

PESHAT AND DERASH: A NEW INTUITIVE AND ANALYTIC APPROACH

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Introduction

In examining talmudic biblical literary analysis, known as *derash*, we posit that not only is *derash* conceptually necessary and logically correct, but that it is also simple and obvious, naturally flowing from the meaning of the text. Generally, the first impression one receives when reading a biblical verse is the *peshat*, or *simple* meaning. On the other hand, *chazal's* interpretations appear contradictory or different. These interpretations are called *derash*.

The apparent contradiction and resulting tension between the *derash* and *peshat* has engendered various schools of thought. Some posit that *derash* are merely mnemotechnical devices, devoid of any interpretive value and serve merely as memory pegs on which various oral laws and ethical motifs may be hung.

There is a powerful school of thought, however, that holds that *peshat* and *derash* are equal. Members of this school include great personages such as Rashi, Ramban, and such major modern biblical commentators as *Ketav Vehakubalah*, the *Malbim*, *Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch*, and the *Torah Temimah*. This school explains that *derash* are based on fundamental grammatical rules. These rules, however, are not always well known and often a person may believe the text is saying one thing when, in fact, it is not—according to the *derash*.

Derash is the *intuitive spontaneous* reaction of the biblical native speaker to the statement of its verses. True *derash* is an *effortless immediate reaction to the statement of a verse*. What follows is a series of carefully selected examples illustrating key principles and fallacies. We contend that a reader's unfamiliarity with a biblical *derash* is due to the reader's lack of a "biblical ear." A Frenchman, for example, without effort can grasp the connotations of a French statement, while an American who has been taught French may not be able to. Inability to comprehend the midrash may be caused by our not constantly speaking biblical Hebrew.

We will circumvent this fundamental problem by the careful construction of analogous statements in common English speech. These culturally comparable examples will enable the reader to overcome any possible lack of empathy with biblical culture and allow him to hear the example in the same way a native speaker would have heard it.

We emphasize that our goal is *intellectual*, not *historical*. We do point out, however, that the opponents of *derash* often exaggerate their claims. For example, Ibn Ezra, who is alleged to be anti-midrash, frequently defends:

the midrashim of our ancient righteous sages, which are founded on truth and cast in molded science, for all their words are like gold and silver which have been refined sevenfold, (Introduction to commentary on *Eychah*).

Ibn Ezra explicitly states that the interpretation of *chazal* is to be chosen over other interpretations because they are true.¹ Even difficult midrashim are praised for their "shrewdness" and "beauty" (Ibn Ezra; Genesis 35:22). His disagreements with *chazal* are often said tongue and cheek and cannot be taken seriously.²

I

Many midrashic problems arise from improper non-Jewish biblical translations. Proper translation allows the midrash to flow lucidly. Thus, if the word *ach* is translated in English as *usually* (instead of *only*) then:

Bible: . . . *usually* observe my Sabbaths. . . (Exodus 31: 13).

Midrash: "*Usually* observe?" When don't you? When there is danger to life.

Bible: . . . (*ach*) *usually* you will have atonement on *Yom Kippur* . . . (Leviticus 23:27; slightly rephrased for clarity).

Midrash: *Usually*? . . . When don't we? When we haven't asked our neighbor's forgiveness for social sins (Rashi).

Bible: . . . you will *usually* (*ach*) be happy (Deuteronomy 16:15) (on holidays).

Midrash: *Usually*?—this excludes the first night of the holiday, when it is not obligatory to be happy (Talmud).

The translation, *ach* = *only*, however, makes the midrashim ungrammatical (e.g. . . . only, observe my Sabbaths . . .). As explained, the midrashic principle, "Usually (*ach*) always denotes exception," is no longer *ad hoc* but, instead, the simple meaning of the word that all school children know.³

¹ The Ibn Ezra, in his introduction to the Torah, speaks about our sages in the fifth of his five categories of interpretation.

If we find two interpretations to verses and one interpretation is like that of our sages who were all righteous, then we will rely on their truth without doubt and with strong support. And God forbid, that we should mingle with the Sadducees who state that their interpretation contradicts the *text and/or grammar*; rather, our sages were true, and *all* their words were true; and God the *Lord of truth*, will lead his servant in the path of truth.

² Did Ibn Ezra seriously believe that the mamzer (illegitimacy) prohibition was only rabbinic and the biblical verse (Deut. 23:3) really referred to the residents of a hypothetical town named *Mamzer*?

³ It is true that "*ach-usually*" does not work in every case, but the translation "*ach-only*" does not make sense in every case either. The demand for 100 percent satisfaction from "*ach-usually*" and the acceptance of difficulties from "*ach-only*" is clearly a double standard.

Tone Versus Logic

Many midrashic explanations incorrectly seek a mathematical rigor when stylistic principles of tone should be evoked. Tone and style can be as objective as logic. If, for example, your teenage daughter comes home from a date complaining, "All he wanted was fun," then it would not be homiletic to interpret fun, sexually. Fun does not mean sex, but it does connote it. One's ignorance of how much fun and what type of fun he wanted does not decrease one's objective surety that he wanted sexual misbehavior.

The Bible states that "Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian woman, *playing* with Isaac (Genesis 21 :9)." Rashi states that playing denotes homosexual behavior. Sarah's concern with her son's gay playmate is similar to the father's concern for his daughter's *fun*-seeking date. True, Rashi gives other possibilities [e.g., he wanted to play war games (cf. 2 Samuel 2: 14)], but our ignorance of what type of *play* Ishmael wanted does not diminish our objective surety that he had foul play in mind.

Play may not mean "gayness" in the Bible, but it does connote it. Play, in this verse, is in the intensive tense. The Konkordance discloses that the word *play* in the intensive tense in the Bible always connotes a playful teasing of a sexual or foul nature. Like the father-daughter situation, the point is not the logic of the grammar but the connotations of the situation.

Similarly, Sarah does not call him by his name, Ishmael, but by his genealogy ("son of a . . ."). The skillful use of genealogical and racial epithets to hint at sexual behavior deviant to societal norms is a common technique in many languages.

If we had a biblical ear we, like Rashi, could hear the verse stating this: "Sarah saw that 'son of an Egyptian' *gayfully foreplaying* with Isaac." Hence, she wanted Ishmael expelled from her house. Thus do the mundane obscurities of talmudic *derash* blossom into the spontaneous simplicities of everyday speech.⁴

There is no English word that totally captures the meaning of *ach*. But the fact that no English word totally captures, say, a French word, is not proof that the French concept is peculiar but, instead, is proof that the English ear and the French ear do not see eye to eye. Similarly we lack the biblical ear that can correctly intuit the meaning of *ach*.

Since *ach* modifies the meaning of a sentence, a complete analysis of it would require a probabilistic propositional calculus, the branch of mathematics that studies such phenomena. My own analysis shows "*ach-rov* (the talmudic concept of *majority*)" to be the best translation in most cases.

⁴ A famous example of the *tone* principle is demonstrated by the four sons of Passover (Exodus 12:26; Exodus 13:14; Deuteronomy 6:20). The wise, wicked (Exodus 12:26), and simple (Exodus 13:14) ask their questions; the wicked (Exodus 12:26) *says* his question. This explains the difference between the wise and the wicked without recourse to grammatical obscurities. It is a matter of tone: Exodus 12:26 refers to the wicked because he rhetorically says his question instead of inquisitively asking it.

Similarly, the apathetic son (Exodus 13:8) does not ask or say anything. (The translation *apathetic* is by the Rav (Soloveitchick), who observes that a child who intellectually cannot ask is conceptually classified as simple (Exodus 13:14). Hence Exodus 13:8, the verse without asking, must refer to a child who does not ask because he psychologically cannot or does not care to ask—that is, he is apathetic. When properly explained, talmudic *derash* become simple and obvious.)

II

Form Versus Meaning

Many midrashim have a defensible *meaning*, but the *form* in which this meaning is expressed appears homiletic. For example, although Jacob lived by Laban, his father-in-law, for 20 years, married local women, and had 12 children, he tells his brother, “I still *lodge* by my father-in-law.” (cf. Genesis 324)

Without using a verbal microscope, we all feel spontaneously irritated by the usage of the word “lodge” by a person so well established. Our prior knowledge of ideological differences between Jacob and Laban, however, leads us to interpret this usage as indicating that Jacob was still a lodger at Laban's house—treated like a stranger because of his ideological differences.

Conceptually, this is defensible because of the two words used to describe living: reside (*yaashav*) and lodge (*goor*), each of which has distinct connotation.⁵ Rashi, however, does not mention this. He expresses the *derash* by a play of letters (the numerical value of *garti* is the number of biblical commandments). It thus incorrectly seems as if the play of letters is the reason for the *derash*.

We list five levels of midrashic acceptance, all of which are our goals.

1. The midrashic idea is considered *true* (e.g., Jacob was religious in Laban's house).
2. Not only is the idea true, but it fits the verse nicely [(e.g., Jacob's religiosity is consistent with his message to Esau (Genesis 32.6 Rashi)].
3. It not only fits the verse nicely, but is logically related by grammar (e.g., *Yaashav* = *live*; *garti* = *lodge*; the different connotations defend the *darash*).
4. Not only is it logical, but intuitive—a native speaker would, on hearing the verse, feel compelled to respond spontaneously with the *derash* (e.g., usage of *lodge* with a well-established person creates a feeling of lingual “irritation,” suggesting that the lodger does not really “feel at home” because of the differences of outlook).
5. The *form* in which the *derash* is expressed is normal and comprehensible if the listener has that *culture's ear*.

To clarify the importance of the *culture's ear*, we consider the well-known English *derash*, “The *principal* is your *pal*, while *principle* is an idea.” We consider three parameters: the two spellings, meanings, and usages of “principal” and “principle.”

I have heard that Dr. Nechemah Leibowitz gives this solution, although I have not been able to verify it.

The usual grammatical reason, the distinction between *lakhem* (Exodus 12:26) and *etkhem* (Deuteronomy 6:20), given to distinguish the wicked and wise, is a supportive reason but not compelling. The compelling reason lies in the question's rhetorical nature.

⁵ This explanation was given by Rav Soloveitchick in his Saturday night Boston *shiurim*.

In philosophical terminology, usage is the *cause* of meaning, but spelling is the means of *recognizing* meaning. Although causation and recognition are *metaphysically distinct*, they can nevertheless be *linguistically equivalent*. If we are told the sentence: "A, hence B," then "A" can equally well be the *cause* of "B," or the means of *recognizing* "B." This *identical* lingual expression of *causation* and *recognition* is what creates confusion in the understanding of *derash*.

Suppose you are told, "Principal is spelled ending in *pal*; hence, it means a person who is your pal." (This is the form "A, hence B.") If you have an English ear, you know that the real cause of meaning is usage, not spelling; hence you interpret the preceding statement as indicating the means of recognition (i.e., "*principal* ends in *pal*" is the means of recognizing or *remembering* the meaning of "principal"). If, however, you do not have an English ear, the form of the statement "A, hence B" might mislead you into thinking that the *spelling* (of principal) was the *cause* of its *meaning*. You would then dismiss the *derash* as *homiletic* since, obviously, not all words have meanings corresponding to their last three letters (e.g., *obviously* and *slyly* have opposite, not same, meanings). Similarly, the lack of a biblical ear can lead to the misunderstanding of otherwise obvious midrashim.

The reader may still object: "Granted, if I had a biblical ear, that I could easily understand *derash*, but couldn't *chazal* have been more sympathetic to people without biblical ears? Why couldn't they simply state the real reason in a midrash? Isn't this a deficiency in midrashic *expression*?"

The answer is no! Lack of rules in a midrash is not a deficiency of expression but an intrinsic property of midrashic content—rules are too complicated to be stated. To illustrate, consider the English plural: "plural has an *s*" is incorrect (fast is not the plural of fa t). "plural ends in *s*" is also incorrect (glass is not plural).

We could try, "An *s* at the end of a word denotes plural if without the *s* the word is singular." But this, in effect, states, "Whenever you can interpret an *s* as plural, do so." This is reminiscent of the talmudic dictum, "*heykhah de'ikah lemidrash darshinan*"—whenever we can make a *derash* we do so. This rule, which appears as the height of arbitrary homily, is seen to be true for the grammatical rule of plurals!

Even so, the preceding rule is still false (*Is* ends in *s*, is single (I) without the *s*, and is not plural). In conclusion, even the simplest grammatical rules are too complex for terse analytic statement. The only solution is to use close approximations and rely on the speaker's ear. This is true in all languages.⁶

⁶ In conclusion, these midrashim can always be understood with an added intermediate step. To take another English analogy, consider "apples has an *s*—the extra letter [the *s* of apples (versus apple)] is for an extra apple—this teaches that were at least two apples." This appears ad hoc—not all extra letters denote extra objects. But, to a person with an English ear, this is understood with an added intermediate step: "The extra letter denotes the grammatical plural, which is what implies an extra apple." If we had biblical ears, the *midrashim* would be heard similarly.

Details Versus Archetypes

To exemplify further the defense of midrashic form, we consider the verse, "*Wow, you're beautiful, my dear, wow you're beautiful.*" (Songs 4: 1) . The *Midrash Rabbah*, commenting on the repetition, states:

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Wow!, you're beautiful with <i>deeds of obligation</i> | 1. Wow!, you're beautiful with <i>deeds of obligation deeds of kindness</i> |
| 2. Wow!, you're beautiful with <i>positive precepts (Do . . .)</i> | 2. Wow!, you're beautiful with <i>negative precepts (Don't)</i> . |
| 3. Wow!,... in duties of the <i>house</i> | 3. Wow!, . . . in duties of the . . . <i>field</i> |
| 4. ...in not wearing <i>shatnez</i> . | 4. ...in wearing <i>shatnez</i> (in the priestly garments). |
| 5. ...in <i>abstaining</i> from <i>orlah</i> fruit | 5... in <i>eating</i> "fourth-year" fruit |
| 6. ...in circumcision | 6. ...in <i>peri'ah</i> |
| 7. ...in reciting <i>Shemoneh Esray</i> | 7. ...in reciting the <i>Shema</i> |
| 8. ...with the <i>Mezuzah</i> (on the <i>house</i>) | 8. ...with <i>tefillin</i> (on the body). |
| 9. ...with the <i>sukkah</i> . | 9...with the <i>lulav</i> and <i>etrog</i> |
| 10. ...with repentance (from <i>bad</i> deeds). | 10. ...with performance (of <i>good</i> deeds). |
| Wow!, you're beautiful in this world | Wow!, you're beautiful in the world to come. |

A lover who says to a woman, "Wow, you're beautiful," twice is obviously more intensely impressed than a man who says it only once. The *derash* is not on the *numerical superfluity* but on the tone of emotional intensity.

If all the midrash had said was "Israel's loyalty to God is more intense than other nation's loyalty to their gods," we would not quibble. The problem is with the midrashic form. Why is Jewish intensity identified with this specific list of examples?

The correct approach, however, views these details as paradigmatic archetypes of more general classes. For example, a Reform motto states: "Be a Jew in your house, and a human being outside." Such a loyalty is "one sided" and not intense. We must be loyal to God all over (in the "house" and in the "field" at work), thus giving a multifaceted, more intense beauty and loyalty.

Thus details of the midrash are understood in two stages: first, as implying a general abstract principle [e.g., be Jewish both privately (home) and publicly (at work)], and second, as giving a particular but representative example (laws of the field, laws of the house). The midrash is then seen as profound and deep, expressing fundamental religio-philosophic norms in an aesthetically pleasing fashion. If, however, the midrash is understood in only one stage (laws of the field, laws of the house) without the general abstract principle, the midrash seems ad hoc, forced, and arbitrary because it then seems that the midrash was exhausting the meaning of the verse in some randomly chosen detail.

This terse teaching, by vivid example, instead of being abstract philosophy, is the mark of poetry. Difficulties in the sonnets of Shakespeare or the poems of Yeats, for example, are attributed to their literary style, nuances, or the special grammar of their time. Incomprehensibility is a deficiency of the reader and not of the poetry.

This is exemplary of the *emunat-hakhamim*—faith in our sages—that we should have. It is not to *chazal*'s honor to interpret every derash with the concepts "mnemotechnical device" or "historical environment."⁷

III

General Versus Details

Often, the force of a midrashic derivation is in its general idea, not its details. For example, suppose while in Sarah's house you hear Abraham, her husband, saying, "Get me milk *also*."

You would immediately notice the word *also*. You would assume that Sarah was getting herself milk and Abraham wanted milk *also*? Or you could assume that Abraham wanted cake and then asked for milk *also*? Our ignorance of the details of superfluity—whether in the subject (Abraham and Sarah) or object (milk and cake)—does not conflict with our surety of the general idea of superfluity.

We must distinguish between grammar and the speaker's grammar or usage. People commonly violate grammatical rules in everyday speech, and this is not significant. But certain parts of grammar, like the usage of *also*, are not violated without cause. We will call this speaker's grammar, or usage.

We could also have further controversy on details based on our knowledge of the situation. Maybe milk was prohibited to Sarah because she had high cholesterol. Even so, maybe she used skim milk, which is permissible to the high-cholesterol person.

The preceding example is typical of talmudic *derash*: We start with a general homiletic rule: "*Also* denotes superfluity" and proceed to try to guess the details based on other facts. There is surety on "generals" and ambiguity on detail.⁸ We will call this approach the principle of *stages*.⁹

⁷ This principle is used on the commentaries of the first letter of the Torah. Rashi, who states special examples, not the underlying archetypes, appears ad hoc. The Ramban mentions explicitly the archetypes in order to "muzzle the mouths of the small of faith, and little in wisdom, who mock at the words of our sages." The Ramban even defends Rashi's form, since "It is impossible to adequately explain this idea in writing, and the hinting of it causes much confusion, since people come to false conclusions."

⁸ A talmudic example of an *also derash* is Deuteronomy 22:22: "When a man be found sleeping with a married woman then they also shall both die, the man sleeping with the woman and the woman . . ." The word *also*, indicating that someone else is executed, is understood to refer to the only other person possibly connected with the affair—the fetus resulting from the adulterous union. (This is only true generally; in

Misunderstandings of stages frequently arise because we do not distinguish between the speaker's (primary) intention and the sentence's information. When Abraham says "Get me milk also," his intention is to get milk. He did not intend to inform anybody that Sarah wanted milk also. But the sentence unequivocally informs us that Sarah did want milk also (or that Abraham wanted cake).

The term *peshat* (simple meaning) is sometimes identified with the speaker's primary intention. But a midrash's claim that a verse informs us of something different from its primary intention is not inconsistent with the claim that the midrash is natural and objectively true. Furthermore, the naturality and objectivity of the midrash's general principle is not inconsistent with the ambiguity and controversy over its details.¹⁰

Methods of Proof

We have emphasized that midrashic objectivity can arise from tone instead of logic and that lingual feeling, not grammar, is important. Granted, that usage is the primary causative factor, but we still must have an objective method of proving what that usage is.

If we are examining a general class of phenomena, there are two basic methods of proof.

certain circumstances we wait for the woman to give birth before executing her; if we do not wait, however, the fetus is killed when the woman is executed.)

We note, consistent with our principle of mistranslations, that the word *also* is sometimes left out of English translations. The resulting confusion in understanding the midrash is obviously a property of the erroneous translation, not the verse.

⁹ An explicit statement of this principle of stages occurs in Rashi (Genesis. 32:14-15). The verses list various animal male-female ratios, obviously designed to conform to their marital frequencies. The midrash lists human male-female marital frequencies. At face value, the midrash is incomprehensible: the animal ratios and human ratios do not match up—they have nothing to do with each other.

Rashi brilliantly points out that the incomprehensibility of the midrash can be resolved by viewing it in two stages. In stage one, the general stage, the verse's (animal) male-female ratios teach us that sexual frequency is a function of both (1) female needs, and (2) male work load. In stage two, the detail stage, we say "Given that we are concerned with both female satisfaction and male work load, what frequencies are most appropriate for human beings as a function of their profession."

The purpose of the midrash was only derivation of the general stage, stage one. Stage two is derived from logic and/or experience.

Similar analysis can be given to the other midrashim of this paper. For example, "*Usually* observe the Sabbath"—Stage one: *Usually* denotes almost always, though possibly with exceptions; stage two: given that there are exceptions to Sabbath observance, what are the most logical possibilities (one possibility is when there is danger to life). Since there is controversy on stage two, we must assume that the whole purpose of the midrash was derivation of stage one.

¹⁰ Many times, for example, the Rambam will classify a midrash halakhah as "known by oral tradition." Usually, the general principle of the midrash is known through logic, while the details are only known through oral tradition. Thus the midrash's claim of logical derivation and the Rambam's claim of oral tradition are both correct.

For example, words denoting superfluity extend culpability of sexual offenses from adults to minors. But only oral tradition can tell us that the male must be at least 9 years old and the female at least 3 years old (see Talmud on Leviticus 15:16; Malbim 158; Niddah 32).

1. The manifestation of the class in the instance under consideration is statistically deviant.
2. There are two equally probable manifestations in this general class, each with a simple conceptual correlate.

As an example of statistical deviance, observe that of the 52 occurrences of King David in Scripture, in only one is the royal title *king* deleted ("And the days of David came near to Death... I Kings 2:1). Rabbi Levi explains this statistical deviance: ". . . there is no dominion in the day of death . . ." (Ecclesiastes 8:8; Midrash Rabbah).

Most people would agree that the midrash's concept—death mocks equally at all—is true and fits the verse nicely. However, to appreciate that a native speaker feels compelled to respond spontaneously with the midrashic comment requires a culturally analogous example. Such an example would occur if, say, President Carter, was called 'Jimmy' at an important public meeting.

This statement is not ungrammatical, and its meaning is clear without additional commentary. But the English ear feels irritated by a first-name public appellation of a leader—it violates English usage and denotes insult. Rav Levi heard the absence of king in the biblical verse the same way we hear reference to President Carter as "Jimmy". As noted earlier, a defense of this spontaneity of response is one of our goals.

An example of simple conceptual correlates can be seen in the two equally frequent biblical phrases for speaking to oneself: "said *in* his heart," and "said *to* his heart." "*To* his heart" occurs with righteous people (I Samuel 27: 1; Genesis 6:6; I Samuel 1: 13), while "*In* his heart" occurs with the wicked (Esther 6:6; I Kings 12:26; also see Genesis 27:41; Genesis Rabbah which mentions the whole principle).

Some people erroneously identify the midrashic derivation with the semantics of the prepositions: the righteous confront their desires—hence they speak to their heart; the wicked are engulfed by their desires—hence, they speak in their heart. Such derivations can be perceived mnemonically, like the *principal-pal derash*. The ultimate cause of the righteous = to-wicked = in distinction is biblical usage. The proof of this comes by examining most (not necessarily *all*) cases. We then assume that biblical people spoke this way and that they spontaneously noted the connotations of these words.

In conclusion, we do not reduce biblical *derash* to usages or statistics, but to an experiential logic, a logic that can be backed by examples and yet is supported by a gut feeling, or intuition, of peculiarity.

IV

Some subtle midrashic points follow.

Cause Versus Effect

The clarification of scriptural anomalies can equally take place by the derivation of new facts or by the utilization of old facts. For example, "I . . . and God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) is mentioned on all seven days of creation except Monday (Genesis 1:6-8). A classic reason explains this because Hell was created on Monday.

It is indeed homiletic to interpret this to mean that Hell's creation on Monday is derived from the missing, ". . . and God saw that it was good," in Monday's creation. Isaiah (30:33; Rashi), explicitly states that Hell was created on Monday. Given the two facts—(1) Hell was created on Monday and (2) "God saw it was good" is not mentioned in Monday's creation—it seems logical to connect them.

Thus the midrash utilized *known* facts to explain an anomaly without informing us of something new. The purpose of *derash* is clarification of anomalies, not creation of facts.

Partial Versus Complete Solutions

Many people approach midrash in a black and white manner. It is important to respect and regard partial solutions optimistically as motivation for further study instead of pessimistically as proof of the hopelessness of research. Thus, in the preceding example, we do not completely know why Rashi holds: *etmol* = yesterday; *etmool* = Monday.

It could be a fact of the dictionary. It could also be some unknown grammatical rule. Just as the English "Lord-lord" difference is recognized by a minute feature (L versus *l*), so could the Hebrew *etmol-etmool* difference be recognized by a minute feature (*o* versus *oo*). The *derash*, of course, is not caused by this minute feature but rather by the grammatical rule that the feature indicates (e.g., capitals denote proper names).

New Grammar

We conclude with an example defending the one midrashic principle on which the anti-midrashists rejoice: new grammar. For, argue the anti-midrashists, if midrash is the spontaneous reaction to a verse's statement, then you can not have new principles of spontaneity. Actually, however, skillful cultural analogies will prove our point.

Explaining the sentence "Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses . . . ," (Numbers 12:1), Rashi states, "She spoke first, hence she is mentioned first." But it is false that the first mentioned in a compound subject is more important (see Exodus 5:1 v. 6:26; Numbers 27:1 v. 36:11; or Genesis 1:1 v. 2:4), and it is not anomalous for a woman (Miriam) to precede a man (Aaron) in a verse (Exodus. 929; Jud. 5: 1).

The new principle is that a compound subject and a singular predicate indicate primary activity in the first mentioned subject.¹¹ An English analogy would be, "They speaks—Aaron and Miriam—against Moses. "

¹¹ This principle was given by the Rav in his Boston Saturday night *shiurim* in the early 1970s on the verse in Genesis 3:8. He gave Genesis 8:23 as a further example.

Note the immediacy with which we are irritated, the obviousness of our being grammatically disturbed, and the compelling force with which we seek a resolution to "They speaks. " This emphasizes the importance of the English ear in *derash*. It is unfortunate, by contrast, that people who lack a biblical ear can hear Numbers 12:1 once a year and not notice the comparable irritability it has with "they speaks. "

"They speaks" emphasizes the problem of the *derash*, not its solution. For the solution, the sentence, "And Miriam spoke—Aaron also—against Moses," connotes that, in instigating the action, Miriam was primary and Aaron secondary. In Hebrew, a single-plural anomaly is used instead of parenthetical phrases (Aaron also).

The biblical ear grasps this *derash* instantly and effortlessly, with ease and simplicity—it is just an ordinary comment. The ignorant can appreciate it only after great work—the examination of many comparable sentences. Even so, the long studies would compel our *logic*, not our verbal *intuition*.

Throughout this essay, we have emphasized the problem of the biblical ear. We now mention its solution—constant biblical experience, the type of study *chazal* used. Every culture arranges massive exposure to doctrines for its constituents. At the very least, at the Friday night table, we must get excited by the nuances of God's latest portion, the way we get excited by Begin's or Carter's latest speech. Children should spend hours watching the Bible-vision instead of the television. Such study must be based not on understanding of content, but on appreciation of wit.

V

To the superficial reader, our results may seem to be a list of randomly chosen examples. In actuality they were picked to represent all major midrashic interpretive categories. A person who familiarizes himself with and consistently applies the following summary, based on our examples, can approach most midrashim with a fair degree of understanding.

We have identified midrashic *rules*, given the types of midrashic *proofs*, discussed midrashic *form*, and listed fallacies of *explanation*. In midrashic rules, we have identified new principles of grammar [e.g., the singular-plural—subject-predicate anomaly (Numbers 12: 1)], and new translations of words (e.g., *ach* = usually).

All midrashic proof emanates from usage. Proof of usage is either by a blatant anomaly (King David versus David-Ecclesiastes 8:8; *Midrash Rabbah*) or by simple conceptual correlates (e.g., to =righteous-in = wicked; Genesis 27:41; Genesis Rabbah). Usage can be experienced or appreciated by cultural English analogies.

Midrashic form can be total, deficient,¹² supportive,¹³ or irrelevant.¹⁴ We have emphasized that even irrelevant reasons are not a deficiency in midrashic form, but in the "listener's ear." ("Principal ends in *pal*, hence, it refers to a person," is an English midrash with an irrelevant reason, which is understood perfectly by the English ear.)

We have listed six types of common midrashic fallacies:

Normal versus abnormal. Midrash does not start with abnormality or "the problem."¹⁵
Stages: General versus details. The goal of midrash is not necessarily proof of all details; the midrash, assuming its general goal clear, may omit mention of it and discuss the possible controversies on details.¹⁶

Tone versus Logic. Midrashic objectivity is not identical with mathematical logic; tone can be very objective.¹⁷

Archetypes versus Examples. A midrash's claim that a verse's meaning is identical with some phenomenon does not mean that the verse's meaning is identical with that phenomenon; instead, it identifies the verse's meaning with the general archetype of which that phenomenon is representative; ignorance of this fallacy has caused the greatest confusion.¹⁸

Effect versus Cause. A midrash can be the effect of a known fact instead of its cause [e.g., creation of Hell on Monday (Genesis 1:6-8; Isaiah 30:33)].

Partial versus Total Explanation. Midrashic comprehension does not require the full development of all of grammar.¹⁹

¹² That is, only half the total reason is given, the other half not being explicitly mentioned. Thus, on Numbers 12:1, Rashi states "Miriam is mentioned first hence she spoke first." This is only half the reason, since the "subject-predicate-singular-plural" anomaly should also be mentioned.

¹³ Thus in note 4 above, the *etkhem-lakhem* distinction, by itself, does not prove anything. With the correct explanation, however, it does add support.

¹⁴ The equivalence of the numerical value of *garti* and the number of biblical commandments is irrelevant to the true explanation of the *derash* on Genesis. 32:4.

¹⁵ Thus, "Get me milk also" does sound peculiar, but the repetition of "Wow! you're beautiful" (Songs 4:1) is not abnormal but instead, a different nuance of tone.

¹⁶ Thus in the *derash* on Genesis 32:14-15, the midrash's actual derivation—the value that sexual frequency should be a function of both male work load and female satisfaction—is never explicitly mentioned, but only hinted at. Instead, the midrash discusses the details of the *derash* which, as Rashi noted, could easily cause confusion. By contrast, the *usually* midrashim always mention explicitly their actual derivation—limits *usually*.

¹⁷ The repetitions of love (Songs 4:1), the rhetorical statement of questions (note 4), and the racial designations of people (Genesis 21:9) are all matters of tone and yet are universally agreed to.

¹⁸ An example was given on Songs 4:1 Midrash Rabbah. Also, see further in the text and note 20. The archetypal technique is the most misused of midrashic techniques, and it can be most powerful, making the most mundane of *derash* the most relevant thoughts.

¹⁹ For example, one does not have to know why *principal* is spelled that way in order to understand the principal-*pal derash*. The sole cause of the *derash* is English usage and dictionary meaning—the *derash* has nothing to do with the spelling. Similarly we can totally understand Rashi in Isaiah 30:33 as a report of usage and meaning. A knowledge of why the word is pronounced *etmool* is not needed.

Conclusion

The only way we can insure respect for *chazal* is by portraying them as they were—men of vast encyclopedic knowledge, keen analytic insight, subtle ethical awareness, and moving moral motivation. The superiority of talmudic interpretation must be shown over the flimsy and whimsical caprices of modern interpretation.²⁰ Otherwise, even if modern interpreters do not lead the layman astray, his respect for midrashic rabbinics will be minimal.²¹

In conclusion, midrashic controversy on biblical interpretation does not arise from the ephemeral historical tides that, but for a fleeting moment, show her ominous waters, only to subside in the mighty sea of time. The majestic and sublime rules of biblical grammar stand rooted in the fertile soil of *chazal's* mind, firm against the petty whirlwinds of historical coincidence and philosophical opinion. The nuances of usage are the omnipresent leaf-veins in the biblical forest of words, nurturing the twigs of brown bark with the verdure of the tree of life. It is in her that ideas bud and philosophies flower and, from these delicate grammatical strands, the true tapestries of wisdom are woven.

²⁰ For example, the technique of archetypal generalization shows that the three acts mentioned in the "Hagar" midrash (Genesis 21:9) correspond to three broad problem classes that modern parents can have with their teenage children: premarital sex, crime, and deviation to other religions. The objectivity of the midrash aids a mother in identifying with Sarah's painful and grave solution of separation of family ties (Genesis 21:9), and facilitates the doubting father identifying with Abraham who was told to listen to his wife (Genesis 21:12; Rashi). Objectivity of exegesis and understanding of connotations are consequently necessary prerequisites to the full utilization and appreciation of midrashic relevance.

²¹ We do not mean to imply that any commentator who did not follow my methods was illogical. There are many considerations that went into the writing of any commentary, only one of which was the text's real meaning. Among the others were the state of ideological persecution from Christian, Greek, or secular philosophies, the receptivity and intellectual capacity of the average reader to certain ideas, the practical importance of the ideas, etc. Examples of deliberate deviation from the truth to preserve the religiosity of the simple can be found in my *Maimonides' Attitude towards Sacrifices" Tradition, 14, No. 1 (Spring 1973), 163-179. Another example might be Rambam, Commentary to Rosh Hashanah 2, 6.*

I am simply advocating a classification of commentaries by purpose: which ones wanted to refute Christian interpretations enabling the ignorant layman to avoid attack; which ones were historical; which ones were tongue and cheek (see note 2); and which ones were to explain the text's real meanings and nuances as heard by the native speaker.

I realize that my methods are controversial to some readers. But the present approach, which regards *all* commentaries historically, cannot be superior to my approach, which regards only *some* as historical. At the very least, my approach should be taken as making more *derash* intuitive than commonly thought.