshat and Drash

INTRODUCTION: A MYSTIFYING EXCHANGE

The Gemara in Maseches Taanis¹ records the following exchange between two sages of the Talmud, R' Yitzchak and Rav Nachman:

אמר ליה הכי אמר ר' יוחנן, יעקב אבינו לא מת
אמר ליה וכי בחנם ספדו ספדנייא וחנטו חנטייא וקברו קברנייא?
אמר ליה מקרא אני דורש, שנאמר: “ועתה אל תירא עבדי יעקב נאום ה' ואל תחת ישראל כי
הנני מושיעך מרחוק ואת זרעך מארץ שבים,” מקיש הוא לזרעו, מה זרעו בחיים אף הוא בחיים

He [R' Yitzchak] said to him [Rav Nachman]: Thus said R' Yochanan: “Yaakov our father never died.”

[Rav Nachman] said to [R' Yitzchak]: “Was it for nothing that the eulogizers eulogized [Yaakov] and the embalmers embalmed him and the buriers buried him?”

[R' Yitzchak] replied: “I am expounding a verse, as it says: ‘And you fear not, My servant Yaakov, says Hashem, and do not become broken, Yisrael, for behold I will deliver you from afar, and your descendants from the land of their captivity.’”² [We see that] the verse equates him [Yaakov] and his descendants: Just as his descendants are living, so too is he living.”

The above exchange is most perplexing. With all due respect to R' Yitzchak's exposition, he appears to have entirely sidestepped Rav Nachman's objection that the simple meaning of the verses indicates that Yaakov died!

PSHAT AND DRASH TEACHINGS

Rav Tzaddok Hakohen of Lublin³ explains the matter by taking us in to the methods of interpretation we call *pshat* and *drash*. These are not simply two ways of deriving messages from the verse. Rather, they often represent two different types of messages, reflecting two entirely different realms:

1 5b.

2 Yirmiyahu 30:10.

3 *Takanas Hashavin*, maamar 6.

- ▷ In the same way as *pshat* represents that which is openly stated and clearly visible to the reader, it likewise reflects the situation as would be visibly apparent to the onlooker.
- ▷ Conversely, just as *drash* involves looking beneath the surface of the Torah's words, so too, the message it communicates reflects aspects of that situation which are "hidden" and not readily apparent.

Here, too, when Rav Nachman challenged the teaching that "Yaakov our father never died" from the fact that he was embalmed, eulogized and buried, R' Yitzchak responded by saying "מקרא אני דורש" – I am *expounding* a verse." With this, he was indicating that the realm to which his teaching refers was not the one apparent to the onlookers and reflected by the *pshat* reading of the verse, but to a more hidden realm, whereby Yaakov, although physically dead, lives on in his descendants.

DEAD MAIDENS WALKING

This fundamental idea is already discussed in earlier sources. In the course of the Torah's description of Pharaoh's daughter going to wash in the Nile, where she would meet the baby Moshe who had been set afloat there by his mother, the verse relates: "וְנַעֲרֹתֶיהָ הֹלְכוֹת עַל יַד הַיָּאֵר" – *and her maidens were walking on the side of the Nile.*"⁴ Commenting on these words, Rashi cites the following Midrash:

ורבותינו דרשו "הולכות" לשון מיתה... הולכות למות לפי שמיחו בה

*Our Sages expounded the word "going" [here] as an expression of death... they were "going" to die because they protested her [taking the child].*⁵

The Maharal⁶ explains that, here too, the midrash does not mean to say that these maidens dropped dead at the side of the Nile when they protested. Rather, it means that they found themselves somehow unable to prevent Pharaoh's daughter from taking the child. This lack of ability was the result of their strength being withheld from them from On High, and it is to this the Midrash refers when it says that they "died", since their connection with life in the higher realms was diminished.

The Maharal's words confirm Rav Tzaddok's principle that a message derived through the medium of *drash* reflects an inner or higher reality beyond that which is readily visible to the onlooker.

IN CONVERSATION

The above idea regarding *pshat* and *drash* also relates to the midrash's expositions on people's words in the Torah. In the beginning of Parshas Vayigash, when Yehuda approaches Yosef to plead for Binyamin's freedom, he prefaces by saying, "כִּי כַמֶּלֶךְ כְּפָרְעָה" – *for you are like Pharaoh.*"⁷ Rashi, commenting on these words, cites no less than four interpretations, starting with the *pshat* and from there proceeding to *drash*:

חשוב אתה בעיני כמלך, זהו פשוט.
ומדרשו: סופך ללקות עליו בצרעת כמו שלקה פרעה על ידי זקנתי שרה.
דבר אחר: מה פרעה גוזר ואינו מקיים, מבטיח ואינו עושה, אף אתה כן.
דבר אחר: אם תקניטני אהרוג אותך ואת אדוניך.

⁴ Shemos 2:5.

⁵ The simple understanding of the basis of this exposition is the fact that the word "הולכות" is written "deficiently" i.e. without either letter *vavs*, indicating a deficiency in the state of the maidens themselves, see Pachad Yitzchak, Pesach maamar 52.

⁶ *Gevuros Hashem* chap. 17.

⁷ Bereishis 44:18.

You are as important in my eyes as a king, this is the pshat meaning.

The midrashic meaning is: your end will be to be afflicted with leprosy just as [the earlier] Pharaoh was afflicted on account of my ancestress, Sarah.

An alternative explanation: just as Pharaoh decrees and does not fulfill, promises and does not act, so too, do you.

An alternative explanation: if you antagonize me, I will kill you and your master.

In this instance, the midrashic explanations seem to not only differ from the *pshat* meaning, but also contradict it! If the *pshat* says that Yehuda's words meant to convey his respect for Yosef, how can the *drash* then say that in fact, they meant to indicate criticism and even threats of a most extreme nature?

R' Yaakov Kamenetzky⁸ explains that here too, the *pshat* and *drash* interpretations reflect the overt meaning and implicit messages within Yehuda's words. The outermost layer was undoubtedly one than expressed respect, and that is the *pshat*. However, people often accompany a straightforward message with additional undertones, insinuations and implications. Together, these form a composite or blended message. It is these added messages that the *drash* draws out from a deeper analysis of Yehuda's words. After all, for a person in his position, standing accused both of spying and of theft, to state that the second-in-command is like the king himself is at best redundant and at worst potentially dangerous. Additionally, the words "כִּי כְמוֹךָ כָּפַרְעֹה" literally translate as: "for like you like Pharaoh," indicating further layers of comparison between the two personalities. R' Yaakov concludes that this is a major idea when learning Midrashim such as these, whereby the interpretations of *pshat* and *drash* in the verse reflect the "*pshat*" and "*drash*" within the person.

A LEVEL DEEPER: HIDDEN ELEMENTS WITHIN REVEALED EVENTS

Taking this discussion one stage further, there are times when the hidden or inner element identified by the *drash* refers not to the event itself, but to its role within the episode being described in the Torah. An example of this is in the episode of the golden calf, where the verse states, "וַיֵּרָא אַהֲרֹן וַיִּבֶן מִזְבֵּחַ לְפָנָיו" – Aharon saw, and built an altar before him.⁹ The verse does not explicate exactly what Aharon saw that led him to build the altar for the people. Rashi cites the explanation of the midrash that Aharon saw that Chur, who protested the making of the calf, was killed by the people. Aharon reasoned that if he, too were to protest, the people would kill him too, rendering their sin so grievous so as to be beyond any hope of rectification, and therefore, he made the altar.

In this instance, this discussion takes place in the realm of *drash*, not because Chur was murdered in a hidden or inner way, but because that murder constituted the inner reason why Aharon acquiesced to the people's demand to make the altar.¹⁰

This example demonstrates the latitude we sometimes need to take with this idea, when we come to consider which aspect of the element identified by the *drash* was hidden from open view at that time.

IN HALACHAH

In light of the above, let us conclude by considering the relative roles of *pshat* and *drash* in halachah, where seemingly, their relationship with visible reality appears to be reversed, i.e. it is reflected specifically in the interpretation of *drash* and not of *pshat*.

8 *Emes le'Yaakov* Bereishis ibid.

9 Shemos 32:5.

10 From a conversation with R' Beryl Gershenfeld shlit"a.

A classic example of this is the famous verse in Parshas Mishpatim, “עַן תַּחַת עֵין – *an eye for an eye*.”¹¹ The simple meaning for this verse is that a person who takes someone’s eye out is punished by having his eye taken out. As we know, based on the midrashic exposition of the verse, the halachah does not require this, but rather he pays monetary compensation equal in value to the victim’s eye.¹² In this case, we see that the visible reality is as indicated by the *drash* and not by the *pshat*! How is this to be understood in light of their relative roles, as discussed above?

Here, too, the “apparentness” expressed by the *pshat* is that the literal penalty of an eye for an eye is what we would expect to be the verdict. The actual punishment of financial restitution is the product of deeper considerations, as expressed by the Talmud in its discussions of this matter, and hence is reflected in the *drash*.

All of this is certainly food for thought and should give us much to contemplate as we seek to further develop our understanding of the worlds of *pshat* and *drash*.

11 Shemos 21:14.

12 See Bava Kama 83b-84a.