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DEFENDING *DERASH*: THE GUR ARYEH'S APPROACH TO HERMENEUTICS

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It has become common in some Modern Orthodox circles for a reference to Rashi's commentary on the Torah to be rejected as "simply *derash*." Rashi has long been considered in Jewish tradition to be the greatest of the Torah commentators, essential to any serious student's understanding of the text, so it is surprising to find that Rashi has become a symbol for "naive misunderstanding." If anything, Rashi is introduced in *parshanut* discussions in these circles primarily as a foil, (as in, "Rashi states the following . . . but *that's* not *peshat!*") to be dismissed before proceeding to a "true" understanding of the verse.

What has caused Rashi to fall from favor? One possible answer is that we are seeing a reaction to the "Artscroll Revolution." With the rise in popularity of this publishing house, which specialized in English translations of classic Hebrew texts, came an increasing standardization of interpretation in English-speaking Jewish communities; and the interpretation that was always followed by Artscroll was Rashi's. Many felt frustrated with this approach, arguing that with this proclivity towards Rashi, the straightforward reading of the text was not only being ignored, but deliberately avoided. Increasingly, frustration grew into antagonism, as it became clear that Artscroll's choice was guided not only by textual considerations, but also ideological ones. Wary of both criticism of the Rabbinic tradition and of the sometimes overtly sexual or morally problematic nature of the Biblical narrative, Rashi's constant reference to Chazal and the reverential tone of his classical German piety was perfect for their agenda.

The paradigmatic example is the Artscroll translation of the Song of Songs, in which the intensely passionate and sometimes erotic interchange between two lovers is transcribed entirely into Rashi's exegetical explanation, in which the literal meaning is only an allegory for the love between God and Israel. Indeed, Artscroll was entirely upfront about its motives in translation:

As the entire gamut of Talmudic and Rabbinic literature relating to *Shir ha-Shirim* makes clear, this highly emotional, seemingly sensuous song is an allegory. As such, a literal translation would be mislead-

ing—even false—because it would not convey the meaning intended by King Solomon, the composer.¹

This approach, however, has infuriated many, who criticize the paternalistic underlying assumption that the unsophisticated reader will be naively led astray by the words themselves, and so require a “filter” of sorts—in other words, a censor. It is only natural, then, that such an extreme approach should have produced an equally extreme reaction, and that where Rashi found an unusually privileged status in one community, he might be kept at a distance in another.

Nevertheless, the distaste for Rashi runs deeper than a circumstantial reactionary position. In fact, it reflects a much broader theory of interpretation. For in these same circles, rolled eyes are not simply reserved for Rashi; rather, anything that would fit under the rubric of “*derash*,” or homiletic interpretation, is often rejected. Anything that might be called “*derash*-like:” Rashi, the entire corpus of Midrash—not to mention Chassidic commentary—is regarded in these circles as “homiletical” at best. This is something of a revolution in itself, for Midrash is considered the classical Jewish form of interpretation, the very definition of Jewish hermeneutics. Instead, this camp celebrates the standard of “*peshuto shel mikra*,” the simple meaning of the text.²

Ironically, the popular resonance of this phrase comes from Rashi himself. In his famous comment to Genesis 3:8, he makes reference to the multiplicity of Midrashic interpretations possible, but says that:

“I have only come to give the simple meaning of the text.”

Yet his understanding of “*peshuto shel mikra*” does not match the contemporary usage, for anyone scantily familiar with Rashi is aware of his heavy reliance on Midrashic exegesis. Indeed, in the very claim to “*peshuto shel mikra*,” he goes on to say:

“. . . and the *agadah* (legends) which settle the words of the text, with each word expressing its character and meaning.”

Clearly, Rashi’s notion of “*peshat*” does not exclude homiletics. Moreover, he makes it clear that “simple meaning” is a reference to the easiest fit (settling) of the text into its larger context within the entire canon (presumably of the Oral Torah as well). In other words, “*peshat*” derives its significance from the closed system of the body of work within which it operates, and must be interpreted within that context.

This is not the way the phrase “*peshuto shel mikra*” is commonly used today.

¹ *The Complete Artscroll Siddur: A New Translation and Anthologized Commentary*, ed. Rabbi Nosson Scherman and Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah, 1999 [2nd ed., orig. 1984]), 298.

² By so doing, this camp is attempting to recapture the approach championed by the medieval commentators Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and R. Yosef Kara.

Instead, “*peshat*” is a reference to literalism, i.e. to the question of what one would first think of when reading the verse. Knowing nothing else but the language, what would this sentence mean? Indeed “Literalism” is a good term for this methodology, which prizes the literal meaning of the text above all. The resistance to Rashi—and to Midrash in general—is based on the presumption that not only is the most literal read the “truest,” but more, that the text only has one level of meaning, one intent. The only question we ought to be asking when we read a verse is “What did the author of this verse intend when it was written?” Any attempt to expound upon that intent, or to suggest multiple layers of meaning, is considered by the Literalist as obfuscation, and is either appreciated solely for its entertainment or sentimental value or rejected out of hand.

To be fair, the Literalists have more than ideological preference motivating them. Indeed, most would probably say that their own sense of intellectual integrity is at stake in the debate over methods of interpretation. The promoters of *derash*, the Literalists would argue, are actually promoting a fundamentalist religious platform, in which all statements of the Rabbis, no matter how fantastic, are to be taken at face value, without critical inquiry. The choice seems to be between taking the verses of the Bible as speaking literally or taking the homiletic exegesis literally, and if these are the only options, the Literalists steer clear of Midrash, which often pushes against the bounds of reason if taken literally. But if the “Fundamentalists” seem to be pushing a dogmatic insistence on the literal truth of all Rabbinic statements, the Literalists push back with their own brand of fundamentalism, an uncompromising notion that Biblical text has one meaning, the simplest understanding of the verse, as it reads, representing the one and only original intent of the author.

This paper will claim that these are not the only two choices available to the believing, but critically thinking, reader of Jewish sacred texts. We hope to make clear a third path, one paved (or at least, re-paved) by that great luminary of Jewish thought, R. Yehuda Loew of Prague, Maharal, in his famous supercommentary to Rashi, the *Gur Aryeh*. Again and again in this commentary, Maharal defends Rashi’s interpretation, but insists simultaneously on the truth of the aggadic statement cited *and* the mistake of reading that statement literally. Instead, he argues, Rabbinic tradition of interpretation is elucidating the deeper, spiritual truth that the text is trying to convey, that accompanies its literal meaning. This is not to say that the Rabbis were speaking only in parable and metaphor. The statements of the Rabbis, according to Maharal are absolutely true, but not in the customary sense that their language provides a one to one correspondence with physical reality. Rather, they are using the best language available to describe an ultimately ineffable spiritual reality which is nevertheless real and true—indeed “truer” in some sense (or at least more significant) than the reality we know with our physical senses. Indeed, Maharal’s operating assertion is that Rashi (and the Rabbis before him) are attempting to describe this reality because that is the project of the Torah itself.

To begin with an example which typifies Maharal's approach in the *Gur Aryeh*, we turn to his comment on Rashi on the verse in Exodus 4:20, which details Moshe's trip back to Egypt with his new wife and children:

And Moshe took his wife and children and mounted them upon the donkey.

Rashi, commenting on the unexpected appearance of the definite article in front of "donkey," brings an explanation from *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*:

The designated donkey. This is the donkey that Abraham saddled for the binding of Isaac, and the one that the King, the Messiah, will be revealed upon, as it says, "A humble one, riding on a donkey." (*Zekhariah* 9:9)

A literal read of this Rashi would force us to accept that there was an actual donkey, that was created at the beginning of time, and that lived eternally, popping up every once in a while to service the great leaders of the Jewish people. This indeed would be a difficult proposition to accept, and the Literalist would throw it out immediately. But then what would he do with the definite article? Why does the Torah speak of "the donkey," a specific one? Either one would have to come up with a different answer—perhaps this was *the* donkey that Moses owned, and the Torah speaks from his vantage point (as in, "Honey, where did we park *the* car?")—or to simply say the Torah used imprecise language, and there is no need to question such a subtle distinction. Whereas the literal read of the Rashi may offend one's sense of reason, these answers are perhaps offensive to one's aesthetic literary sensibilities. Either the Torah's choice is relatively meaningless or it is sloppy, certainly not as well-crafted a turn of phrase as we might expect from a Divine text.

Gur Aryeh takes a different approach. He quotes the Midrash in full, which concludes: "this is the donkey that was created during twilight (of the sixth day of Creation)," and then goes on to say that the image of riding a donkey referenced in all these cases is very specifically chosen, for a donkey represents pure physicality—both in its usage in the world, and especially because the word for donkey, *hamor*, has the same root as the word for matter, *homer*. Therefore, in all these cases, when we speak of riding on a donkey, the "riding" is emblematic of being elevated above, or having mastery over, pure physicality—i.e. existing in a spiritual realm.

This may explain the significance of the image itself, but why would the Midrash speak of riding just one donkey, instead of three instances of one act with three different donkeys? Maharal's answer is that any thing or idea which is divided exists on a low spiritual level. When we speak of something which is spiritually elevated, we speak of it with as much unity as possible, for indeed,

because of the inherent spirituality in the act, it expresses a divine ideal act, which in turn expresses the divine unity. This inherent spirituality also explains the reference to the twilight of creation, says Maharal, for it was in that “in-between” hour that things were created which are neither purely physical, nor purely spiritual, but exist somewhere in-between. Here Maharal has given us the reason for the use of this imagery, a spiritual justification which suggests that something deeply important is being conveyed to us by the Midrash, and in turn, by the Torah itself, for which allegorical language is the best means of expression.

It might be suggested that Maharal believes these spiritual truths are being expressed, but he would still have us believe in the actual physical immortality of this donkey. To this, he answers explicitly:

The explanation is not that the donkey was alive the whole time, from the time of the creation of the world until the time of Abraham and Moshe and the Messiah. Rather, that during this twilight, the force was placed in the world to bring forth this “riding” to the world.

No, claims Maharal, the existence of a supernatural donkey is not literally true, but the idea that God created a potential for great people to elevate themselves above pure physicality—that is actually and absolutely, even literally, true.

Another striking illustration of this methodology can be found in *Gur Aryeh* attached to Rashi’s commentary on Deuteronomy 4:32:

For ask about the earliest days that came before you, since God created man on the Earth, and from one end of the heavens to the other, has there ever been a thing as great as this, or has such a thing ever been heard?

Rashi comments on the use of the phrase “from one end of the heavens to the other” using an *agadah* from *Hagigah* 12a, and tells us that this phrase refers back to the one that precedes it about the creation of man:

Its ‘Midrash’ teaches about the height of Adam, which was from the Earth up to the heavens, and that is the same measurement as ‘from one end to the other.’

Again we have a statement that is difficult for reason to accept without getting flustered, the notion that the first man’s physical being was tall enough to reach up into the sky. However, Maharal, certainly a man who prized his reasoning faculties, is wholly unfazed by the idea, not even introducing his comments with words of questioning or puzzlement (as he often does). Still, he is quick to plunge into a spiritualized interpretation, along the lines of the one we saw earlier. He begins, as above, by stating plainly that the language creates an image that serves as a symbol for a more profound concept. We are told that Adam

stretches from Earth to the heavens because Man, in his being, comprises elements of the lower, physical realm, and the higher, spiritual realm. This spiritual component of Man's being, the *Gur Aryeh* continues, is reflective of his *Tzelem Elohim*, the fact that he was created in the image of God.

A thing which is godly, it then follows, must include all—the higher and the lower—as God encompasses all. Moreover, it is precisely this godly essence of Man's being which tells us how to read this image of the Midrash:

And because of the force of the divine element which is in Man [Adam]—perforce, he must be All, undivided. And since this is the essence of the form of Man, we no longer regard him by the measurement of his body. For the essential thing in Man is the divine element within him, and beside it, the body is nullified, and has no characteristic, and we only consider that which is essential in Man.

In other words, if one was to read the *agadah* literally, one not only misses the point, but actually inverses its meaning entirely! Maharal's interpretation of the midrash explanations in Rashi is not a default position, a backpedaling apologetic based on his discomfort with such fanciful imagery; rather, it is precisely because of his full confidence in deep metaphysical truths that he is fully comfortable with the allegorical language which expresses them best.

It might be claimed that the in the *Gur Aryeh*, Maharal is simply using Rashi as a springboard to expound upon his own theology, but is not trying to articulate any particular theory of hermeneutics. In another example, however, Maharal makes it clear that he is well aware of the implications of his approach and the alternatives and is intentionally taking a stand in defense of Rashi and the midrashic tradition. In Rashi's commentary on Genesis, *Parashat Vayeitzei*, in the verses that bracket Jacob's dream, Rashi picks up on a textual inconsistency. At the opening of the *parashah*, in Chapter 28, verse 11, we read:

And he encountered the place, and he stayed there, for the sun had set, and he took from the stones of the place and placed them around his head, and he lay down in the place.

Then comes the famous dream with Jacob's ladder of angels coming up and down, and God standing above. And then Jacob awakens in verse 18:

And Jacob got up in the morning and took the stone that he had placed around his head and placed it as a monument and poured oil on its head.

Oddly, the stones, plural, have suddenly become just one stone. Furthermore, how was one stone placed around his head? The Literalist might argue that the Torah here is speaking imprecisely and means to tell us, simply, that Jacob took one of the stones that he had placed around his head. This *peshat*, however, is a difficult solution because again, it forces us to conclude that either the Torah is

sloppy in its phrasing, or that its awkward choice is deliberate, but meaningless.

Rashi's solution is midrashic. He preempts the question in an earlier verse, and commenting on the phrase, "and placed them around his head," he writes:

He made them like a gutterpipe around his head, for he feared wild animals. They began to quarrel with one another. This one would say: the Tzaddik (righteous man) should rest his head on me! And that one would say: he should rest it on me! Immediately, God made them into one stone. This is why it says (later), "and [Jacob] took the stone that he had placed around his head."

This *agadah* from *Hullin* 91b certainly explains the latter verse quite nicely, but this solution has its own difficulties, more intellectual than textual. For even if we were to accept that God could and would perform the miracle of uniting these stones to resolve a minor conflict, few reasonable people could sit easily with the idea that rocks have desire and intention that they express to one another in the form childish squabbling over the wishes of a simple piety. It is not difficult to see how the Literalist would be uncomfortable with such an answer. No "philosophically-minded" person would be inclined to see this story as literally true.

Maharal, no doubt a great philosophical mind himself, is well aware of this inclination, yet he cautions against pushing off this midrash too hastily:

And if you will ask, 'What quarrel was there for stones, who have no consciousness?!' This is what people ask. And these people do not know the intention of the Sages.

He goes on to give a lengthy interpretation of this intention, the fundamentals of which are premised on the assertion that Ya'akov is the embodiment of Oneness, as the representative of God's Oneness. Therefore, it follows in Maharal's metaphysics that his being will repel all division and draw things into unity. The argument of the stones is a representation of their physical disunity, for conflict is the conceptual version of division. As Ya'akov comes close to these multiple rocks, his own overwhelming presence so commands unity that it evokes divine assistance in bringing unity to the division around him.

This model may provide meaning to the imagery, but it does not yet resolve the nagging discomfort to our rational instincts. Whether or not we discover a deep conceptual framework, we are still left with the basic problem if we are to take this midrash literally. Stones, the very paradigm of inanimate objects, do not have consciousness, let alone powers of articulation in the world as we know it! Indeed, Maharal himself confirms this principle absolutely, and even takes it a step further. Things in the natural world, he says, function according to their nature, even those things without consciousness. Therefore, Maharal rejects not only the idea that the stones were actually speaking, but also the possibility of God literally joining the physical stones into one. However, he declares, this

event did not take place in nature! Yet he is not telling us that this is simply a metaphor, for he goes on to say that in fact, all the events of this night took place *above* the natural order, in the realm of the supernatural, which for Maharal is a very real, true level of existence.

It is at this point, after a thorough explanation of his own interpretation, that he reveals his awareness of the alternative approach:

There are commentators who interpret “from the stones of the place” as “from one of the stones of the place.” And these men bring forth a Torah of *hefker* (worthlessness), explaining it according to their will, because even a simpleton does not speak with words like these. For since he only took one stone—it would only have had to write “and he took a stone.”

This, says Maharal, clear to any thinking person. Why, then, would these commentators offer such an interpretation? Here he labels their method:

Only because they *radfu ahar peshat ha-katuv* (chase after the simple meaning of the verse), they make the Torah worthless.

Indeed, as Maharal closes his piece he makes it very clear that he is responding directly to such a hermeneutic, deliberately articulating a distinctly different position regarding methods of interpretation:

I was forced to write these words, to enlighten these blind-hearted men, who take words which are the hearthstove of the world and make them words of void, as if they had no substance, and words of stupidity, without taste or smell (reason or spirit), [and elevate them] to the greatest heights of world. . . . Each word in this image is a wondrous thing. And one should not think that the words that I explained above are the root and essence of the matter; they are but the beginning of understanding in the smallest way what it is possible for beginners. . . . Further, you should know that if you search after the words of the Sages as if they were secret treasures, then you will find a storehouse of precious vessels that they stored in their secret treasures. And the foolish man thinks, “these are just words of *derashah* which they only said to embellish their language!” And you, do not think thus; rather, every one of their words are the root of the Torah.

Here he makes his charge head-on, coming to defend *derash* not simply for its aesthetic or traditional value, but as the vessel in which the sages transmitted their understanding of the depth of meaning embedded in the words of Torah. Torah, through the Midrashic lens, is not only narrating a straightforward storyline or collection of laws, but also simultaneously imparting spiritual laws that map out the dimensions of a metaphysical reality just as real and relevant to us as the physical reality we live and breathe in. Here it should be strongly empha-

sized: one need not accept all of Maharal's descriptions of the contours of this dimension to appreciate the underlying premise that the text of Torah speaks simultaneously on multiple levels of meaning.

This simultaneity is perhaps the more essential point Maharal makes in the above quote. For he decries his version of our Literalists, the "*Rodfei Peshat*," rather dogmatically, but when he concedes that even his own explanation should not be taken as the "root and essence of the matter," he is telling us by implication that what he is really arguing for is not one meaning over the other, but the openness of the text to include multiple meanings at once. This presumably would include, though not be limited to, the simplest level of *peshat*. Indeed the text is certainly telling us the simple sequence of events: that Jacob took rocks, slept on them, and later picked one up to use as a monument. However, Maharal's purpose is to show that these same words are, concurrently, cluing us into the nature of Jacob's spiritual being and how this manifested in his presence as he interacted with the world around him. Indeed, the text contains other messages, infinite messages, as the handiwork of an infinite author.

In fact, this claim for multiple levels of meaning is something that Rashi himself would probably agree with. In the second citation of his we saw above, we start the quote midway through, where Rashi began to explain the "midrash," that Adam was as high as the heavens; but in fact, Rashi starts out giving another explanation to the phrase "from one end of the heavens to the other":

. . . and also ask all the creatures that are found from one end to the other. This is its *peshat*. And its *midrash* is. . . .

Here we see clearly that Rashi does not view his insertion of *midrashim* as a substitution for the simplest read of the verse, as it is often presented by the Fundamentalist camp, much to the frustration of our friends the Literalists. Instead he sees the *derash* as an accompaniment to the *peshat*, both extant in the verse at once, the one implicit and the other explicit. For Rashi believed in the same kind of Torah text that Maharal did, and indeed that Chazal did—a multivalent text that contained the potential for expressing many truths at once.³



This question of the nature of our sacred text is really the central one in this debate. For we are not simply witnessing a difference in the way people under-

³ The idea of a multivalent text is not only at the center of Rashi's work; it is the core of the literalists, such as Rashbam, and later writers including the Vilna Gaon. See further: *Bein Yehudim le-Notsrim be-farshanut ha-Mikra* by Sarah Kamin (Hebrew University, 1991); *The Approach of Classic Jewish Exegetes to Peshat and Derash and Its Implications for the Teaching of Bible Today* by Yeshayahu Maori (translated by Rabbi Dr. Moshe J. Bernstein) in *Tradition* 21:3; and *Hakhmei Zarefat ha-Rishonim* by Avraham Grossman, Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1995.

stand words. What is really at stake here is the way we regard the Torah itself. Is it simply a text, like any other, to be treated like any other? Or do we approach the Torah as a wholly different kind of text? A text that sparkles with divinity because of its divine origins, and is capable, as we turn our heads this way and that, of reflecting the brilliant light of first one truth, then another, and then another, ad infinitum. As the Talmud in *Sanhedrin* 34a records:

It was taught in R. Ishmael's academy, "Are not my words like fire," said the Lord, "like the hammer shattering the rock?" Just as the hammer sends sparks flying, so does one text bring forth many interpretations.

The answer to this question will be found in one's philosophical and theological orientation. First of all, one certainly cannot accept Maharal's approach if one does not accept the notion of a spiritual reality at all. If one seeks a Judaism wholly without the supernatural, then surely the Midrash cannot reflect any concept of truth which depends on verifiability in the physical laws of nature, nor indeed can the Torah text have divine properties that place it in a textual category of its own.

Yet even for the believing Jew, there is another philosophical question to answer—a question about the nature of truth itself. Many deeply faithful Jews are committed to the Rationalist philosophical claim of the Modern Age that absolute truth is singular and exclusive, and cannot coexist with another truth. Just as reality has one true dimension, so too, language which expresses this reality has one true meaning. Indeed, many feel comfortable in the Literalist camp precisely because they sense that this is a more modern approach, and are uncomfortable with a religion that would ask them to accept notions of reality and language that are antiquated.

Yet, one might ask if this Modernist notion of truth is itself quickly becoming antiquated. The "postmodern" approach to truth, which is gaining ascendancy in contemporary philosophy, would suggest that truth can only be understood as multidimensional and that language can never achieve a one-to-one correspondence with reality. This is not the space to explore in depth the implications of such a claim on Torah study; yet the student of Torah cannot help but notice that as the Modern worldview begins to crumble in the Academy, that it is these latest formulations of truth that have a greater correspondence with traditional statements such as the one found in another classic Torah commentary founded on *Derash, Or ha-Hayim*:

For the Torah has four paths: *Pesbat* (Simple Meaning), *Remez* (Hinted Meaning), *Derash* (Homiletical Meaning), *Sod* (Hidden Meaning), and from these spread forth seventy faces, and every face into several ways, paths and trails, and this is the meaning of the verse, which says, "[In] my ways," in plural, "you should walk,"

meaning in all the ways and paths should you walk in your explanation of the verses, and one should not say that the Torah only has one *peshat*, understood to all.

Perhaps the roads of the future will eventually wind around and intersect with some of the well-trodden paths of the past.