

HALACHIC AND HASHKAFIC ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

147 - EXPLORING THE BOUNDARIES OF LITERAL AND NON-LITERAL READINGS OF CHUMASH - PART 1 OU ISRAEL CENTER - FALL 2019

- The foundation of our understanding of Torah is the text of Chumash. Every letter is sacred and special, and grappling with the meaning of every word and idea is the starting point of any exploration of the meaning of our existence.
- We were not however given the raw text alone. Along with it comes a plethora of Torah Shebe'al Peh - the Oral Law, some of which originates in the Revelation at Sinai and prophecy to Moshe, and some of which was developed over time by our Torah leaders and thinkers - the Sanhedrin, the individual Tannaim and Amoraim that comprise 'Chazal', and later the mefarshim throughout Jewish history and across the Jewish world.
- However, Revelation (whether Sinaitic or ongoing) is not the only source of our perception of reality. We also base much of our understanding of the universe on reason and academic thought - whether philosophical or scientific. In the last 500 years, both of these areas have grown exponentially to form and inform the world-view of the secular society around us.
- Clearly, there is a potential for (at least apparent) conflict between Revelation and Reason¹. In navigating that difficult road, the manner in which we read our sacred texts is critical. When should a reading be literal and when allegorical? This applies especially to Chumash, but also more widely to Tanach, Talmud and Midrashim².
- There is no 'safety' in either of the extreme positions on this question. To reject any non-literal understanding of Chumash would require a fundamentalist reading to the point that God has physical properties - hand, eye, anger etc. So, clearly, some aspects of the text must have a deeper non-literal meaning. On the other hand, to fully allegorize the Chumash entirely undermines the binding nature and definition of mitzvot and halacha, not to mention many of central historical assumptions of the text. In this sense, such a reading is also clearly inconsistent with the text itself.
- So where can we draw a line somewhere between these extreme and untenable readings?

A] FRAMING THE ISSUES - A CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

1. RJS: I believe the Bible records events that actually happened, like God talking to Abraham, arguing with him, challenging him. God really did intervene in human history.
- RD: You don't really believe that Abraham talked to God and God bargained with him? This is some kind of symbolic parable that you're talking about.
- RJS: It's clearly a parable and the argument between God and Abraham is God giving Abraham a seminar in how to be a Jewish parent....
- RD: I get the feeling that theologians, whether Jewish or Christian almost don't bother to distinguish between that which is symbolic and that which is literal.
- RJS: Tell me, when your daughter was ten did you teach her theories or tell her stories?
- RD: Well, you make a good point which is that there are times when stories get across a point better than telling it literally.
- RJS: And when civilization was in its 'childhood', you tell it stories.
- RD: Yes, there's a lot to be said for parables³, certainly. But what I want to know - and I always want to know this from theologians, Christian or Jewish - is do you actually think it happened? Do you actually think that Abraham did truss Isaac on an altar and then let him off?
- RJS: I definitely think that something happened that made Jews value their children more than in any other civilization I know

1. Rabbi Sacks' 2012 book: *The Great Partnership - Science, Religion the Search for Meaning* is an essential read on the issue.

2. The question of how to read Midrashim, and the extent to which ANY literal understanding is legitimate is beyond the scope of this shiur. We will iy'H deal with this on another occasion. In brief, while we will see that, with Tanach, there is a presumption of literal understanding unless there are strong reasons to negate that. With Midrashim, according to many mefarshim, there is a presumption of NON-LITERAL reading, unless there is strong reason to take a more literal approach.

3. There are significant distinctions between different types of non-literal interpretation - allegory, parable, idiom, metaphor, myth, hyperbole etc. For the present purposes we will define 'literal' as the 'normal' or 'standard' usage of language by people.

RD: It's entirely admirable that these moral lessons should become enshrined in the culture of any people Something interesting happened in Jewish history which led to these admirable things. But, I actually care about what's historically true!

RJS: So do I!

RD: Yes, but, do you think that Abraham really did truss Isaac on an altar?

RJS: I don't... I....

RD: I want to know if you think it's literally true!

RJS: Well, first of all I think that story is a protest against the belief throughout the ancient world that parents own their children ... and I think G-d is saying 'no Jew owns his or her child'... **And that is what I am reading from all these stories. These things happened but they didn't happen as mere facts. They happened as morally instructive lessons.....**

Conversation between Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks and Richard Dawkins, BBC pre-Rosh Hashana broadcast - September 2012⁴

2. Both the Flood and the Tower of Babel are rooted in actual historical events, even if the narrative is not couched in the language of descriptive history. Mesopotamia had many flood myths, all of which testify to the memory of disastrous inundations, especially on the flat lands of the Tigris-Euphrates valley (See Commentary of R. David Zvi Hoffman to Genesis 6 [Hebrew, 140] who suggests that the Flood may have been limited to centres of human habitation, rather than covering the whole earth). Excavations at Shurruk, Kish, Uruk and Ur - Abraham's birthplace - reveal evidence of clay flood deposits. Likewise the Tower of Babel was a historical reality. Herodotus tells of the sacred enclosure of Babylon, at the centre of which was a ziqqurat or tower of seven stories, 300 feet high. The remains of more than thirty such towers have been discovered, mainly in lower Mesopotamia, and many references have been found in the literature of the time that speak of such towers "reaching heaven."

However, the stories of the Flood and Babel are not merely historical, because the Torah is not history but "teaching, instruction." They are there because they represent a profound moral-social-political-spiritual truth about the human situation as the Torah sees it. They represent, respectively, precisely the failures intimated by Paul Johnson. The Flood tells us what happens to civilization when individuals rule and there is no collective. Babel tells us what happens when the collective rules and individuals are sacrificed to it.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks - Individual and Collective Responsibility⁵

3. Before we open the Torah however, let us consider how to read it. As a subject of philological or antiquarian research? As corroboration for antediluvian or geological hypotheses? In the expectation of finding revelations of esoteric mysteries? Certainly not! As Jews we will read this book - as a book tendered to us by God in order that we learn from it about what we are and what we should be during our earthly existence. We will read it as 'Torah' - literally instruction - directing and guiding us within God's world and among humanity, making our inner self come alive.

Rav S.R. Hirsch - 19 Letters, Letter 2

B] TORAH AS POETRY

4. דבי רבי ישמעאל תנא: (ירמיהו כ"ג) וְכַפְּטִישׁ וְפָצֵץ סָלַעַ. מה פטיש זה מתחלק לכמה ניצוצות - אף מקרא אחד יוצא לכמה טעמים

סנהדרין לא.

Torah Shebichtav is multi-layered and permits multiple levels of interpretation. Consider the difference between the Torah understanding of a word - 'davar' - which is also a 'thing' in itself; almost a 3D object which can be analyzed from different perspectives. Compare this with the Aristotelian (and modern secular) concept of the 'word' - 'logos' - which is a mere convention to communicate the form of a thing. The secular 'word' is never an intrinsic source of truth.

5. וְעֵתָהּ כְּתָבוּ לָכֶם אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת וְלִמְדָה אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁמְרָהּ בְּפִיהֶם לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה־לִּי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לְעֵד בְּבִנְיַי יִשְׂרָאֵל

דברים לא"ט

The Torah calls itself a 'shira' - a poem.

4. Minutes 17:48 - 20:44, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipDdd1SISoM&feature=youtu.be>

A fuller version of this debate can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=roFdPHdhgKQ. The debate on literalism can be found between minutes 14:12 and 24:40.

5. Available on the OU website at https://www.ou.org/torah/parsha/rabbi-sacks-on-parsha/individual_and_collective_responsibility/

To download more source sheets and audio shiurim visit www.rabbimanning.com

6. ג. והנה בנדרים (נח) העלו בפ"י המקרא כתבו לכם את השירה שהוא כל התורה. והביאו ראיה מסיפ"י דקרא למען תהיה לי השירה הזאת לעד הא מיהא יש להבין היאך נקרא כה"ת שירה? והרי לא נכתבה בלשון של שירה! אלא ע"כ יש בה טבע וסגולת השירה. שהוא דבור בלשון מליצה. דידוע לכל מבין עם תלמוד דמשונה המליצה מספור פראי בשני ענינים: בטבע ובסגולה:

ב) דבשיר אין הענין מבואר יפה כמו בספור פראי. וצריך לעשות הערות מן הצד. דזה החרוז כוון לזה הספור. וזה החרוז כוון לזה. ולא מיקירי דרוש. אלא כך הוא טבע השיר אפ"י של הדיוט. ומושכל עוד דמי שידוע בטוב ענין שהביא לידי מליצה זו שנתחבר עליו מתוק לו אור לשון של השיר ודקדוקה הרבה יותר מלאיש שאין לו ידיעה מתכונת הענין, ורק בא להתבונן מן המליצה תורף הענין. ומזה עלול הוא להשערות בדויות מה שלא ה"י מעולם ולא לזה כוון המשורר. כך הוא טבע כל התורה שאין הספור שבה מבואר יפה. אלא יש לעשות הערות ופירושים לדקדוקי הלשון. ולא נקרא 'דרוש'. אלא כך הוא פשט המקרא

ג) דבשיר יש סגולה לפארה ברמזים מה שאינו מענין השיר. כמו שנהוג לעשות ראשי החרוזים בדרך א"ב או שם המחבר. וסגולה זו מיוחדת במליצה ולא בספור פראי. וידוע דסגולה זו מכרחת הרבה פעמים להמחבר לעקם את הלשון כמעט. רק כדי שיחלו ראשי החרוזים באות הנדרש לו. ודבר זה ממש היא בכל התורה כולה. שמלבד הענין המדובר בפשט המקרא, עוד יש בכל דבר הרבה סודות וענינים נעלמים אשר מחמת זה בא כמה פעמים המקרא בלשון שאינו מדויק כ"כ. וכ"ז אינו רק בתורה הקדושה אלא בכל מקראי קדש

קדמת העמק - הקדמת הנצי"ב לספר העמק דבר ס"ג

The Netziv (R. Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin of Volozhin - 19C) understands that we are required to read the verses of the Torah with the same nuance and sophistication that we bring to the reading of poetry!

- As with the analysis of all literature, a major hermeneutical question must be how to decide when a meaning attributed to a text is authentic. What is the relevant test to ascertain the meaning of any text? Is it: (i) the intention of the author (ii) the understanding of the initial readership for whom the text was written (iii) the objective understanding of any other group of people reading that text in the future, even though that could not have been anticipated that the time of writing⁶ or (iv) the subjective understanding of any individual reading that text at any time, even though that is almost certainly not what the author, or maybe most other people, would understand?
- No one would deny that the Torah has multiple levels of meaning which have parallel and concurrent legitimacy. The more pertinent question is whether the one specific level of meaning - the literal - can ever be fully negated, in any case such that we can definitively state that the verse in question CANNOT be understood literally.

C] MUST A VERSE ALWAYS HAVE A 'PSHAT' MEANING?

7. משנה. לא יצא האיש לא בסיף ולא בקשת, ולא בתריס, ולא באלה, ולא ברומח, ואם יצא - חייב חטאת. רבי אליעזר אומר: תכשיטין הן לו, וחכמים אומרים: אינן אלא לגנאי, שנאמר: (ישעיהו ב"ד) וְכִתְּלוּ חֲבוּתְכֶם לְאַתֵּימִים וְחֲנִיתוֹתֵיהֶם לְמִזְמוֹרוֹת לֹא-יֵשָׁא נְוִי אֶל-גּוֹי חָרָב וְלֹא-יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד מִלְחָמָה. גמ' מאי טעמא דרבי אליעזר דאמר תכשיטין הן לו! דכתיב (תהלים מה"ד) חֲגוּר־חַרְבָן עַל-יַרְךָ גְבוּר־הַיָּדָף וְהַדְרָךְ. אמר ליה רב כהנא למר בריה דרב הונא: האי בדברי תורה כתיב! אמר ליה: אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוט. אמר רב כהנא כד הוינא בר תמני סרי שנין והוה גמירנא ליה לכוליה תלמודא, ולא הוה ידענא דאין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו עד השתא!!

שבת סג.

Chazal express a principle that a verse never loses its 'pschat' meaning. Should this be seen as an imperative to retain a literal reading of Tanach?

- Interestingly, this principle is immediately questioned in the text. Rav Kahana expresses that, in his broad education in Torah, he had never heard of this principle until this exchange!

8. גמ'. ת"ר: (דברים כה"ו) וְהָיָה הַבְּכוֹר׃ יִקְוֶם עַל-שֵׁם אָחִיו - לנחלה. אתה אומר לנחלה, או אינו אלא לשם? יוסף - קורין אותו יוסף, יוחנן - קורין אותו יוחנן? נאמר כאן יקום על שם אחיו, ונאמר להלן (בראשית מח"ו) עַל שֵׁם אָחִיהֶם יִקְרָאוּ בְּנֵיחֲלָתָם. מה שם האמור להלן נחלה אף שם האמור כאן לנחלה אמר רבא: אף על גב דבכל התורה כולה אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו, (רש"י - וף על גב דדרשין ליה לדרשא מידי פשוטו מיכו לא נפיק לגמרי) הכא אתאי גזרה שוה אפיקתיה מפשטיה לגמרי!

במות כד.

Chazal here outline the exception that proves the rule! All verses have a pshat, except for this one concerning Yibum, where the verse requires the first child of the levirate marriage to take the 'name' of his uncle - the deceased husband. This does not mean the actual name but the inheritance. Chazal explain that this negates the pshat of this verse, yet all other verses DO have a pshat!

- What is the meaning of 'pschat'. Does it mean 'literal'? In many cases the clear answer is that the pshat is NOT the literal meaning of the verse.

6. Consider what is an authentic reading of the US Constitution. Must the rights granted be interpreted in the context of the intentions of the original Founding Fathers or can they be given a 21st Century meaning, even though we are certain that the 18th Century authors would have objected totally to such an interpretation.

9. לא־תִקְלַל חֵרֶשׁ וְלִפְנֵי עֵוֵר לֹא תִתֵּן מִכְשָׁל ... (רש"י - לפני הסומא צדצר לא תתן ענה שאינה הוגנת לו. אל תאמר מכור שדך וקח לך חמור, ואתה עוקף עליו ונוטלה הימנו)

ויקרא יט"ד

The Torah prohibits putting a stumbling block before the blind. Rashi explains this as a prohibition on giving bad advice. But is that the pshat in the verse or a drash?

10. והנה מדברי הרב המחבר וכן מדברי הר"מ נראה דפסוק הזה דלפני עור ילא לגמרי מפשוטו, דאם נתן מכשול ממש אבן לפני עור אינו עובר!

מנחת חינוך מצוה רל"ב

The Minchat Chinuch understands that this verse actually has NO literal meaning, to the extent that if one actually placed a rock in front of a blind person, THIS specific prohibition would not apply!

- In fact, the principle of פשוטו איך מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו is generally used in the discussion of halachic⁸ applications of the text and the line between pshat and drash⁹. It is NOT cited by the classic mefarshim in the discussion of the literal or non-literal meaning of the narrative parts of Tanach.
- Defining 'pshat' is tricky. The root פ-ש-ט means surface level or spread out. So pshat is the superficial, initial reading of the text, based upon the proper understanding of the words in conformity with the rules of language, structure, context and the teachings of the Oral Law.¹⁰
- It certainly does not mean 'simple'¹¹. It can be 'literal' but is not certainly not by definition literal. The 'yad' of God is not a physical hand but an idiom for power/activity etc.¹² So too, when the verses record in Hebrew the conversations of Bilaam and Balak, or Paro and his ministers, these are presumably not the literal words that they uttered since they spoke their own languages. So too, in the narrative portions of Tanach which record historical¹³ events, the pshat of the pesukim is not necessarily a literal blow-by-blow account of 'what happened'¹⁴.

D] THE DANGERS OF HALACHIC INAUTHENTICITY - 'MEGALE PANIM LATORAH'

11. רבי אלעזר המודעי אומר: המחלל את הקדשים, והמבזה את המועדות, והמלבין פני חברו ברבים, והמפר בריתו של אברהם אבינו עליו השלום, והמגלה פנים בתורה שלא כהלכה - אף על פי שיש בידו תורה ומעשים טובים אין לו חלק לעולם הבא

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ג משנה יא

One of the most brazen and unacceptable practices is creating new facets to Torah which are against the halacha. Such a person loses their place in the World To Come.

12. והמגלה פנים בתורה - שמראה פנים ופירושים צחורה שלא כהלכה. כגון המתרגם ומזרעך לא תתן להעביר למוך - ומזרעך לא תתן להעביר לארמיותא. ואין זה פשוטו של מקרא. וכלל זה הדורש דרשות של דופי. פירוש אחר: מגלה פנים - שמעזיז פניו לעבור על דברי תורה צפרהסויא ציד רמה ואין לו צושת פנים

ר' עובדיה מברטנורא מסכת אבות פרק ג משנה יא

Megale Panim LeTorah applies to someone who reinterprets verses relating to mitzvot in such a way to change the halacha. It also includes someone who learns disparaging or mocking interpretations - derashot shel dofi.¹⁵

- As such, the allegorizing of verses in such a way to change halacha or reinterpret the meaning of mitzvot would clearly be seriously prohibited. But the reading of narrative passages of the Torah in a non-literal manner would not be *megale panim* - except to the extent that it undermines in some way the halachic system. We will see in Part 2 that this also applies to readings which undermine one of the main platforms of Jewish belief - *ikrei hadat*.

7. Of course, such an action is absolutely prohibited in practice on many other halachic grounds, not least of which the Torah mitzva of Ahavat Reim.

8. Although the verses in Nach quotes here are not directly halachic, they are being brought in the context of a halachic proof, not a narrative understanding.

9. The question of what is the pshat and what is drash can be fascinating in English too! Consider the following advertising slogans:

"WE BUILD EXCITEMENT - PONTIAC"

"TRUST SLEEPY'S FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE"

"SMIRNOFF - LEAVES YOU BREATHELESS"

What are the 'pshat' and 'drash' meanings of those phrases?

10. See *The Requirement of Pshat and Challenge of Derash*, Abraham Kelman, Hakira Journal Vol 3 p.133

11. Note R. Hayyim Angel's book of essays on pshat and drash issues entitled *Pshat Isn't So Simple* - see further reading below.

12. It should however be noted that a mystical Torah approach and the kabbalistic mefarshim understand the expressions 'yad', 'ayin' etc as being descriptions of an actual spiritual reality, rather than a simple metaphor. God actually does have a 'yad'. This is not of course physical but an elevated Divine manifestation of a 'yad'. Our hand is simply a pale reflection of this reality. Nevertheless, even on this understanding, the word 'yad' in the verse is still not being read literally, in the sense of the 'normal' understanding of the word.

13. The actual historicity of at least certain parts of the Tanach narrative are not only essential to any authentic view of Judaism but in many cases (certainly in the chronologically later parts of Tanach) are corroborated by external evidence.

14. We will discuss this more iyH in Part 2.

15. See Sanhedrin 99b for examples.

E] RAV SA'ADIA GAON AND THE LIMITS OF NON-LITERALISM

E1] RAV SAADIA GAON'S 4 REASONS

13. it is a well-know fact that every statement found in the Bible is to be understood in its literal sense except for those that cannot be so construed **for one of the following four reasons**:-
- (i) It may, for example, either be rejected by the observation of the senses, such as the statement: *And the man called his wife's name Eve because she was the mother of all living things*, whereas we see that the ox and the lion are not the offspring of womankind
- (ii) Or else the literal sense may be negated by reason, such as that of the statement "*For the Lord your G-d is a devouring fire*" ... now fire is something created and defective, for it is subject to extinction. Hence it is logically inadmissible that God resembles it.
- (iii) ... by an explicit text of a contradictory nature, in which case it would become necessary to interpret the first statement in a non-literal sense
- (iv) Finally, any Biblical statement to the meaning of which rabbinic tradition has attached a certain reservation is to be interpreted by us in keeping with this authentic tradition. Thus it has been transmitted to us that the punishment of stripes consists of 39 blows, although the Scripture states "*Forty stripes he may give him*"
- There exist, then, only these four possible reasons for a non-literal interpretation of the verses of the Sacred Writ, there being no fifth!

Sefer Emunot Vedeot 7:2¹⁶

14. it is not admissible that a verse [of Scripture] be construed in any other than its literal sense except for one of the four reasons mentioned by us previously. Where, however, none of these reasons exists, the verses are to be taken in their explicit meaning. For if it were necessary to construe every verse of Sacred Writ in whatever figurative sense is possible without compelling proof, not a single revealed law would be maintained¹⁷, since they are all capable of such non-literal interpretation.¹⁸

Sefer Emunot Vedeot 7:4

Later in the same section of the book, Rav Saadia gives an underlying reason for the concern of over-allegorization. Without appropriate and authentic boundaries, allegory would totally undermine the system of mitzvot, changing the meaning of some explicit commandments and transforming others into metaphors for more abstract overarching moral values. He also gives examples of how unchecked allegorization could undermine the historicity of key events in the Tanach.

E2] LITERAL READINGS NEGATED BY OUR SENSES

15. אֲנִי אֶנְחֵנוּ עֲלֵים אַחֲיוֹ הַמָּסוּ אֶת לְבַבְנוּ לְאֹמֵר עִם גְּדוֹל וְרַם מִמֶּנּוּ עָרִים גְּדֹלֹת וּבְצוּרֹת בְּשָׁמַיִם וְגַם בְּגִי עֲנָקִים רְאִינוּ שָׁם:

דברים א-כח

When the Torah speaks of 'cities fortified to the heavens', we understand the hyperbole and true meaning. We read this an idiom.

16. וּמִלֶּתֶם אֶת עֶרְלַת לְבַבְכֶם וְעֶרְפְּכֶם לֹא תִקְשׁוּ עוֹד

דברים י:טו

So too the 'circumcising' of the 'foreskin' of our heart.

• An obvious question here is the extent to which this negation of literal reading due to sense perception extends to negation due to our scientific understanding. Today, our 'senses' extend far wider than immediate personal awareness. Given the reach of science and technology, we are able to 'sense' countless millions of facts about the universe we live in. On that basis, would Rav Saadia understand that where the verses of the Torah appear to contradict contemporary science - eg in the account of Creation and the Age of the Universe, or in the flood narrative, they must be reinterpreted in accordance with science?

16. Emunot Ve'Deot was written in Arabic and later translated into Hebrew. There are in fact two variant versions of the Seventh Treatise and that which most often appears (based on the original Ibn Tibbon translation) is the other one. The English translations used on this sheet are from the 1948 Rosenblatt translation.

17. This is of course one of the main directions of Christian hermeneutics, which read much of the Tanach in a non-literal manner. Classic Christian hermeneutics sees four levels of meaning in the verses - literal, moral, allegorical and anagogical (mystical). In this way many of the commandments of the Chumash can be re-interpreted in ways that do not impose concrete obligations.

18. Rav Saadia Gaon then gives 5 examples of how legal and narrative passages in Tanach could, incorrectly, have been allegorized due to other verse and proofs. These include reading (i) the law not to light fires on Shabbat as a prohibition to fight armed battles on Shabbat ; (ii) the law not to eat chametz on Pesach as a prohibition against adultery; (iii) the narrative of splitting of the Red Sea as a description of how the Bnei Yisrael was caught between two wings of the Egyptian army; and (iv) the account of the stopping of the sun and moon in Yehoshua as a metaphor for the firm establishment of the Jewish government!

17. The view of Saadia (882-942) shared by all the medieval philosophers, is that when a biblical text is incompatible with wither reason or observation, that is sufficient evidence that it is to read figuratively, allegorically, poetically or in some other way. Reason and observation, later to become the methodology of science, were regarded as reliable bases of knowledge, and it was taken as axiomatic that the Torah could not conflict with established truth.

The Great Partnership, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, p 353¹⁹

- This approach then raises the question of the role of miracles in the Tanach. Natural Science cannot (by definition) accept the existence of the supernatural. So how would we view miracles in light of R. Saadia? Are they actually more 'natural' than we think?

E3] LITERAL READINGS OF MITZVOT NEGATED BY CHAZAL

Clearly, there are many mitzvot in the Torah which we understand in a way which is NOT a literal reading of the verse.

18. לא תבשל גדי בחלב אמו

שמות כ"ב

The Torah states: 'Do not cook a kid in its mother's milk', which is understood as prohibition on cooking the meat and milk of a domesticated animal, or eating such a cooked mixture.

19. אם זרחת השמש עליו דמים לו שלם ושלם אם אין לו ונמכר בגנבתו: (רש"י - אין זה אלא כמן משל: אם צרור לך הדבר שיש לו שלום עמך כשמש הזה שהוא שלום בעולם, כך פשוט לך שאינו צא להרוג ...)

שמות כ"ב

If 'the sun shines on the intruder', it is not permitted to kill them. This is NOT a reference to actual sunshine, but Rashi understands it to be 'like a parable' - if the matter is as 'clear as day' that the intruder has no intention to harm.

20. והנה הוא שם עלילת דברים לאמר לא מצאתי לבתך בתולים ואלה בתולי בתי ופרשו השמלה לפני זקני העיר: (רש"י - כרי זה משל: מחורין הדברים כשמלה)

דברים כ"ב

In another example, which Rashi calls an actual parable, the Torah speaks of proving the virginity of a bride by 'laying out the sheet before the judges'. In fact there is no sheet at all²⁰! This is simply a mashal for presenting clear evidence, as if 'laying out a sheet'.

E4] LITERAL READINGS OF NARRATIVE NEGATED BY CHAZAL

21. יתיב ההוא מרבנן קמיה דר' שמואל בר נחמני, ויתיב וקאמר: איוב לא היה ולא נברא אלא משל היה. א"ל, עליך אמר קרא: (איוב א:א) אִיֹּשׁ הָיָה בְּאֶרֶץ עֵדֵן אֵיֹב שָׁמַיִל! אלא מעתה, (שמואל ב' י"ב) וְלָרֵשׁ אֵיֹן כָּל כִּי אִם-כַּבֵּשָׁה אַחַת קִטְנָה אֲשֶׁר קָנָה וְיַחֲלֶהּ וְגו'. מי הוה? אלא משל בעלמא! הכא נמי משל בעלמא. א"כ, שמו ושם עירו למה?

בבא בתרא טו.

In debating the historicity of the book of Job, one opinion in the Gemara posits that the entire book is a mashal!

E5] LITERAL READINGS NEGATED BY OTHER VERSES

22. ויברא אלהים את האדם בצלמו בצלם אלהים ברא אותו זכר ונקבה ברא אתם: רש"י - ולהלן הוא אומר (בראשית ז:כ) ויקח אחר מללעותיו וגו', ופשוטו של מקרא, כאן הודיעך שנבראו שניהם בשש ואל פירש לך כיצד צרייתן ופירש לך במקום אחר

בראשית א:כ

Rashi explains that the creation of man and woman was NOT simultaneous, even though Bereishit 1 seems to state clearly that it was. In fact, it is only in Bereishit 2 that we see how the actual creation took place - man first and woman second.

19. See though Rabbi Moshe Meiselman in Torah, Chazal and Science p 272, who strongly disagrees with Rabbi Sacks on this point. He does not regard the guidelines of Rav Saadia to include scientific knowledge. He questions whether science is based on reason as much as on 'subjective factors'. Nevertheless, in response to Rabbi Meiselman, whilst it is certainly true that some scientists have personal agendas, and not everything labelled 'science' is clearly established objective fact, with some issues remaining theoretical, it cannot be denied that most of science is fundamentally objective and grounded in reason.

20. Although Ramban does outline one scenario in which the practice was to examine an actual sheet.

E6] LITERAL READINGS NEGATED BY REASON, SCIENCE OR TORAH THOUGHT

23. You surely know that many verses of the holy Law are not to be taken literally. Since it is known through proofs of reason that it is impossible for the thing to be literally so, the translator [Aramaic targum] rendered it in a form that reason will abide. A man should never cast his reason behind him, for the eyes are set in front and not in back²¹.

Maimonides - Letter on Astrology (translated R. Isadore Twersky - A Maimonides Reader (1972) p. 472

In Part 2 we will look more closely at the concept of דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם. What are its limits and how does it help to define the authentic boundaries of non-literal readings of Tanach?

Further Reading

- *The Biblical Stories of Creation, Garden of Eden and the Flood: History or Metaphor* - R. Shubert Spero - Tradition 33:2 (1999) pp 5-18
- *On the Limits of Non-Literal Interpretation of Scripture from an Orthodox Perspective* - Joshua L. Golding - Torah Umadda Journal (10/2001) pp 37-59
- *The Challenge of Creation* (2006) - R. Natan Slifkin - Chapter 7
- *Torah, Chazal and Science* (2013) - Chapters 28-32
- *Pshat Isn't So Simple* (2014) - R. Hayyim Angel - p58
- *The Keys to the Palace* (2017) - R. Hayyim Angel - p115
- *Judaism Reclaimed* (2019) - R. Shmuel Phillips - Chapter 8

21. Prof Menachem Kellner in *Science in the Beit Midrash* p234 uses this passage to argue that "To all intents and purposes, science becomes our measure for understanding the Torah." It does not seem however that the passages he quotes support this thesis. The Rambam explicitly allows for supernatural miracles in explaining verses literally. Also the translation Kellner brings of source 17 above (ibid p245 n30), whilst supportive of his thesis, seems unfaithful to the original