PESHAT
BEFORE
DERASH
in the study of Torah

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PREFACE

I first included the main ideas in a shiur I gave to a handful of people several years ago. On Wednesday the 19th of Iyyar 5762, a siyum was arranged by my old friends Robert and Elisheva Cramer, on Ki MiTzion, a weekly ‘sheet’ that I had issued over a period of six years. There I delivered a lecture on the subject, which I had meanwhile looked into more carefully. Limitation of time meant that much had to be condensed more that I should have wished, so I decided to write it all down and expand it with a few additions, fuller explanations, and more examples. Getting down to this has taken me eighteen months!

It was particularly appropriate that the Chairman at the siyum was none other than my old friend Professor Cyril Domb (learned as he is in all aspects of traditional Jewish studies, his professorship is in Physics) who first taught me how to place emphasis on the study of peshat in Tanakh. While the systematic arrangement presented here is entirely my own responsibility, the basis of the ideas came to me through Professor Domb, at a weekly shiur he held some fifty years ago. He in turn obtained many of his ideas from the late Nechama Leibowitz, but his training as a scientist rather than as a rabbi enabled him to take a fresh outlook and approach to the subject.

The following has been made comprehensive to the best of my ability, but my ability, like that of everyone else, is limited, and there is doubtful room for extension.

My thanks to my friend Eli Handel for enabling this publication.

Above all, my gratitude to the Almighty, who has preserved me to this old age and enabled me to present this, which I hope will help people to understand and follow what he has asked us to do.

A. S.

Eli, Mount Ephraim
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INTRODUCTION

Scriptures can be interpreted in one of two ways, called, respectively, *peshat* and *derash*.

The basic idea of *peshat* is that the text means what it says. However, the meaning of what it says is not always quite so obvious. Often readers do not even notice *what* it actually says, let alone the meaning.

The basic idea of *derash* is that the text says one thing but really means something else, to be discovered by ‘digging down into it’.

Traditionally, we accept both, but recently the latter has tended to oust the former, which needs to be reinstated. The purpose of this monograph is to clarify what each one is, what its function is, and then to explain how the study of *peshat* works – enough has been written on *derash*.

There are differences, in both approach and consequences, between *derash* applied to *halakhah* and that applied to anything else, known collectively (albeit misleadingly) as *aggadah*. Strict rules have been formulated for *midrash halakhah*, but this type of interpretation is now banned, and all we have are the results handed down to us from Mishnah (but not Gemara) times. On the other hand, midrashic interpretation of *aggadah* is still used, and there are rules for this too, though they are not always adhered to. What is written here about *derash* or *midrash* refers exclusively, unless specified, to what is called *aggadah*.

*Peshat* and *derash* serve different purposes and should not be confused. The purpose of *peshat* is to help the reader to understand the text. The purpose of *derash* is not to explain, but to use the text to produce something that teaches a useful lesson.

The result of the difference in practice is that an explanation which is *peshat* should become self-evident – that is to say, you might not notice it until it is pointed out, but once it is pointed out you should see it for yourself as obvious. It should also solve all or most of the problems posed by the text – until these can be solved, there is text but no *peshat*. 
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Derash, on the other hand, which often creates more problems overall than it solves locally, involves something that has to be accepted – you either accept it (on someone’s authority) or you do not. You must not be surprised when midrashim, which may originate from different sources, contradict one another.

Derash should not be used, but unfortunately often is used, to explain the text. In his commentary on the Book of Samuel, Rabbi Joseph Kara, a neighbour, pupil and great friend of Rashi and his family (not to be confused with Rabbi Joseph Karo or Caro who centuries later wrote the Shulhan Arukh), considers the meaning of the word הتعبير in 1 Samuel 1:17. Some render this as ‘May he grant ...’, a prayer, and others as ‘He will grant ...’, a prophecy. Rabbi Kara comments at length:

‘If you rely on the Midrash’ – (a long one which he quotes in full) – ‘you can push aside your problem, but you should realise that when the text of the Neviim was written, it was written complete with explanation and all that is necessary so that future generations should not stumble over it’ (i.e. be misled or confused by it), ‘and there is nothing missing. There is no need to bring evidence from elsewhere, nor [to bring] any midrash, because the Torah was given complete, was written complete, and nothing is missing from it. The Midrash of our Sages is to enhance the ‘Torah’ (lit. to enlarge on it and glorify it, based on Isaiah 42:21). ‘But whoever does not know the straightforward meaning of the scripture and turns to the midrash [to explain it] is like one who is suddenly overpowered by the current of the river and a flood of deep water and who grasps whatever he can get hold of in order to save himself. If he were to put his mind to G-d’s words he would search for their explanation and simple meaning and find them, fulfilling what is written (in Proverbs 2:4-5) “If you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand fear of G-D and discover knowledge of the Almighty.” As in this case .....’ (Kara then explains how his translation solves the problem).

Normally we imagine that the peshat is the plain, simple interpretation, while the derash being deeper is more complicated. We assume, falsely, that


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This is by definition. In fact, as will be shown, the situation is often the reverse.

Both peshat and derash demand careful attention to the precise wording of the text, but they treat the text differently. The principal differences are that derash very often

- is not afraid of distorting the text slightly,
- is not afraid of forcing an interpretation,
- takes the piece it is dealing with out of context,
- over-simplifies the grammar,
- ignores idioms and language style,
- inserts additional data not mentioned which helps with its interpretation,
- adds inessential extraneous details not mentioned in the text which confuse the interpretation,
- ignores realism, relying on miracles and divinely-inspired foreknowledge to explain everything.

Peshat tries to avoid all these. It often happens that the derash, not being bound by such restrictions, appears simple and direct, taking things very literally, whereas the peshat, in order to make sense of a section of text in context, has to dig very deeply. Rashbam calls this latter omek hapeshat.

Nobody seems to have bothered to set out rules for the study of peshat, so I have taken it upon myself to set out guidelines which hopefully will prove useful in encouraging a revival of the currently neglected study of pure peshat, leaving derash till later for advanced study. An appendix illustrating how a midrash arises, its purpose and how it is to be treated, may prove helpful.
Chapter 1

THE CORRECT MEANING OF WORDS

Many words are traditionally mistranslated or misunderstood. These fall into two categories:

1. Obscure and rare words.
2. Common words.

1. With the first, obscure and rare words, often the only thing to do is to guess. Various people guess by different methods and achieve differing results, and alas there is usually nothing one can do about it, particularly if the word occurs only once. However, where the word occurs rarely but not uniquely, the method normally used is often not the best. Basing everything on the root and etymology is not always the best way, as can be shown from English, where two words derived from the same origin can come to mean the direct opposite of one another.

‘Continual’ means with repeated breaks, whereas ‘continuous’ means without a break. Or consider something expensive, where you talk about its price, its value or its worth. All three terms mean much the same. But not so when you talk about something that is priceless, valueless or worthless! In a case like this, even if etymology gets you somewhere near the meaning of the word, you do not get near enough to be able, with reasonable certainty, to make sense of the entire context.

There is an even better example where etymology goes right off the track. The word *telescope* was coined for a gadget invented by Galileo which enabled you to look (Greek *scop*) at something at a distance (Greek *tele*). It was a very long tube with a lens at each end, very useful, but clumsy for storage due to the length of the tube. Somebody designed a set of tubes of gradually decreasing diameter which would slide into one another, so that the gadget could easily be expanded for use, or collapsed when not in use. This system was found useful also for other tubes, and was described as *telescopic*. I have a walking stick which is telescopic, but it does not help me to see at a distance. How does etymology help to explain the word?
There are also cases where the precise meaning of an obscure word that occurs uniquely is not even worth bothering about. An extreme case arises in Gen. 26:24

Everyone puzzled over the word *yemim*. Onkelos and Ibn Ezra assume that it means tough men (perhaps primitive savages), Rashi and Ramban (based on one view in the Talmud) that it means mules, Rashbam that it could be either wild men or wild animals and it is not worth worrying about any further, while Gesenius insists that it refers to hot springs. Actually there is no convincing evidence that it is even a plural, though it looks like one. It could have been a natural or a man-made landmark of some sort, or almost anything. In worrying about the word, they all (except Nahmanides) get diverted from the main point.

It seems that a well-known story about Anah and the *yemim* was still remembered at the time of Moses but has now been lost completely. Without knowing what happened between Anah and his *yemim* – and there are no clues to help us guess – knowing the meaning of the word does not help us one iota. The Torah is not telling us anything about *yemim*, or even about Anah and the *yemim*, but merely wishes to correct a misunderstanding or remove confusion by pointing out which of the two men named Anah – one Zibeon’s brother and the other his son – was the one concerned in the story. The verse tells us that it was Zibeon’s son, and then stresses this by adding that his discovery was while pasturing the donkeys of *his father Zibeon*. It was not his uncle, also Anah. It appears that the latter was Esau’s father-in-law, though this is not absolutely certain. (Read Nachmanides *ad loc* to get thoroughly confused. It is not always possible to disentangle the peshat completely.)

It is hard to understand why it matters which Anah found the *yemim*, or for that matter why the family tree of Seir should interest us in the least, but it was doubtless included in the Torah for a good reason. The meaning of *yemim* will not help us until we know what Anah’s discovery led to.

2. The second group, common words, may be sub-divided:

(a) Mistranslations in English, which are understood correctly in Hebrew.
These may date from the Septuagint, more often simply from King James’s translation, which, though intended for Christians, has been adopted by Jews.

(b) Traditional misunderstandings in Hebrew, dating often (but not always) from Onkelos, who in turn doubtless often turned to an earlier tradition.

The first of these may be further sub-divided:

(i) words which were correct in the time of King James, but have since changed their meaning.

An example is *halt*, which meant *jump* or *skip*, but now means *stop*. When Elijah asked ‘How long halt ye between two opinions?’ (1 Kings 18:21), he did not mean that they stopped (modern *halted*), unable to make up their minds, as we understood it. He meant that they jumped backwards and forwards (archaic *halted*) from one to the other. We cannot blame King James for a mistake arising from changes in the English language since his time.

(ii) mistakes *ab initio*. We will give two classic examples.

First מָקֵמָה is wrongly translated as *corner* through confusion with מָקֶב. It means *edge*, and whoever has learned other than from the English knows this. It is the *edge* of the field, not the corner, which has to be left for the poor and others (Lev. 19:9, 23:22) and in the Mishnah there is absolutely no confusion. Elsewhere likewise the word means *edge*.

Second, the verb הָרַע means to *murder*, not ‘kill’. The translation of לְאָלָה הָרַע as ‘thou shalt not kill’ instead of ‘you are not to murder’ has led many devout Christians to believe that it is wrong to kill even in self-defence. In this case Jews have all spotted the mistake and are not confused, but not so in the first example and many other instances.

Regarding (b), traditional mistranslations in Hebrew (which are, of course, carried over into English), we have an excellent example in the word פרח (which is not a flower) and the corresponding verb פרחים (which does not mean to bloom or blossom). The way to understand a word like this is not to go to etymology and work out the derivation, but *to look at where it*
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occurs – it occurs frequently – and see which meaning makes most sense.

The guiding principle is as follows. Where the context in one place forces a particular meaning, preference should be given to that meaning elsewhere, unless there is good reason to the contrary. True a word may have two different meanings in different places, but this should not be assumed unnecessarily. This is especially true when the obligatory meaning in the first place also makes more sense than the one usually given in the second and other places. Let us see how this works.

In Psalm 92:13 we find צרייך תקנה ו группа. True, a palm does sometimes blossom, but there is nothing special about it. In fact it is not easy to notice, and blossoming is not a prominent characteristic of a palm (as it is, for instance, with an almond). What the palm does do is to shoot up, straight and tall – it is to this that the צרייך is compared. Likewise in verse 8 we find בחרה ו;width=440 height=642\)

...and to this the wicked are compared. The idea of the verb הרה is to emerge out of a base, and the noun הרה is a bud or shoot. (Note that in Isaiah 18:5 even King James is forced to translate it as ‘bud’.) Hence in Exodus 9:10 we find, in one of the Ten Plagues, blisters emerging from the skin like buds, not like flowers, and this must be applied to the ‘buds’ on the Tabernacle Lampstand, where הרה means a knob, and בחרה means something else – possibly a floral design, so that we have them the wrong way round. In Num. 8:4 we have יך the trunk, and הרה the offshoot – strictly a singular used as a collective, ‘the offshoots’ collectively. Rashi’s grandson Samuel (Rashbam) interprets the story of Aaron’s stick (Num. 17:23) correctly, the order of appearance was the natural one, first buds, then flowers, then fruit. So the mistake arose after the time of Rashbam. The word for a flower is צרייך. In modern Hebrew the mistake has become entrenched and cannot be corrected, but in studying the Bible it can and must be corrected.

There are very many other mistakes of the same type, which can be spotted by comparing the meaning in the different places where the word occurs. Remember, where the context in one place forces a particular meaning, preference should be given to that meaning elsewhere unless there
is good reason to the contrary. Other examples include בֵּית לֶחֶם which normally means territory, not border. Onkelos does not make that mistake, he correctly renders it as תֵּרָא. A field is a portion of land that is delineated by borders, and the nearest Hebrew word is מַלְקָה (short for מַלְקָה שֵׁרֶד), whereas שֵׁרֶד means simply land – often a synonym for אֲרֵץ – unbounded. The land referred to in a particular context may be bounded, e.g. שֵׁרֶד פְּרוֹח. Ephron’s land, which is of course bounded and separated from someone else’s land by a natural boundary (such as water) or by fences or landmarks – unspecified. But this is indicated by the delineator ‘Ephron’s’, and not implied in the word שֵׁרֶד itself. In contrast, נֵבֶל means bounded territory.

[Incidentally, an alternative to שֵׁרֶד often used is the archaic form שֵׁד (which does not mean ‘my ...’), and likewise the alternative to the construct שֵׁרֶד, which is a singular, and not a plural. The plural is שֵׁד, ‘lands’, i.e. plots of land unspecified. The singular is often used instead of אֲרֵץ – for some unknown reason we usually find אֲרֵץ מַכְּבוֹד and אֲרֵץ גָּוֵי but שֵׁד מַכְּבוֹד and שֵׁד גָּוֵי or sometimes שֵׁד מַכְּבֹּר and שֵׁד גָּוֵי. The latter means the Land (not lands) of Moab.]

Two very serious mistakes occur traditionally in translating words. One has been recognised by scholars, but is still taught wrongly and used wrongly by many – צֶרֶת does not mean leprosy, a normally incurable but only mildly infectious disease of the nerves, skin and bones, but refers to a type of skin problem, probably flaking, which can disappear (Lev.14:3), and which is not leprosy. The word lepra is really the correct (Latin and Greek) translation of צֶרֶת, but the mistake arose some twelve hundred years ago, when John of Damascus, an Arab doctor, wrongly used this word to describe what we call ‘leprosy’. The consequence has been unnecessary terror and rough treatment of (actual) lepers by society. For instance in Hawaii a special law was passed banning the term ‘leprosy’ and substituting ‘Hansen’s disease’, because ‘biblical associations’ had led to lepers being regarded as ‘unclean’ (another mistake) and so prevented from receiving proper treatment.

The other, which is far too complicated to go into here, is the word פְּלַאָאָה. The American translation ‘labor’ is totally and absolutely wrong
from every angle. The English ‘work’ is no better, though the plural
‘works’, which has a different connotation, could be acceptable in some
contexts. It is generally understood to mean some form of activity, an
abstract noun, but there is no evidence to prove that it is ever an abstract
noun. It occurs often as a concrete noun, and is almost certainly a concrete
noun wherever it occurs in the Bible. The confusion arises because it has
quite a different meaning, indeed an abstract noun, in the Talmud, and this
meaning is applied wrongly in the Bible. This is a subject on its own, and
to explain how to correct the mistake would take far more space than is
justified here. The error has led to grave problems in trying to explain the
concept and laws of the Sabbath.

There are numerous other cases. It can be shown, for instance, that בַּשַּׁבָּח is a sheep and בַּשַׁבָּנָה is a lamb, and the two are not interchangeable. Here is
not the place to give a long list, merely to stress the importance of getting
the meaning of a word correct in order not to misunderstand the Holy Text.

Apart from the meaning of a word, there is also the connotation, i.e. the
subtle variation of meaning, which may differ somewhat from one case to
another, but more often varies between a wider and a narrower meaning.
The narrower one may well be technical, and we find the same word used,
even in a similar context, sometimes in a technical sense and sometimes not.
We must be careful, in peshat, not to force out esoteric explanations in such
cases.

A good example is the word אכזר, which incidentally does not mean
‘unclean’, but approximately barred or forbidden. We have in Lev. 11 a list
of creatures whose carcases are not allowed to be eaten, and some, but not all, are referred to as אכזר. The latter word is used there in a technical
sense, meaning that they may not be brought into a holy place, and that in
various ways (described elsewhere) they contaminate by contagion, passing
on this bar of entry to a holy place and so on, according to the rules of
‘tum’ah’. This bar does not apply to all the creatures whose flesh may not
be eaten, for instance forbidden fish and insects. A dead fly may be brought
into the Sanctuary courtyard, and a live one that annoys may be killed there
(unless there happens to be a rabbinic restriction), but not a mouse or lizard.
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A virtually identical list appears in Deut. 14, but there Moses uses the word אָכַל to refer to all the creatures whose flesh may not be eaten, i.e. uses the word to mean simply ‘forbidden’. He does not relate there to the laws of tum’ah at all! In fact the word אָכַל (with its grammatical variations of form) occurs several times in the Torah, in at least four different connotations, and it is essential to get the right one each time. Once you understand the different connotations, the context helps you to know which one is being used. Forcing the connotation of a word as used in one place into another place is used by derash to deduce all sorts of things, but this is not peshat.

Another important word is used in two connotations, yet this fact is overlooked, leading to problems followed by forced explanations to solve them. The word is כְּנֶסֶת, which is really best rendered in English by the word minister used in its very widest sense. In 2 Sam 8:18 כְּנֶסֶת, the phrase כְּנֶסֶת occurs a few times in Deuteronomy and in Joshua, and the meaning is ambiguous – does it mean specifically the Levites, who were ministers (not in the technical sense of Priests like the sons of Aaron)? Or does it mean the Priests (i.e. the Aaronites) who were in fact Levites? The answer is not simple.

In Joshua 3-4 the kohanim the leviim carriers of the Ark and subsequently just the kohanim carriers of the Ark carry the Ark across the dry bed of the Jordan. This could not mean the Aaronites, since the Ark was not carried by the Priests, but by the Levites of the clan of Kohath. In Deut. 31:9 (compare verse 26), the Levites are also meant, as undoubtedly in 18:1. But in Deut. 24:8 Moses certainly meant the Aaronites, as did Ezekiel (44:15) – Zadok was an Aaronite that David appointed High Priest. In these cases the context helps us, but not in Deut. 17:9&18 and 27:9. Who are meant there? Peshat does not always explain everything. When it fails we must be honest and
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admit there is no peshat, and that we are taking our explanation (if we have one) from elsewhere.
Chapter 2

THE PRECISE WORDING OF THE TEXT

The Torah (Pentateuch) is virtually error-free, and the accuracy of our text is reliable. It is therefore important to look carefully at what the text actually says, and not to look just at the whole verse and jump to conclusions. Here too, the precise meaning of words and the connotation in context (as explained in the last chapter) is critical.

Let us take an example from Gen. 47:22. When the Egyptians were starving and begged Joseph to sell them food, he gave them food in exchange for their land, which he bought from them. An exception was the land owned by the priests, because בֶּן מַמָּא פָרִיעָה ... אֶלְכָּל אַתְּ חַקֶּשׁ. I had always misunderstood this, and later when I discovered the error I found that many people whom I spoke to had made the same mistake. It is due only to carelessness in not reading the words properly. בֶּן means (so I assumed) a law, and Pharaoh made a law that their land was not to be sold. The damage is partly due to a desire to rush through the text so as to cover the weekly parashah each week, a fatal error.

In fact בֶּן very often does not mean a law at all, but an allocation, an allotment, even a perk. The (Israelite) priests were later given an allocation of the breast and part of the leg of certain animal offerings, referred to as בֶּן (Ex. 29:28). Here the (Egyptian) priests received an allocation of food from Pharaoh, presumably free, and as the verse continues, they ate their allocation, as a result of which they were not starving, and there was no need for them to even consider selling their land.

Such errors are usually subjective, each person makes his own mistakes, but there are some that are generally accepted! One that was brought to my notice concerns the annual Festival at Shiloh, referred to in the Book of Judges (21:19-21). Everyone who has read this remembers how the girls used to come out and dance in the vineyards. But look carefully. It does not say that at all. It says that the Benjamites were told to hide in the vineyards, and when the girls came out to dance they should come out of the vineyards.
and seize them. This alters the picture, and enabled Dr. Yoel Eliyahu of
Ophrah (who pointed this out) to propose a location of the event in order to
explain various difficulties in the text.

One that has gained acceptance, but really belongs only to derash (if at
all), is in Lev. 23:43.

כָּכָכְתָה יָשָׁבָת יָאָת בֵּית יֵשָׁבָא בָּהֲזוֹיָא אִיתָמָא מַכָּכָיָא
The Israelites were made to live in shelters ‘when I brought them out of
Egypt’ – nowhere does it say that they lived in them for forty years in the
desert! In fact it mentions a few times that they lived in tents. Only at the
actual time of the Exodus were they forced to live in temporary shelters
(succot) until they had an opportunity to make tents.

A glaring example of widespread misreading is found with Pharaoh’s
chariots. Ask anyone who is familiar with the Torah how many chariots
Pharaoh took to chase after the Israelites, and you are almost certain to
receive the reply ‘six hundred’. Of course! Does it not say that he took six
hundred chariots, all the chariots of Egypt? NO! It does NOT! It says

וְיָדַע שֶׁמֵּאָנָא לְכֹל בָּהֲזוֹר לֵךְ לַכְּבַּבְּמָא

‘He took six hundred chosen chariots AND all the chariots of Egypt.’
The ‘chosen’ ones were probably the gold-plated de luxe chariots of which
excavators have found remains, probably used by senior army officers and
high officials. How many chariots did he take? It does not say, but a
reasonable guess is that it was not less than a thousand.

How many chariots Pharaoh took is not important, the point here is how
careless reading distorts what the text actually says.
Chapter 3

IN CONTEXT

Unlike derash, peshat does not normally like to take things out of context. Here exceptionally we will take an example from halakha, because it illustrates the difference very clearly, but we are not stating halakha. We find, in Lev. 19:17-18,

לא תשוא את אחיך בלבך, שחטת חמדת אתה ע鹵ית ולא תשקי עליך התיה;
לא תкон ולא תפרט את בני עמק, יאבקת לכלך קמק (אני ה).

Derash analyses this into four sections (as shown), regarding each section as a separate law. (The third section in fact is sub-divided into two, but we need not consider that for our purposes here. Nor need we consider here the two words, placed here in brackets, at the end.) Each section is taken independently, and is treated as having no connection with the rest.

There is no objection to this – derash is essential in the study of halakha, but as long as you remember that it is derash, and is not peshat. Here the superficial meaning of the derash, without going into depth, is obvious – only when you go into depth, to find exactly what each section means, does it get complicated. But the peshat paradoxically is not so obvious, and needs to be shown. The four sections are not independent but connected, and follow on from one another logically.

[The use of four different expressions each meaning ‘your fellow Israelite’ is something else, of interest in itself, but not relevant to our main discussion here.]

1. You are not to hate your brother (i.e. fellow-Israelite) in your mind.

Do not retain any inward ill-feeling towards him. When is this most likely to happen? Presumably when he has done you harm or annoyed you in some way. But if the hatred is there within, you cannot just ‘not hate’ – you have to remove it. It then tells you how.

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2. You are to rebuke him, and not carry a sin on his account.

   There is always a possibility of a misunderstanding, or that he is unaware that he has offended you, or unaware that you have taken it so seriously that you bear a grudge. It is up to you to rebuke him, either gently or perhaps severely so as to hurt him in return, depending on circumstances, personalities and so on. As long as you hold it all within, you are sinning. Once you bring it out, he may apologise or try to make it up, and all is well. If he does not, you have performed your duty, you have done your best, and you no longer sin (apparently even if you continue to hate him).

3. You are not to take revenge, etc. (The difference between the two verbs mentioned here needs of course to be explained.) This does not mean do not retaliate at the time, but do not hit back later.

   The temptation in the first place is either to retain hatred within, or to take revenge. Do neither. Rebuke him, do not take revenge.

4. And you will love him as yourself. (‘As yourself’ requires explaining.)

   This is not an instruction, but a consequence, alternatively it tells you the attitude you should take when handling the matter, using (2) above which is expressed as a positive instruction, and not (1) or (3) which are expressed as negative ones.

   One can go into this a little more deeply. Rebuying is essential, not only as an alternative to retaining inner hatred, but also perhaps as an alternative to doing nothing. For his sake, if not for yours, he must be made to know that he has done wrong. Otherwise, (a) you may later be tempted to hate him even if you do not do so now – you think you have forgiven him, but deep down you have not done so as long as he does not ask you to, (b) he may continue to act that way to others, not seeing anything wrong in it, and you are wasting an opportunity to help him by preventing this.

   From all this one can see how all four sections are interconnected and interrelated. A further insight can be obtained by taking two other quotations, not biblical, together, and seeing how they fit in. Hillel told a
man that the entire Torah is a teaching on how not to do to others what you do not want done to yourself. George Bernard Shaw wrote ‘Beware of the man who does not return your blows – he neither forgives you, nor allows you to forgive yourself!’ On stopping to consider this, it becomes largely self-evident. Combine this with Hillel’s remark. You do not want someone not to return your blows, so do not fail to return blows to others. However, the Torah says ‘Do not take revenge’ - you do not actually return the blows (unless perhaps on the spot, the Torah is referring to later), but you do return them in the form of a rebuke. Having told him what you think of him, you are more likely to forget it and forgive, and you will enable him to apologise and thus forgive himself.

The whole needs a great deal of thought, but at all events it is different to the derash, which takes the second section out of context, assumes that the rebuking is not over a personal injury but over a sin, any illegal act, and requires that it should be applied only if it is likely to have effect. The peshat requires the rebuke whether he will take notice or not.

Another problem ties up with what has been dealt with in an earlier chapter, the precise meaning of words. A word may have several different meanings with the same etymology, but the context helps.

Consider an English analogy. The word post (from the Latin) means roughly a location (‘position’ – same root). How this came to mean a bar of wood or metal stuck into the ground (to mark a position), where a soldier stands, a degree of hierarchy in which a person finds himself in a big organisation, the system of communication by letters (American ‘mail’), an idiom for speed (‘post-haste’) and so on, cannot be detailed here. All are connected historically, but the meanings have diverged and there is no longer a connection between the post-office (‘mail’) and a bar of wood. Were this Hebrew, when the word occurs in one meaning, derash would not hesitate to bring in another meaning to ‘interpret’.

For example, הָלַךְ means a leg (more accurately a leg-and-foot), but it can also mean ‘a time’ in the sense of ‘three times’ etc., synonymous with the more usual מִפְרָק. More than likely ‘time’ and ‘leg’ have the same etymology, the initial meanings once tied up, but when we reach Biblical
Hebrew the connection has long since been forgotten. In the story of Balaam (Num. 22:28, 32, 33) כלשות can only mean three times (‘thrice’). The same applies to the pilgrim festivals (Ex. 23:14), confirmed by the use of כלשות in the very same context in Ex. 23:17, Ex. 34:23 and Deut. 16:16. This is peshat. However, derash insists on being ‘over-literal’ and interpreting it here as ‘leg’ or ‘foot’, hence the rather ridiculous English rendering ‘the three foot-festivals’ which I was always taught.
Chapter 4

THE IMPORTANCE OF GRAMMAR

Sadly, Biblical Hebrew grammar is much neglected. Where not, it is taught as a subject on its own, which is more than most people can take, instead of teaching the language correctly, with grammar interspersed as you go along. Grammar ‘as a subject’ should only be taught in revision, a summary of what is mostly already known but in systematic order. The way it is done today, the teachers themselves do not know anything about it, and cannot teach it, so they guess their way through and pupils do the same. Failing to understand the grammar of Classical Hebrew properly leads to misunderstanding the peshat of the text.

We are taught the rules of inflexion – how a verb is conjugated, and so on. But we are not taught the rules of syntax. What is more, they try to apply the concept of ‘tense’ to inflexion, which in Classical Hebrew just does not work. You have two forms which are used in certain ways to produce various past and future tenses, but you do not have, as in Latin, later Aramaic and Modern Hebrew, a form for the future and a form for the past.

A particular example is one quoted very casually by Rashi on Gen. 4:1, again on Gen. 21:1, and more carefully on the Talmud where it discusses the latter verse (B. Kama 92b). Rashi was a grammatical scholar, that is to say he had studied the subject thoroughly, but he was not a grammarian like Saadya earlier or Ibn Ezra later. He does not teach us a law of syntax, but quotes it as if everyone knows and understands it, so that he is merely pointing out its application here. I have not found this rule in any grammar book. Where does Rashi get it from? I have not found it in the works of Menahem or Donash, and presume that it was in one of the now lost volumes of Saadya Gaon’s 12-volume grammar. But the rule is a sound one and an important one.

The rule is that when a past matter is being considered, the subject normally follows the verb, or if a pronoun it is omitted, if the subject comes...
**Pesha Before Derash**

*before* the verb, the verb is a pluperfect. Thus in the first case, had it said ידוע הָאָדָם את הָיוָה אֱשֶׂתָם, that would have meant ‘then Adam got to know his wife Eve’. But it does not say that, it says ... עִדָּמְנוּ, subject (Adam) before the verb (got to know), meaning ‘now Adam had [already, previously] got to know his wife Eve’. (Note incidentally, not ‘knew’ or ‘had known’ but ‘(had) got to know’.) Actually the rule is somewhat wider, referring to relative tenses in general, the ‘pluperfect’ being a particular instance. Rashi may well have been aware of this. He does not quote it as a rule, but merely refers to its application here and in Gen. 21:1.

We find this rule in many other cases, e.g. ניבי ישראלי חלلد ביתשח ‘had walked’, before the Egyptians followed and got drowned (Ex. 14:29 and 15:19 – contrast 14:22 where no pluperfect is intended). There are a number of exceptions, but overall the rule applies throughout the Tanakh. Alas, our teachers have failed to appreciate what Rashi was saying.

Rashi applies the rule to Gen. 4:1. If we apply it to Gen. 4:4, just three verses later, we discover that contrary to the way we were taught, Abel brought his offering *before* Cain brought his, which then puts the story in a different setting. With a little more careful delving and thought we then understand the whole story as *pesha* with no need for fire from heaven. Abel first brought his offering, to which G-d ‘turned’ or looked [favourably] – how? By granting a blessing as a reward. The flocks flourished and expanded! Cain, seeing this, brought an offering so as to likewise get a reward, in other words as an investment, for which reason it was not looked on favourably! The Torah makes it clear that the fact that one brought of his animals and the other of his land produce was irrelevant with regard to acceptance. Each brings according to what is in his sphere. Acceptance depends on the attitude with which it is brought. (Compare Deut. 16:17.)

Another instance occurs in the Ten Commandments (once in each version) and in two other cases, four in all. We find (regarding idols etc.) לא יְקַבְּדוּ (velo to ‘ovedem, although for some unknown reason the Sephardim say ‘ta’ovedem’). What does this mean? Surprisingly even the grammarian David Kimchi (Radak) says that this is simply a variation of לא יְקַבְּדָם,
and means the same thing. Then why, since the letters are the same, did the Masoretes apply different vowels? If it means *ta'avedem* it should say so. *Ta’avedem* would be the regular form meaning ‘serve them’, but Radak overlooks the fact that *to’ovedem* is not irregular, it is the regular form of the *hof’al*, or causative passive, and if it is read that way then that is what it means: ‘You are not to be made/cause/persuaded to serve them’. This makes perfect sense, and does not require an unnecessary distortion of the grammar.

A final word. Do not overdo it. Grammar is important, but its rules are not infallible and are often broken. However, it is quite unjustified to assume, as Radak does here, that the rules are broken, when applying the rules makes sense and does not create problems.
Chapter 5

THE IMPORTANCE OF STYLE

There is an assumption that nothing in the Torah, at least, is truly redundant, and if something appears to be, then there is a special reason for it. Now in any language there are often idioms and idiomatic expressions which carry words that we could do without. While derash says that these words are in fact not needed in the context, and therefore teach us something extra, peshat allows these as necessary where the style of the language demands them.

Consider an example in English. You say to a child ‘Go and get dressed, wash yourself, and come and sit down and eat your breakfast.’ All that you wish to convey could be condensed into ‘Dress, wash, and eat.’ But somehow it doesn’t sound right. Obviously he cannot get dressed without first going to the place where he does it, he is not being told to wash someone else, he is not expected to eat supper first thing in the morning, nor to eat someone else’s breakfast, nor to eat it standing up. The extra words are apparently unnecessary, and derash would treat them as superfluous, but peshat makes allowance for the demands of the style of the language. The whole question of redundancy and how it is dealt with is considered in a later chapter, but here we will merely mention three of the more common examples of the demands of style in adding words that we could perhaps manage without.

The first is the use of auxiliary verbs, similar to the ‘go and’ in the English example given. One is exactly that – to precede a gentle command or instruction with קָרָה or with דָּאָה, or to follow the instruction with קָרָה – or, as grammar demands, קָרָה and so on. This latter is like saying ‘get yourself something to drink’.

Similar to this is the idiom בֹּאֵשׁ עֵינִי חֲרָה ‘he looked up and saw’, which occurs several times. If he was looking down, then he would have to look up first in order to see, but we do not need to be told that! It is simply idiomatic usage.
**Pesah Before Derash**

The second is the use of the infinitive before a verb, especially but not only in a command, for emphasis, such as אבד תמאבדו, for which the only good English equivalent is ‘make quite sure that you destroy ... completely.’ Derash calls this ‘doubling’, and treats the first word as redundant, pesah says that the text wishes to emphasise and this is the way to do it.

The third is explained very well by Rashbam (Rashi’s grandson Samuel) who fully appreciated the importance and relevance of style. It occurs in early Biblical poetry – a verse starts with part of the sentence, stops in the middle leaving it in mid-air, and starts again, slightly differently. It is used when addressing someone, often G-d, and is found mainly in the early poems – in the Song of the Red Sea, the Song of Deborah, and a few psalms, particularly those attributed by tradition to Moses (90-100). The reader will no doubt recognise the following examples –

ימנו. ה. נאקרי יכתב – ימינו. ה. חרש איב
רע שפקתי, ברוה – שפקתי אמי...
כי ת窗 איבך. ה. כי תלה איבך יאבדו
לה לה, שפקות עמי – לה לה, בורך זני

In the second example, Deborah is being addressed (by Barak). שפקתי is an archaic form of שפקתי.

Incidentally, note where commas have been carefully inserted in the above and where they have not. In the last case בן אלהם (or משמחת עמי in the other version) is the subject of the command (the ‘vocative’), whereas ובך הוא is the object. This is a style in poetry alternative to the better-known ‘parallelism’.

Derash is not intended to make sense of the text, but to teach something else, so we must not expect it to make sense of the text. In Ex. 15:16, the phrase רכ ציבר occurs twice (the same rule of style as in the examples above).

Until your people will have crossed,.... רכ ציבר עמי ה
until the people .... will have crossed רכ ציבר עמי ו קינית

The midrash attributes the repetition to the crossings of the Arnon and the Jordan, but the repetition is merely poetic Hebrew style. At the time when they crossed the Red Sea they did not expect to cross either the Arnon or the
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*Jordan, as there was no intention of doing so.* Moses, if he already knew the details of the plan, expected them to enter Canaan from the South at Kadesh Barnea. Only later because they refused did they have to spend forty years in the desert, and after their earlier abortive attempt a new plan was devised, whereby they entered from the East, crossing the Arnon and the Jordan. Certainly when singing at the Red Sea they had no such thing in mind, even sub-consciously. Actually the verb SPORT does not mean to cross in the restricted sense of crossing a river, or of crossing ‘over’, but to traverse, and can be used equally for crossing the desert or passing through any region, land or sea, which they all realised they would have to do to reach the Promised Land. However, that is not the issue – we are talking about the repetition of the word, which to derash implies two crossings or traversings, but to peshat does not, it is just a particular style of expression.

So other cases too, to explain why something is not written in the way we would have written it. In the story of Cain and Abel discussed in the last chapter, we saw that Abel brought his offering first. Why then is Cain’s mentioned first? The answer is that a certain style had been chosen for the story, for whatever reason, and we have an order from the beginning of Chapter 4 until the middle of verse 5 (when it can no longer continue) as follows: Cain, Abel, Abel, Cain, Cain, Abel, Abel, Cain, Cain...

A similar result is obtained from a different style in Gen. 19:37-38, where Ammon (normally mentioned first) was born before Moab. Here the criterion of style is that the older girl always came first – she initiated the idea, she acted first, her pregnancy came first, so her giving birth is also mentioned first even though it came second.

A further effect of style is considered later, in Chapter 7.

Idiomatic style tends to overrule the simple principles of grammar, and may lead to ambiguity, in turn causing us to err. A classic case is in Gen. 2:3, where we find

محمد, مليمحمdeny إسهر. ‘א, יישם.

Unfortunately the pronoun is omitted (‘א, יישם is a conjunction, not a pronoun) as often in Biblical Hebrew and even in English ‘that G. (had?) created to make’, and we tend to put it back in the wrong place.
Peshat Before Derash

It is not מַכְּל מֶלֶךְ וְאֶשֶּר לַעֲשׁוֹת, leaving מַכְּל מֶלֶךְ וְאֶשֶּר לַעֲשׁוֹת in the air without an object, since we often find the phrase מַכְּל מֶלֶךְ וְאֶשֶּר לַעֲשׁוֹת but never the phrase מַכְּל מֶלֶךְ וְאֶשֶּר לַעֲשׁוֹת. It is מַכְּל מֶלֶךְ וְאֶשֶּר לַעֲשׁוֹת, leaving מַכְּל מֶלֶךְ וְאֶשֶּר לַעֲשׁוֹת without an object. For the consequence of this, see Nachmanides, who gets the right answer although he goes a long way round to reach it. The problem (of a transitive verb without an object) is still there, but it is a different verb that is ‘left in the air’ and hence a different answer for the implied object.
Chapter 6

THE IMPORTANCE OF PUNCTUATION

Punctuation is important in understanding text. Sir Ernest Gowers, one time head of the British Civil Service, wrote a book and conducted a (successful) campaign to get the Civil Service to use correct and simple English. He objected strongly to a suggestion that commas should be abolished in order to save the time, and thus the cost, of secretaries. He pointed out the difference between ‘The public say Civil Servants are morons’ and ‘The public, say Civil Servants, are morons.’

In the Bible we have the punctuation of ta’amey hamikra, a very useful system which attaches a punctuation mark to (nearly) every word, and grades them. Each word thus has a relative position in the sentence or verse. In contrast, our modern system puts marks between words, and uses them sparingly. Sometimes a writer wishes he had stronger and weaker commas, and feels the lack. However, the modern system does have the advantage of quotation marks, question marks, and brackets (or parentheses) which the Biblical system lacks. What is more, the division into ‘verses’ does not always correspond to the division into sentences. For instance, the first three ‘verses’ of the Bible constitute one sentence, with verse 2, the middle verse, in parentheses, and a semi-colon in the middle of the third verse.

Just as in Gowers’ example quoted above, so in Hebrew, a change in punctuation can completely alter the meaning of the text. We may take an example from halakhah, because in this instance there is no derash to contradict the peshat. What is interesting is how it can so easily be misunderstood. We will first look at Num. 19:12 as it is usually read (in public) and what it would mean if this were correct.

הָאָרְמִיָּה וְהַתִּשְׁמָע בְּיָמִים בְּשָׁלוֹשִׁים וְגוֹיָם שֶׁבְּשַׁבִּית לָא יִטְקְרָא: ‘If he does not cleanse himself on the third day, then on the seventh day he will not become clear.’

King James, in his archaic English, renders it this way. ‘But if he purify himself not on the third day, then the seventh day he shall not be clean.’
**Peshat Before Derash**

(We are not concerned here with the difference between ‘cleanse’ and ‘purify’, ‘clear’ and ‘clean’, but with *when* he has to do it to achieve the required result.) This is the way most readers read it in the synagogue, misled by the tune, and the way the Yemenites explain the text (to which they need a *derash* to correct it) because they are taught the rules of punctuation of *ta’amey hamikra* incorrectly.

Now look at the verse as it should be read.

גַּם־לָא יְהַשֵּׁא בַּיָּמִים מְשַׁלְשֵׁי בְּיָמֵי חַשָּׁבוֹתָיו לֵאמֶר:

He has to cleanse himself on both the third and the seventh days, otherwise he will not become clear at all. This interpretation is universally accepted as the *halakhah*, it is confirmed by the text itself later (Num. 31:19 which could not be understood any other way, King James missed it), but is made obvious by the punctuation of the *ta’amey hamikra*. (The same applies to the first half of the verse, but we have not quoted it so as not to confuse the issue, as there is a different problem there.)

*Derash* of course disregards punctuation completely, the most notorious case being Ex. 23:2, where we are told simply not to turn aside to follow the majority to pervert justice. The *derash* says that you *should* follow the majority to pervert! Here it is not enough to have a *derash* to tell us that the text does not mean what it says but something else – you need a *derash on a derash* to explain that the first *derash* does not mean what it says but something else!]

Another example is in Gen. 1:11-12

הָרַשָּׁה הַכּוֹכֹבִּים לְאָשֶׁר מִקְרוּיָם לִצְנֵה
קָעָל פֶּרֶס אֶשֶׁר פָּרָה לְכָנִי אֶתְרַחֲבָה לְכָנִי...
וְהוֹלְצִים הַכּוֹכֹבִּים לְאָשֶׁר מִקְרוּיָם לִצְנֵה
קָעָל פֶּרֶס אֶשֶׁר מִרְּחָבָה לְכָנִי...

The above is an approximate division as usually punctuated, but not correct. King James (who here agrees with most traditional translations) has ‘Let the Earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind’.

The punctuation shows first that אָשֶׁר is construct – this as commentators have pointed out is understood by the punctuation of a *revia* and not (as in
some bad manuscripts) a *zakef* on the word. אֲשֶׁר is a general term meaning, roughly, vegetation, and is of two types – אֲשֶׁר a collective meaning roughly ‘grasses’ in the widest sense, and אֲשֶׁר here too a collective meaning ‘trees’, so it means ‘May the ground produce vegetation of grasses ... and trees ...’. But אֲשֶׁר do not mean ‘after its kind’ but ‘of (their) various kinds’ (or ‘species’, sometimes, but not here, ‘varieties’) see Lev. 11:15 etc. And with the correct punctuation it refers not to the last noun but to the first one in the previous clause. Thus

תרש את תְמוֹנָתא קָטָן אֵשֶׁר יִשְׁרְאֵל לֹא יִהְיוּ אֵשֶׁר יִרְוּ אָנָן תְמוֹנָתא קָטָן אֵשֶׁר יִשְׁרְאֵל לֹא יִהְיוּ אֵשֶׁר יִרְוּ

That is to say, vegetation of seed-bearing grasses of various kinds, and fruit-bearing trees of various kinds, with the seed within. That the grass or tree produces fruit or seed ‘according to its kind’ may well be true, but is not what it says.

Here we see the involvement of at least three principles – the correct meaning of words, the precise wording of the text, and the punctuation, all three of which are traditionally disregarded to produce an incorrect result.

An interesting case arises from a discussion in the Gemara at the beginning of *Bava Kama* on Ex. 22:4

וֹסֵל אַתָּכָה אֲנָחָה He releases his animals, and they consume on someone else’s land. [Note ‘animals’ – Hebrew collective.]

The Gemara here admittedly considers *derash*, and admittedly discusses *halakhah*, but the argument is based initially on the *peshat* of the verse, and as such does not make much sense.

But the argument would make sense if the punctuation were changed

וֹסֵל אַתָּכָה אֲנָחָה בָּשָׂר He releases his animals and/or they consume, on someone else’s land. [The Gemara takes ‘or’ not ‘and’.]
Peshat Before Derash

One is tempted to say that the punctuation was ignored or distorted for the purpose of derash, but I am inclined to think not. We do know from elsewhere that in some cases the punctuation of ta’amey hamikra (not then written down, but memorised by heart) as accepted by the Talmud differed a bit from that which we have from the Masoretes (just as the spelling sometimes differed, with and without a vav). I strongly suspect that this is one of those cases.

In any event, for the purpose of peshat the punctuation of the ta’amey hamikra must not be ignored. In most cases if we do ignore it (or treat it the Yemenite way) we get something idiotic, as in Lev. 4:5

לֶאִם הֵמֵאֶת מְכֵה בֶּקֶר   ‘the priest who is anointed with blood of the bull shall take’, instead of
לֶאִם הֵמֵאֶת מְכֵה בֶּקֶר   ‘the anointed priest shall take from the blood of the bull’.

The danger is not when the error makes nonsense, as here, but when it makes sense only wrong sense, as it does in Num. 19:12 quoted above.
Chapter 7

CHANGING THE ORDER

Often the Hebrew punctuation used — not just the punctuation marks (mentioned in an earlier chapter), but the punctuation itself — differs from the sort of thing we are used to. We know that individual words in a clause occur in a different order, but sometimes the clauses or groups of words in a sentence are in a different order. In such cases we may have to do one of two things —

(a) to remove a group of words completely and translate the verse without them, then and only then to reinsert them and see how they fit in to make sense, or

(b) to change the order — to remove a clause from its place and put it somewhere else in the sentence, such as taking it out from the middle and putting it into the beginning or at the end. The verse then looks ‘right’ to us, it is the way we would have written it and makes sense. Then we must remember that we did not write it, someone else did, who used a different style (and there was no special divine reason for this, it was the natural style of the language at the time), so we put it back where it was in the first place, but read it in such a way that it makes sense the way intended, which is not the way we would normally read something written that way today.

This sort of thing applies particularly to words that are in brackets. Deut. 3:19 presents no problems, but shows that that sort of thing was done.

I have put in the extra spaces — they were not there originally. It is obvious that the middle section is in brackets. We can take it out completely, make sense of the verse without it, and then put it back in. Here we do not need to do that, because it is so obvious, but that is not always so.

Gen. 15:13 makes sense either way, but different sense, and the context does not help. Peshat here is ambiguous, but when we know the whole story we can see which is intended.

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This is the way one is naturally inclined to read it. But the whole story tells us it is wrong. Try this –

Do the same trick – remove the middle part, translate the verse without it, and then put it back in without changing the translation of the main part.

The residence (partly in Canaan which would not yet belong to them), and not the servitude, would last four hundred years.

An interesting case arose where the verse itself appeared to make sense as read directly, yet there were great problems.

Note the etnachta, a sort of semi-colon in the middle of the verse.

‘They camped beyond Arnon ..... because Arnon is the border of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites.’ So says King James. Really? It looks alright at first. Arnon, a river, acts as the border. But then two problems arise. First Arnon is not just a river, but a valley some two miles wide with a river running through it – hardly suitable for a border. Second, במבלי does not mean ‘border’, it means territory. So Arnon is Moabite territory between Moab and the Amorites. This makes no sense at all. Either it is Moabite territory, or it is a no-man’s land between Moab and the Amorites, but not both!

The commentators fight shy of this, but it makes sense if we look at it differently.

We now have two large gaps. If we remove the middle section entirely, we see that they camped beyond Arnon, between Moab and the Amorites. We can now re-insert the bit we took out – first put it back at the beginning of the verse. ‘Because Arnon is Moabite territory, they camped beyond Arnon, between Moab and the Amorites’. Now put it back in its original place, but in brackets, ‘They camped beyond Arnon (because Arnon is Moabite territory and they were not allowed to enter Moabite territory) between Moab and the Amorites.’
One could go further and remove the brackets, replacing them with commas. ‘They camped beyond Arnon ..., because Arnon is Moabite territory, between Moab and the Amorites’ – somehow we feel that this is wrong, it is not good English. True, but it is good classical Hebrew, so we see why we were misled at the beginning, and that in order to make sense we may have to change the word order from the way it was written to the way we would have written it, without implying criticism of the way it was written. It was correct for Classical Hebrew, but not for English or even for Rabbinic, let alone Modern, Hebrew!

Conversely, ‘because’ in English is a strong word that can begin a sentence, while the Hebrew הָעָלָה is weak and cannot normally be used there in that sense (though it can in the sense of ‘if’ or ‘when’). A stronger word might put on more emphasis than the author wished, so this style was used.

[In English we could do better. ‘They camped between Moab and the Amorites, beyond Arnon because Arnon is Moabite territory.’ This makes it quite clear.]

A large number of problems concerning the route by which Moses led the Israelites through Transjordan have arisen only from mistranslating this verse.
Chapter 8

EXCESS WORDS

There is an axiom that in the Torah at least nothing is unnecessary. It follows that any word that could apparently be omitted is really there to teach us something that we have not noticed, and might perhaps otherwise never notice. As we have explained in an earlier chapter, for derash anything which is logically unnecessary, that is to say where the meaning can be understood without it, is superfluous, and can be used to deduce something additional that may or may not be entirely relevant to the subject matter. On the other hand, peshat makes allowance for idiom and style, in fact demands style. We have considered the example of repetition in poetic style. But there can still be apparent redundancy.

How is redundancy dealt with? The analogy is when you take a watch or a motor-cycle engine to pieces, in order to repair it. You fix something or other and then put it together again, but lo and behold you have a spare screw left over. Yet when you try the thing out it works! It may be difficult for a woman to appreciate this problem, but every man has encountered it somewhere or other, some time or other, even if only when watching someone else doing it.

Derash is pleased. We managed to reassemble the thing without this screw, so it is redundant. We have a spare screw and can use it for something else (not even necessarily relevant)!

Peshat says ‘No!’ If the screw was there at the beginning it was needed, the manufacturers do not put in extra screws for no reason. The thing may work now, but has a good chance of soon going wrong. So we have done something wrong, we have missed out a screw somewhere. What we now have to do is to take it all to pieces and start all over again. Reassemble it carefully and make sure that wherever a screw is needed we put one in. We should end up without a surplus screw.

In other words, peshat says that we have not understood the text correctly, and we must start again from scratch and ‘re-built’ it.
Peshat Before Derash

There is however one big warning here. As Rashbam points out many times, irrelevant information is sometimes given which is needed as a background for something that comes later. The classic case that he quotes a few times in other places is with the sons of Noah who came out of the Ark (Gen. 9:18) which does not really fit. Canaan did not go into or come out of the Ark, other sons are not mentioned, and the information is not only apparently but actually irrelevant at that point. However it is given as background information so that the reader will understand what happened later. When Shem and Japhet behaved properly and Ham did not, Noah blessed the first two but cursed Canaan. What is the connection? Here we see that Canaan was the son of Ham. (Why he should have cursed Canaan altogether is another issue that we need not enter into here.) Rashbam cites a number of similar cases.
Chapter 9

USE AND MISUSE OF IMAGINATION

The rule in peshat is not to add any essential relevant details that should have been mentioned in the text. We have to make do with what we have got, and on anything important that is missing we can only speculate, without certainty.

Against this, we may use our imagination to interpolate reasonable background necessary to make sense.

One of the worst offences committed by those who use derash to explain the text, or more accurately to expand the text, concerns names. Where we have a name without details, and elsewhere details without a name, the two are identified with one another. An unnamed man was executed for breaking the Sabbath laws, and a man named Zelaphhehad ‘died for his own sin’, therefore Zelaphhehad was the Sabbath-breaker! There is no evidence to support this.

Sometimes even two different names are identified as one – Milcah had a sister Iscah who is mentioned nowhere else, so obviously she must have been Sarah! Peshat will have nothing to do with this sort of thing. A worse case is Keturah, the woman Abraham married after Sarah died. She of course was Hagar – so says Rashi. His grandson Samuel (Rashbam) simply says that according to the peshat she was not.

Let us consider. When Sarah died she was 127 years old. Abraham, ten years older, was 137, and he married Keturah after that. Keturah then bore him six children. When Hagar bore Ishmael he was 86. Let us say that Hagar was 13 – hardly less! 137 minus 86 leaves 51, so if Keturah was Hagar she was 64 at absolute minimum when she bore the first of six children! This would have been hardly less of a miracle than Sarah’s bearing one at 90, yet it is passed over as commonplace.

From a different angle, it is very hard to accept that after Sarah’s death Abraham would have been so cold-blooded as to insult her memory by taking back the woman she threw out!
This sort of midrash is not derivation but imagination, which is used very widely. That does not mean that imagination must be banished from peshat, merely that it must be limited to reasonable suppositions regarding background, and may not introduce major matters in the foreground.

A useful example, which is so important that we will deal with it at length, is the story of the Golden Calf. Many questions arise, that are answered by the midrash in a way that provokes more questions, in turn answered in a way that may shock us rather than soothe us. Yet peshat has a very easy explanation. Both draw on imagination, but in a different way.

Two main questions are asked: How come that Aaron apparently condoned idolatry? What happened to Hur, who was left behind in joint charge with Aaron but who mysteriously disappeared when he was most needed?

The midrash answers the second one first. Hur tried to stop the people, and he was lynched. To the first question, Aaron saw what happened to Hur, so he either played for time, or succumbed to great pressure and could not help himself.

Note that major information is inserted. No mention is made in the text of Hur’s being lynched, nor of the people having committed a sin of that nature, nor of any punishment or even rebuke over it. Why is such information, vital to understanding what happened, withheld from us? As for Aaron, there is a law that when threatened with the alternative of death or committing one of the three cardinal sins of idolatry, murder, or a serious sexual offence, יכרו לאל יћר, you should let them kill you and not sin. Hur died, Aaron saved his own life by yielding to pressure.

But there are more serious questions. Hur sacrificed his life so as not to commit idolatry, and his reward was to pass into oblivion. Even his murder was not recorded. Aaron who condoned idolatry (it seems) to save his life was rewarded by being made High Priest! Now it is easy to moralise over others, the law says that you must give your life rather than commit one of those sins. Would you or I have the strength and courage to stand up to that? And if we have not been tried, can we judge Aaron? Answer – that is not the point. We may not judge Aaron, we may say that he was human, but
if he could not stand up to that, especially with regard to idolatry, how can
he be fit to be High Priest? To be forgiven, yes, but to be High Priest? And
even if he did not really submit, but merely played for time, expecting
Moses the next day, he was in some way tainted with idolatry, even though
he did not commit it, and this alone should have been enough to prevent his
becoming High Priest.

The midrash answers that what he did was a very high and noble thing.
In order to save Israel, he was willing to sacrifice his life in the Next World
by not sacrificing it in this world! This establishes a very dangerous
precedent that can be used as an excuse for anything! Far from solving the
problem, the midrash makes it worse. We are left with a picture of Aaron
which is libellous in the extreme. He is presented as a religious coward who
succumbed to pressure so as to condone idolatry, and he is justified in this!

*Peshat* cleans him up considerably. He was not completely innocent,
because G-d was angry at him and only Moses’s intercession on his behalf
saved him from destruction (Deut. 9:29). But whatever his sin, it was not in
condoning idolatry, or he could not have been made High Priest. He was
punished by the death of two of his sons on the very day of his own
investiture, but in what way was that connected with his sin?

The commentators start well in considering the *peshat*, but do not
continue with it! Aaron was suddenly surrounded by thousands of people
who demanded that he should make them an idol. He asked them to bring
the gold from their wives’ and children’s ornaments. The commentators
explain that he felt this to be safe, as he was sure that the wives and
children would not give them. He was wrong, because (as it says) the people
brought their own. Now the text does not say anything about Aaron’s
attitude, it is an addition, but *it is reasonable, as a background to the story,
and it fits in with the wording*. It is therefore acceptable as *peshat*.

So far, so good. But why stop there? Why not go on?

Aaron melted the gold and then either moulded or chiselled out (there are
two opinions, it matters not which) an idol. Some claim that he merely
threw the gold into the fire and the idol emerged – that is not what it says,
that is merely what he told Moses afterwards. It says that he chiselled it
with a chisel, or moulded it with a mould, whichever way you prefer to translate the words. Why did he do this?

It is not at all unreasonable to assume that he carried on in the same way. He carved out a calf similar to the ones the Egyptians worshipped, not for the people to worship it but to ridicule it. He thought that he would show them how this thing on which the Egyptians conferred holiness could be made simply from their own gold, as he had done in front of their eyes. How could such a thing become a god? But no, the people acclaimed it as the god that had brought them out of Egypt! So he built an altar in front of it, again to ridicule it. Finally he announced that there would be a Festival to G-d the next day. He said ‘to G-d’, he knew very well that the people would imagine that he meant the idol, but that did not matter. The important thing was ‘tomorrow’, meanwhile to get them to bed. They were too excited. Next day, after a good night’s sleep, they would wake up realising what fools they had made of themselves the night before.

But again he was wrong. They got up extra early, offered sacrifices, ate and drank, and prepared to start an orgy. Aaron had made a mistake, the same mistake, at every stage. He had underestimated the people! But this in itself was not the sin. The sin was that in defiance of the Second of the Ten Commandments he had made an idol. He had disobeyed. In mitigation he had felt justified, as he had done it not for the purpose of idolatry but for the very opposite, to prevent idolatry. Still, he had disobeyed. We can see his sin, why G-d was angry, why also G-d was appeased somewhat and forgave him, and above all that he was in no way whatsoever responsible for consciously condoning idolatry. He was foolish, but not a coward. He was still fit to be High Priest. But he also had a lesson to learn first.

There is a difference between laws of justice, to be applied with wisdom and common sense, and rules of procedure in the Sanctuary which require strict obedience. As Aaron had treated the Second Commandment, so two of his sons applied reasoning to the rules of the Sanctuary, which demanded plain obedience, making them unfit to be priests. The result taught Aaron a painful lesson.
**Peshat Before Derash**

This explanation involves ‘reading between the lines’. It brings in background, Aaron’s mentality, in a reasonable and acceptable way, even though it is not mentioned clearly in the text. But it does not bring in major events or information whose omission from the text seems hard to explain. It must be stressed that the use of imagination in this way does not necessarily give the correct interpretation of the text. What it does do is to provide one possible explanation which should satisfactorily solve the problem. There may be others, of which (together with the one offered) one is the correct one. Without sufficient information we cannot be certain, but the existence of at least one possible explanation that is reasonable and realistic, that does not conflict with what is written, and that solves the problem, is enough to remove the problem as such. It enables us to accept the text, without having to bring in extraneous material that stretches the imagination or makes excessive demands on acceptance in the way that derash does.

As for Hur, there is a hint in Moses being told that the person responsible would be removed from the Book – and at that very time Hur disappears, we are not even told what happened to him. Could he perhaps have been the ringleader of the revolt? That would have made Aaron’s task much harder, and tended to confuse him so as to make faulty decisions.

In the case under consideration, the derash (which is not always acceptable, the classical commentators often cry against its teachings) libels Aaron, while the peshat clears him. One can easily understand (though not so easily justify) a desire to libel Esau by blaming him for even more than he deserves, but why libel Aaron? Furthermore why simultaneously, and without any evidence, turn Hur into a martyr, when the Torah clearly hints to the contrary. He is praised for helping Moses during the battle with Amalek, but that is all. Many people started well, but did not keep that way – David’s nephew Joab, King Joash, even Jehu and possibly Jeroboam son of Nebat. Whether Hur was or was not part of the revolt, there is no need to make him a martyr while libelling Aaron.

Here we see one of the biggest divergences between peshat and derash.
Chapter 10

THE PRECISE LOCATION OF VERSES

Sometimes the order of verses looks wrong. Again we must look very carefully and see if we have understood it all correctly.

For example, in Exodus chaps. 3-4, Moses is given a mission to perform and argues five times in an attempt to ‘get out of it’. Each time he is answered (3:10-4:17). Apparently he is finally convinced and in 4:18 we read that he went to his father-in-law Jethro to ask permission to go, which Jethro granted. So far so good.

Then in the next verse, 4:19, he is told ‘Go, return to Egypt because the people who wanted to kill you are dead.’ The information in the second part, that he need not fear, if needed at all, should have been given before he went to speak to Jethro. As for the first part, the whole tone seems to be ‘Stop arguing, stop messing about, get going!’ This too makes sense only before he spoke to Jethro, the latter implying that he was convinced and had decided to accept the mission. In other words we are led to conclude that verses 18 and 19 have been interchanged and should be the other way round – our verse 19 should have come first, followed by our verse 18.

But that is not the case. We are given the verses in the order we read, and there must be a reason. So we do not bring in a midrash with an extra story, but look carefully at what we have and try to understand it.

Moses goes to Jethro and suddenly asks permission to go and visit his family in Egypt, and Jethro answers ‘Go Ahead’. Are we not a little bit surprised? Would we not have rather expected him to ask ‘Why all of a sudden? Aren’t you happy here?’ Beyond that, we learn later that Moses put his wife and sons on a donkey, took them, and went, but on the way omitted to circumcise his son. This could only have been his younger son, who was thus eight days old. So when he set out, his son had just been born. Was that the time to leave? Would you not have expected Jethro to say ‘At least wait a bit till your wife, my daughter, recovers from the birth’?
**Peshat Before Derash**

What we would have expected Jethro to say is of no importance, but surely Moses would have expected Jethro to raise these objections – and Jethro did not!

We now get a slightly different picture. After the five arguments and the replies, Moses was *not* yet won over, but could not think of any more objections. So he went to Jethro (verse 18) *expecting Jethro to object!* Then he could return and place a sixth argument, ‘How can I go? Jethro, who has been so very good to me, won’t let me!’ But this failed, Jethro gave permission! Verse 19 then follows – ‘I saw through your trick, you tried to use Jethro as an excuse not to go, and it did not work. Now get going! Oh, and I see that you have an ace up your sleeve, which you are keeping till last – the seventh argument, that you cannot go to Egypt because as soon as you get there they will kill you! Well I will trump your ace. They won’t, because they are all dead.’ This verse **must** come *after* verse 18, as we have it.

Again, the explanation with imaginative addition is *not necessarily correct*, and is not directly implied in the text. It offers *one* reasonable possibility sufficient to remove the problem, there may be others.

Further examples are Gen 13:5-7 (which is more complicated, as other issues are involved) and Gen. 42:22-23, explaining why Joseph imprisoned Simeon in particular.
Chapter 11

REALISM AND PICTURING THE SITUATION

The midrash tends to lead people to imagine that all the stories we read in the Bible took place in a magic artificial world, with artificial people, the like of whom one will never meet today. They all had divine inspiration enabling them to foresee subsequent events, and neither thought nor acted like ordinary people, while supernatural miracles happened all the time.

This loses the whole point of all the biblical stories. The characters depicted in the histories were real people in a real world, who thought and behaved like real people. Even if you claim that Cain, Abel and Job were fictional, they were still typical and behaved like real people, no less than fictional characters in a novel. They are not intended to be idolised characters as in Greek mythology, which is the picture acquired when midrashim are taught to small children too young to differentiate between fact and fancy. Fancy is often important, but must not be confused with fact.

The whole point of the stories is that they illustrate real life. The details may be different, but there are points which are very relevant in both my life and yours, and the stories teach us how to behave, and how not to. We cannot learn all this from stories about artificial mythical characters. Derash can be fanciful and imaginary, peshat cannot.

Let us take an actual instance. Joseph left Hebron to visit his brothers who were in the vicinity of Shechem (modern Nablus), at least a two days’ journey northwards. The internal combustion engine had not yet been invented, nor even the bicycle. He found that they had moved on to Dothan, a day’s journey further north. When he arrived, Reuben put him into a dry cistern in order to save his life, as his brothers had wanted to kill him. He left him probably without food and certainly without water, and went away. On his return he was shocked to find that Joseph had disappeared. He tore his clothes, evidently believing that the brothers had killed Joseph after all. (See also 42:22.)
Where did Reuben go in the meantime? *Peshat* says that it does not matter, it is totally irrelevant to the story. He had some business to transact, or some job to do, never mind what. *Derash* says that he went to serve his father — the brothers took it in turns.

The first question that arises is ‘In that case why did Jacob need to send Joseph to find out what was happening? He saw one of them each day!’

But look at the whole thing realistically. How long was Reuben away? If he came back expecting to find Joseph alive and well he could not have been away for more than a few hours at most. Against this, from Dothan to Hebron where his father was staying was at least a three day’s journey, as we have seen. Add another three days for the return, and in the middle of a six days’ journey he would hardly have stopped for a few hours — probably a day at least. So to visit his father Reuben would have been away for at least a week, at the end of which Joseph would certainly have been dead from thirst and starvation. This does not fit in with the story.

You cannot explain the stories in the text on a basis of fanciful imagination run wild. You must be realistic.

In 1 Sam. 15:4, Saul gathered his army יִנַּצְחֵם בַּעֲלוֹת and mustered them at [a place called] The Telaim.’ He had 210,000 men, not far short of a quarter of a million. However, someone got it fixed into his head (not only here but in many other places as well) that the first word means ‘counted’ — it never does, though it can mean something that includes counting. The second word also means ‘sheep’ (or perhaps lambs). So the midrash translates these words that Saul ‘counted them with sheep’ and explains that each soldier brought with him a sheep which he handed over, and the sheep were counted by Saul, evidently an insomniac who kept awake until he reached nearly a quarter of a million, making sure that no individual animal was counted twice!

Try to picture it. The battle has to wait until the counting is finished. And anyone who does not have a sheep to bring cannot join the army. Beyond that, if a quarter of a million sheep got in the way of the battle it was just hard luck on the sheep.
**Pesah Before Derash**

However, this version serves a useful purpose. If ever you lie awake at night unable to slumber, visualise Saul’s army and the sheep, and try to help poor Saul to count them.

In 11:8 we find that Saul ‘mustered them at Bezek’. What did the soldiers bring here?
Chapter 12

NO NONSENSE

Do not be afraid of the truth. Something that appears silly probably is so the way you have understood it. You have gone wrong somewhere, start again.

When Jonah finally got to Nineveh

‘he called out saying “in forty days’ time Nineveh will be overthrown”.’

After just one day, everyone who had been behaving badly suddenly repented, even the King, and all started to behave properly.

Why? A man who goes around simply shouting ‘in just over a month the town will be destroyed’ would surely, in any society, be regarded as a nut-case, a lunatic let loose. Probably quite harmless, but certainly not to be taken seriously!

We find with Abraham ‘he preached’, and so here too. We must separate the two words. Jonah did not go around shouting like a madman ‘the town is going to be destroyed!’ First he preached a sermon, and only then, after each sermon he concluded with the words ‘In forty days’ time ...’ The sermon itself was effective, and so the people took the final remark seriously.
Chapter 13

THE QUESTION ITSELF

A principle of Zen philosophy must sometimes be applied. Do not jump to conclusions to force an answer, but at the same time do not ignore the question. Concentrate on the question, whether or not you can find an answer, but an unanswered question is far better than a forced answer.

If you simply concentrate on a question to which there is no quick satisfactory answer, very often the problem eventually solves itself. Alternatively, hold it in your mind, other questions arise elsewhere, and eventually they suddenly link up, and a solution appears which solves them all.

We have already mentioned Rashbam’s point about a piece of apparently irrelevant information that teaches us nothing in its context, but which gives a background to something that comes later. Only when you reach the latter can you understand the former.
Chapter 14

WHEN TO LEAVE IT ALONE

As a last resort, leave the whole thing alone. Not quite everything is
given to us to understand. It may not even be meant for our generation. In
Deut. 32:21

’They have annoyed me (lit. made me jealous) with a non-god, and I will
annoy them with a non-people.’

Our rabbis could hardly have appreciated this as we can. The main
nations that have persecuted the Jews have been the Babylonians, the
Romans and the Germans. Each of these was at least a nation, a strong
people. Only today have we encountered a non-people, created by fiction
into a pseudo-people. The so-called ‘Palestinians’ (a title once applied to
Jews) are no more a real people than Baal was a real god.

There is a further type of ‘leave it alone’.

In Chapter 5 we considered idiomatic usage. Idioms such as ‘He looked
up and saw’ are easy to understand, they become clear from the context if
they are not already obvious.

But there are proverbial idioms that are based on something ‘well-known’
at the time of writing, or on a proverb ‘well-known’ at the time of writing,
where the original, once ‘well-known’, has been lost, and the phrase used
is now meaningless to us.

Take for example the English expression ‘to cry wolf’. This is based on
the story of the little boy who annoyed the villagers twice by crying ‘wolf’
and then laughing at them when they came out and found there was no wolf
– so that the third time, when there was a wolf, nobody took any notice. If
you do not know the story, the phrase ‘crying wolf’ means nothing to you.

Or take the phrase ‘the writing on the wall’, meaning that the end is near,
that everything is about to collapse. It is based, of course, on the story of
Belshazzar’s Feast in the Book of Daniel. Suppose someone found this
phrase in an old book, but that the Book of Daniel had been lost completely
and everyone had forgotten the original story. Nobody would then be able to understand what ‘the writing on the wall’ meant, and no forced explanations of special meanings of ‘writing’ or ‘wall’ (or of ‘wolf’ in the previous example) would get the real meaning.

The Book of Job is full of proverbs whose origins have been lost. Some may become clear from the context, others not. But nobody who claims to understand everything in the Book of Job is taken seriously.

However, take a case from the Torah. Twice Zipporah used the phrase נֵתוֹן יְהֹוָה (Ex. 4:25-26), in two different meanings neither of which means anything to us. The Commentators’ analyses of this (did she mean Moses or the baby? what was the blood? etc.) are reminiscent of *in loco parentis* once explained as ‘Daddy is a train-driver’ – only sadly they are meant to be taken seriously! Obviously she was using a known phrase, readily understood at the time, but incomprehensible to us. The only way we will ever be able to understand it, if at all, is if we find an ancient text in which the phrase occurs, where the context makes the meaning unambiguously clear (which it does not do here since there is controversy among the commentators), and that meaning makes sense in our text here. Until then – leave it alone! What is the *peshat*? There isn’t one. We just do not know what it means, so do not force it, just leave it alone.

Remember the shocking headline in a London newspaper: ‘Barking Man Bitten by Dog’? Will historians who discover the newspaper in a thousand years’ time know that Barking is the name of a London suburb where the man came from, or will they draw the wrong conclusions? Likewise the Bible contains many topical references that have been lost.

*Peshat Before Derash*
Chapter 15

DIGGING DEEP

The Israelites spent thirty-seven and a half years wandering in the desert from the fiasco at Kadesh Barnea until they appeared at the other Kadesh (Zin) ready to make a fresh start towards entering the Promised Land. What happened during this period? We are told only of two incidents, one major and the other minor but significant. The major one was Korah’s revolt, we do not know where it took place, and are not told when, though there are pointers that suggest that it was probably in the latter part of the period, that is to say at least twenty years after Kadesh Barnea. Regarding the minor incident, there are no clues whatever as to either place or time. A man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath, arrested, brought before the elders, and punished (Num.15:32-36). Other details are irrelevant here.

Now the singling out of this case implies that otherwise, overall, the Sabbath was observed throughout that period. There may have been odd offenders who happened not to be caught, but we cannot be far from the truth in saying that though Moses criticised the people for lots of other things (Deut. 9:7), Sabbath observance was universal.

This is not stated in the text, it is a deduction from what is stated, a logical inference. (It appears to be contradicted by Ezekiel 20:13, but the problem may be placed, along with so many others, as a problem in Ezekiel.) Again it involves ‘reading between the lines’, but it must not be confused with ‘imaginative additions’ dealt with in an earlier chapter. Those are additions we put into the story, with no actual basis in the text, but which are needed to make sense of the text. Here we have enough information to make sense of the story from the text itself. By logical inference we have deduced additional information not stated in the text.

The example considered is extremely simple, and the information obtained is of doubtful value, but in many less obvious cases much additional information can be obtained by ‘digging deep into the text’. 
Peshat Before Derash

This was the original idea of derash – the peshat was what the text actually says, derash was digging deep to obtain more information. However, the usage of the words has changed. Derash generally involves adding extraneous material not found in the text, not deduced from it, and not even suggested by ‘reading between the lines’, so we must now consider this as part of the study of peshat. No doubt this is what Rashbam had in mind with his expression ומכה פשע, the ‘depth’ of the peshat, which he was at pains to distinguish from the derash of the type much – in his opinion far too much – used by his grandfather Rashi.
Chapter 16

LOGIC VERSUS COMMON SENSE

We must beware of becoming too obsessed with logic. After all, women get on quite well without it. Excessive concern over logic seems to have begun with the Greeks. They influenced the Romans and subsequently even the English – we are taught the English language on principles of strict logic (such as not to use the double negative), and they undoubtedly influenced the rabbis of the Talmud (who in turn influenced succeeding generations). However, we do not find this obsession in the Bible, and sometimes its absence grates on us following our upbringing.

As an example we find וְשֵׁם אָתָּה כֵּל מְצוֹיִת – you are to ‘do’ (i.e. obey) all of G-d’s instructions. Now contrast Lev. 4:1 about a person who sins המַעֲזָה ה’ אָשֶׁר לֹא מַעֲזָה regarding one of G-d’s instructions which are not to be done. Can there be any Divine instructions that are not to be done?

We know the answer, it means one of the instructions concerning something that is not to be done. It is the action, not the instruction, which is ‘not to be done’. Obvious? Of course, on the basis of common sense, but the verse does not follow strict logic. To do so would make the wording unnecessarily clumsy.

Here we must remember the rule:

Where there is a conflict between logic and common sense, the Torah prefers common sense.

Do not try to ‘explain’ it or force it. Just accept that it is indeed illogical but the meaning is obvious by common sense, which is far more important (and recognised as such by the Torah) than logic.

A very familiar example (how often have you said it? and how often have you thought about it?) for which there is no need to give a reference, is לָקַם תְּנִין לְהַר בִּתְיָהוּ בְּכַרְדָּא לְכֶשֶׁב לָקָם לַכְּשֶׁב לָקַם לַכְּשֶׁב לָקַם לַכְּשֶׁב

Leaving aside the switching between singular and plural, which occurs very often in the language of the Torah, does it mean that (a) when you are
sitting at home, going to bed etc. you are to teach your children to recite?
Or that (b) you are to teach your children that they should recite them when
you are sitting at home, going to bed, etc.? Both are grammatically correct
and obviously senseless. It means of course that you are to teach your
children to follow and learn from your example in that you recite them when
sitting at home, going to bed, etc. [The translation ‘going to bed’ instead of
‘lying down’ avoids the ambiguity in ‘when lying down’ (not ‘while lying
down’), the meaning obvious only from the parallel ‘getting up’].

So far, so good, nobody disagrees with the first part. However, when is
it that you recite the words? The peshat is ‘when sitting at home (and) when
travelling (and) when going to bed and when getting up. That is clearly the
peshat. But here we are dealing with halakhah, which rejects (or at least
ignores) the peshat and turns to a combination of derash and tradition. We
will state the result without explaining how it is arrived at. ‘Whether you
are sitting at home or travelling, (both) at night and in the morning.’

Modern halakhah, based on rabinic law, rejects even the derash and
interprets it as ‘both when most people [used to] go to bed in talmudic times
and when most people [used to] get up in talmudic times.’

Here, as we are considering logic, is a suitable place to mention
something else – a digression, but not totally irrelevant. The early Hebrew
grammarians were Jews, who understood grammar very well but were
handicapped in writing by a lack of suitable technical terms. Then came the
Christian scholars whose work in the field of Biblical Hebrew grammar is
not to be despised, notwithstanding many shortcomings. The later Hebrew
grammarians inherited from them a mixture of good and bad, while often
failing to understand what the early Jewish grammarians had written.

The Christian grammarians first learned their own language (usually
German, from which their writings were translated by others into English),
then Latin and Greek, and finally Hebrew (often along with Arabic and

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1. An example of something clearly understood against all logic is Orwell’s mocking of
communism: ‘All men are equal, but some are more equal than others.’
A more familiar case is when a doctor says ‘Take one tablet twice a day’ (you can’t),
understood to mean ‘Twice a day, take one tablet’ (not the same thing).
other Semitic tongues). Both the grammarians and the translators were thoroughly indoctrinated with Latin, whose grammar tends to be precise, and with the outlook of strict logic, and they expected the same thing from Classical Hebrew, especially as the Scriptures were holy and would in the first place ‘get things right’. They applied basic concepts of Latin grammar to Hebrew, only modifying them to a minimum where absolutely necessary, and failed to realise that in Hebrew the very basic concepts were often different – but that is not the point here. Their obsession with logic and strict adherence to fixed grammatical rules led them to be perturbed at any apparent breach of these rules. Where a rule appeared to be broken, there was obviously a mistake, but as the author would never have made a mistake it was a copyist. This led them, and subsequently the so-called ‘Bible critics’, to ‘correct’ these ‘mistakes’ in the text.

The Jews, who would not accept these deviations from grammatical rules as ‘mistakes’, still took them seriously – to them the rules of grammar came from Heaven – and so they attributed to each such deviation an unknown ‘deep Divine reason’ which it is ‘not for us to fathom’. Both attitudes are ridiculous. Hebrew was an actual language, spoken and written, which like other languages had rules of grammar. But in every language (except Esperanto) rules of grammar are broken, and the breaches become entrenched. Admittedly this is less so in Latin than in most languages, because the Romans worried about it, while others, including those who used Hebrew to speak and write, worried far less. Deviations from the rules of grammar should be accepted, they are neither mistakes nor put in deliberately for some esoteric divine purpose.

An example which occurs throughout the Torah is the use at times of masculine third-person plural endings where feminine ones are required. So what? Hebrew was not so particular. In contrast, Onkelos in his Aramaic translation was very particular about this. He ‘corrected’ these things, but he did not correct the basic text, he merely corrected the grammar in translation, because (his) Aramaic demanded precision in distinguishing masculine and feminine in all the endings, which Hebrew did not. (There is evidence that there were dialects of Aramaic that tended to use masculine
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endings for both, and his fussiness may have reflected a reaction, in his
dialect, against those other dialects.)

For all that, rules of grammar are not to be treated with contempt, and
exceptions should not be invented to explain something unnecessarily, as we
have illustrated earlier with נברם.
Chapter 17

THE RELEVANCE OF BACKGROUND

In an earlier chapter we mentioned the use of imagination to supply a necessary background to make sense of the text. Here we mention something that is not within the student’s ability, but depends on what he happens to have picked up somewhere else, that supplies a background which will enable the text to make simple sense. Let us take two examples.

1. Problem: Deut.23:19 לָא הֹבֵי אֹתֶן זֹּמֵח מַחֲטֵר כָּל בִּית עַם. Where does the dog come in? Why is the price of a dog different to that of any other animal? How does he fit in with this?

   Background: In writings in the Canaanite and other languages similar to Hebrew the word kalb (kelev) is used to mean not only a dog but also a male prostitute.

   Application: Suppose it means that here.

   לא战术 כְּשֶׁה כָּנֹב יֶשֶׁךְ לָאוֹרָיו תעַשׁ מַכְנִיעָה לא战术 אֵת אתָּנֶן זֹּמֵח מַחֲטֵר כָּל בִּית עַם

   We now see the balance in both verses, and the four-legged dog does not come into it. (This explanation is used in modern commentaries.)

2. Problem: Num.12:12 ... אֶלְּרוּ הַיָּמָה. What does all this mean? Varous complex explanations have been offered.

   Background: The condition of zaraat (which includes various diseases) is that of surface or skin flaking or peeling, the flakes falling down like falling snow. (An Arab doctor once confused zaraat with leprosy, something totally different, and the mistake was copied and became embedded.)

   A piece of little-known medical information is that when a baby dies in its mother’s womb two or three days before birth, all its skin falls off, and it is born (dead) without skin, the bare flesh looking as if some of it is missing.

   Application: The verse than makes simple straightforward sense.

   אַלָּרוּ הַיָּמָה אַלָּרוּ בְּצַעַת מַכָּמִים אֶפְּלִי מַכָּמִים בְּשָׁנָה.
Chapter 18

SIMPLE AND ACCEPTABLE

Any explanation based on *peshat* must become self-evident. You may not notice it until it is pointed out, but it should become obvious once you see it. If it does not, reject it. An explanation does not have validity on the basis of who said it, but only in its own right.

Equally, nothing should be rejected merely because it does not have the support of ‘authority’. Put it to the test, and see if it justifies itself, or not.

In this, of course, *halakhah* is different. There alone, a decision’s validity depends solely on the authority of the one who gave it, but even Maimonides agrees that outside *halakhah* nobody is obliged to accept something on the basis of ‘authority’ which he otherwise would not accept.

It naturally follows that the whole of this treatise likewise should contain only material that is self-evident once you notice it. The need for it is because things have been so obscured that we do not notice the obvious until it is pointed out to us.
Appendix

UNDERSTANDING DERASH

An example of a modern derash illustrates beautifully how a derash arises, the useful purposes that it serves, the dangers inherent, and how such dangers can be (though often are not) avoided.

When the Israelites stood by the Red Sea, and saw, with terror, the Egyptian army advancing towards them with six hundred chariots, Moses reassured them with the words (Ex. 14:14)

ה' ילחם לכם. ולא תweapon
‘G-d will fight for you, and you will be silent.’

A teacher once interpreted this, distorting the text slightly as if the last word wasしなך, rendering it as ‘G-d will provide you with breadしなך, but you must plough’. In derash you are allowed to distort the text slightly, especially when, as here, there is no need to change any of the consonants.

(The Talmudic style would be to sayאל תתקין תחראות אלה תakening.)

The idea is one found in many places. G-d blesses your actions and helps them to succeed, but does not just do things for you. The Hindus have a proverb – G-d feeds the birds but does not throw the food into the nest. Leaving aside the unfortunate fact that this very case was an exception, Moses was telling them that in this instance the very reverse would happen, they were to do nothing, the advice is otherwise sound as a very good general rule. The teaching is a good one.

The teacher did not mean this to be taken literally in translating the verse. The people were standing terrified at the approach of imminent death by massacre or recapture into slavery, and Moses could think of nothing better to do than to teach them a piece of philosophy! Just what they wanted to hear, it would come in very useful in the future if they survived, the chances of which were virtually nil.

No, the teacher wanted you, whenever you come to this verse and read it, to associate that teaching with it and remember it. The verse would serve as a reminder, in other words act beyond its primary purpose (of telling you
what happened at the Red Sea) and remind you of something important and useful in life. The fact that it directly contradicted the plain meaning, which was advice for one specific exceptional case, is irrelevant. The verse serves two purposes, which need have no connection with each other.

We see here how a midrash arises and grows. If the teaching is acceptable it becomes accepted. It is therefore something of very high value, and not just a piece of nonsense as it may indeed appear at first sight. However, as Rabbi Joseph Kara (whose words we have quoted in the Introduction) pointed out, such teachings were brought in by the rabbis to enhance the Torah, to give it more use and interest, but are not to be used to interpret the verse as part of the story. The fact that it was often taken as such (otherwise Rabbi Kara would not have objected) was the reason for the criticism Rashbam made to his grandfather Rashi concerning the latter’s commentary, which Rashi finally accepted.

Today children are taught Torah with the midrash as explanation and completion, so as to take it all, lock stock and barrel, literally. Whatever the midrash says is fact. Suppose you teach them the above midrash, they will if young enough accept it without question. Standing at the Red Sea, Moses gave them this piece of philosophy. What you teach them becomes entrenched, and later when you tell them that the verse means ‘G-d will fight for you while you remain silent’ they will refuse to accept this. It contradicts what they have been taught and have accepted.

This is the great danger of derash, and the way of avoiding it is not to teach it to anyone who has not already learned the peshat thoroughly. Only then may he learn the midrashim, which he will be able to accept for what they are, an enhancement, a useful appendix, but in no way a substitute for the correct translation and interpretation of the text.

A similar problem arose with cabalah, so that the rabbis banned its study except by those who had already completed study of the entire Babylonian Talmud from beginning to end. Such a scholar would treat cabalah with care and know how and where to use it. The ban was not observed, cabalah was taught to the ignorant masses, studied at an early stage, taken at face value, developed into something horrible that we see today which verges on
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(if it does not actually enter into) a form of idolatry. A man who publicly
desecrates the Sabbath once told me he could not understand how I, a
religious Jew, could refuse to believe in reincarnation, which is (he said) the
ABC of Judaism!

While there is some doubt as to whether there ever was anything worth
while in caballah, midrash undoubtedly, in most cases at least, has a basic
value. But it must be kept in its place, and not be allowed to oust the
peshaṭ.
THE AUTHOR

Alan Smith, son of the late Rabbi Mark and Mrs. Rose Smith, was born in London in 1930 and learned to read and translate Chumash at a very early age. He studied languages and science at the City of London School, and graduated in physics at the Royal College of Science. On emigrating to Israel at the age of 49 he found employment in turn as a manual labourer in a chemical factory, as a Post Office clerk, a cleaner in a Jerusalem building for a year – he is very proud of this, he says it helped to clear his mind – and as a library assistant, finally as a self-employed translator until he retired.

Neither a yeshivah graduate nor a university scholar, each of whom claims to have exclusive authority on Torah, he writes on Torah matters for ordinary people seeking an acceptable down-to-earth explanation of the text. His unconventional approach challenges traditional translations and grammar, and relies on a careful reading of the text in order to unearth the plain meaning without resorting to midrash. He maintains that ideas should stand or fall on their own merits and not on the authority of the writer or anyone else. ['If it makes sense, accept my idea, if not, reject it.‘]

Until recently his various books and booklets have been privately distributed, but he has finally agreed to have them published for the readership at large.