

CHAPTER AA: SYMBOLISM

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AA.1 – Introduction. Symbolism is a controversial interpretive topic. On the one hand, it is appealing, emotionally powerful, and morally exhortative while on the other hand it does not appear to be the straightforward simple meaning of the text (*peshat*). While we are in no position to discuss, at this point, *peshat and derash*, we can make significant contributions at this point by showing that the biblical text requires of its readers a symbolic interpretation to certain passages.

This entire issue is based on the writings of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, whose contributions to symbolism were several centuries beyond his time. Hirsch actually dealt with the problem of whether a symbolic interpretation is the *peshat* of the text, required by its readers.

This may appear counterintuitive. So, we start with Hirsch's famous set of three categories. This will be following by application to this week's Torah reading, Terumah.

AA.2 – Category 1 of Biblical Symbols: Quite simply, Hirsch says, "Suppose the biblical text declares explicitly that a commandment is a symbol?" Doesn't that obligate the reader to interpret that commandment symbolically?

In fact, there are 4 biblical commandments which are called symbolic: Tefillin (Ex13-16), Shabbath (Ex31-13), the Egyptian Passover (Ex12-13), and circumcision (Gn 17:11).

People are always eager to attack any *proof* that passages must be symbolic. In this case, they distinguish between a sign and a symbol. The argument seems to be that these 4 commandments are signs not symbols.

To answer this (and to continue without our examples) we need a definition of symbol

A symbol is an activity or object such that the performance of that activity or the use of that object is intended to remind the user of *other* activities or objects.

Quite simply, then, a sign, simply reminds without any connection, while a symbol has intrinsic connection. It follows that if God says "rest on the sabbath" because "I created the world in 6 days and rested on the 7 days" it is seen that our rest activity is an activity that reminds of another activity namely that of God's rest. Since the connection between *rest* (of myself) and *rest* (of God) is intrinsic, we see that this is not just a sign but a symbol. The same can be said of the other symbolic commandments. Tefillin for example is not just sign about God's redemption, it rather contains the biblical parshahs talking about this redemption and hence it is a symbol not a sign.

AA.3 – Category 2 of Biblical Symbols: Suppose, suggests Hirsch, that a commandment is not called a symbol or a sign but nevertheless we are told that doing one activity has as its purpose the reminding us of other categories. Then *by definition* we are dealing with a symbol. So, if the bible. Nu15-37:41 tells me to wear Tzitzith" in order to remind me of the (other) biblical commandments" then the Bible has declared Tzitzith as a symbol.

AA.4 – Category 3 of Biblical Symbols: In the final category, Hirsch considers, activities laden with emotional experiences, activities such as forgiveness, love, spiritual desires. Hirsch points out that the objects used to accomplish these emotional categories are well-known symbols and that justifies their symbolic classification.

Perhaps some examples from secular practice will help. If on a TV show a person gives his wife on their 10th anniversary, a bouquet of 10 red roses and says that this “tells her about his love for her,” would anyone doubt that this is *intended* to be interpreted symbolically. Hirsch, in his critical analysis of this event, would point out that the 10 roses corresponds to the 10 years of marriage, and that redness is a well-known symbol of love.

In examining this example, we are using the definition of *peshat* that I advocated in 2006 and 2007, “The author intended meaning of a statement.” You simply ask one question: “Does it appear reasonable that the author intended this meaning?” If the answer is yes that we have *peshat*.

Anyone watching the television show alluded to above would agree that the husband intended his gift of 10 roses as a symbol. That is all that matters.

Hirsch, continues, if Temple procedures speak about deep human emotions – guilt, forgiveness, peace, spiritual aspiration – and if furthermore the bible uses objects, for example, blood, with known symbolic interpretations, then we can consider these items as intended to be symbolic.

AA.5 – The Temple: We have started off lightly, since this is a complex topic. The punchiest proof that the (desert) Temple is symbolic is the famous verse, Ex25-08, “They [the Jews] will make Me a Temple, and I will dwell among them.” We have here an explicit statement, that the Temple is not for God dwelling in it, but for God dwelling in them, the people. In other words, the Temple in its intent is to remind one of something else, the Temple is not for God to dwell in but for God to dwell in the people and hence it is symbolic.

AA.6 – Symbolic Meaning: On Ex25-24 discussing the golden rim surrounding the Temple Table Rashi states, “This is symbolic of the crown of royalty; because the [word] “table” has a connotation of wealth and greatness as can be inferred from the idiom “the table of kings”.

Here Rashi uses the very powerful figure of speech, synecdoche, by which a particularly good example becomes the word by which an entire category is named. In this case, the “table of kings” is different than the “table of paupers” or “the table of ordinary folks”.

The gist of this, is that by creating a Temple for God to dwell amongst us, God invites each sector of the Jewish people to join. The Temple Table invites the rich, the wealthy, the royal, to have God present in their midst. It creates this invitation by virtue of the Temple utensil, the table, and which symbolizes not God’s House, but the Jewish people amongst which God dwells, in this case, the segment of the Jewish people who are rich, wealthy, and royal.

True, we would like to know more details. We would like to know *how* the rich, the wealthy, and the royal, invite God into their midst. But as often happens in symbolic passages, the passage is about the idea not the details.

Rashi therefore suffices with a simple statement of *what* is being symbolized.