YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**Parashat Noach**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

**The Greatness of Rashi and the Midrash**

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**Introduction**

A few years ago, we hosted a family – except for the father – on Shabbat *Parashat Vayishlach*. At one point, the mother mentioned that the father talks to the children every Shabbat about the weekly *parasha*. Since he was away that week, she asked me to say something in his stead. Of course, I couldn't refuse, and so I began to tell the children about the meeting between Yaakov and Esav in the *parasha*, in the light of the *midrashim* that Rashi brings in his commentary to the Torah. Just when I got to the juicy part, when Esav was about to bite Yaakov on the neck, I noticed a disturbed look in the mother's eyes. When I asked her where I went wrong, she firmly replied that I was teaching *midrashim*, whereas "in our house we only learn the plain meaning of the text."

**Benefits of *Midrashim***

Many people in our time look down on *midrashim*, and only look for *peshat* –explanations that accord with the plain meaning of the text. Indeed, Rashi himself writes (*Bereishit* 3:8) that his goal is not simply to cite *midrashim* and *aggadot*, but to seek "the plain sense (*peshat*)of Scripture" and "*aggadot* that settle the words of Scripture in a matter that fits."[[1]](#footnote-1)

However, the best place to find midrashic citations among the commentators is in the commentary of Rashi. It stands to reason that in his opinion, many *midrashim* "explain the words of Scripture in a way that fits in with them." His clarification that he does not bring just any *midrashim* alludes to the fact that he brings quite a few *midrashim*; otherwise, he would not have bothered to clarify this, but would have simply avoided bringing *midrashim* (like other commentators, such as the Ibn Ezra).

Why, then, does Rashi use Midrash so frequently? What do these *midrashim* manage to add to the "plain" interpretation? I suggest that we can point to two main advantages of Midrash.

**I. Accessibility with Simplicity**

The first advantage of Midrash is in creating a connection with the Torah. The Torah is not always easy to understand, and sometimes withholds details. On this point, Midrash comes to our aid, filling in the gaps and painting a colorful picture that will draw the learner in.

In this way, the listener can become attached to the Torah at a young age. Midrash gives people the opportunity to use their imagination while engaged in Torah study. This can be compared, *mutatis mutandis*, to animated movies shown to children: the movies describe a colorful and fantastic reality with many phenomena that do not exist in the real world – but that appeal to the human heart. It is impossible to describe a complex reality to children. When trying to make anything accessible to children, one must provide them with a simpler picture, which includes "colorful" descriptions. A reality where everything is clear and predictable – where one knows who the good guys are and who the bad guys are, and that the good guys always win in the end. A reality where you don't have to start thinking about and analyzing everything.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Thus, the first goal of *midrashim* is to make the Torah accessible. In this way, people develop an emotional connection to Torah even in their childhood. The *midrashim* build an appreciation that accompanies a person not only through childhood but also into adulthood. Within every adult is the child he once was; one's experiences as a child greatly shape the person one will be as an adult. Therefore, the messages imparted by a *midrash* do not disappear; they continue to influence the person, even if only subconsciously, and shape his lifelong approach to Torah. Just as with animated movies, the creators instill a variety of messages directly and indirectly, so too the *midrashim* of *Chazal* instill us with ideas and worldviews.

This, of course, is not the full picture. When a person grows up, he is expected to understand that the Torah is more complex than the simple picture presented by a *midrash*. But none of this detracts from the great value of Midrash.

**II. Communicating Complex Messages**

While it is true that Midrash often presents a simplified and less complex picture, sometimes it adopts a different approach, and therein lies its second advantage: adding "color" that in fact contributes to understanding the Torah's complexities.

Here, however, Midrash makes a certain demand. Note that the Ramban also sometimes offers a foundational and comprehensive analysis of a Biblical story or character, and insists on the complexities therein. However, while the Ramban takes pains to construct a detailed approach and to present his arguments clearly, Rashi brings only the midrashic expositions, leaving us to do the rest. And Midrash is demanding. It does not present a clear picture that combines the different perspectives that it represents, but demands of the reader, the learner, to contemplate and understand the relationship between different expositions.

**The Different Messages of Midrash**

At this point, it is important to emphasize that *peshat –* the plain meaning – and *derash* – the midrashic exposition – should not be perceived as the "logical interpretation" and the "less logical interpretation," respectively. They are two legitimate methods of reading the Torah. The Torah is made up of layers, and many times the *Midrashim* shed light on the words of the Torah. Let us consider several examples:

**1. The Lion that Struck Noach**

 An especially good example of the wide array of messages expressed in Midrash is found in our *parasha*, *Parashat Noach*. In the wake of the Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba Acharei Mot* 20,1 and parallels), Rashi describes (on *Bereishit* 7:23) how Noach was once late in bringing food to the lion on the ark, in response to which the lion "struck him." Even though this *midrash* is short and provides few details, it can be understood in several ways.

First, it can be understood that the *midrash* reflects a view that, in principle, even Noach did not deserve to be saved from the flood. We similarly find a midrashic teaching elsewhere (*Pesikta Zutrata* [*Lekakh Tov*], end of *Parashat Bereishit*, chap. 6) that "even against Noach it was decreed" that he would die in the flood, "but he found favor."

At the beginning of *Parashat Noach*, Rashi writes that "some of our Rabbis explain it [= the phrase 'in his generations'] to his [Noach’s] credit… and others explain it to his discredit" (Rashi, *Bereishit* 6:9). Those who explain it to his credit certainly maintain that Noach was a righteous man, and that is why he was saved from the flood. Those who explain it to his discredit, on the other hand, might say that Noach himself did not deserve to be saved from the flood, but that God had to save *someone* in order to maintain humanity. Noach was righteous *relative to* the members of his generation, and therefore he was saved.

If we take this a step further, to the extent of saying Noach was saved only in order that mankind should be saved, then it was not necessary that he be saved in the best possible manner, whole in his body and soul; "minimal" rescue would suffice. In light of this, we can understand why a lion struck him: Noach in and of himself did not deserve to be saved, and therefore he suffered injury. In same place (*Bereishit* 7:23), Rashi brings another *midrash* that goes in the same direction: Noach "was coughing and spitting blood because of the trouble he had with the cattle and beasts." Once again, Noach himself was not the object of rescue, but only the means to save humanity. In and of himself he did not deserve to be saved, and therefore he merited only "minimal" rescue.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is the first understanding.

A second possible understanding is that the *midrash* comes to illustrate the burden and difficulty involved in managing the world, something that is perhaps beyond the ability of man. During his stay in the ark, Noach and his family took care of all the pure and impure animals in the ark. They basically had to handle the whole world, though only a scaled-down model of it.

People tend to think it is very simple to run the world, and so the *midrash* comes to teach us the opposite message, describing what happens when humans really do have to manage the whole world: it does not work. "The lion struck him." Man is not able to manage the whole world; at the very least, it is not a simple job.

This message corresponds to the words of the Gemara in *Pesachim* (118a), that “man's sustenance is difficult” yet God "gives food to all flesh" (*Tehillim* 136:25). From another perspective, the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* (108b) brings the words of Shem, the son of Noach, according to whom "we had much trouble in the ark" because "the animals which are usually fed by day, we fed by day, and those normally fed by night, we fed by night." Shem describes constant and unending work, beyond human capability. Noach and his sons managed the task with great difficulty, if at all. This is the second understanding.

A third possibility for understanding the *midrash* is as a parable for our relationship with God, with the goal of teaching us about gratitude. God makes sure to feed the entire world with His goodness, grace, and mercy – and we, if our food is not brought to us exactly on time, begin to file complaints. We are just like the lion. According to this explanation, the *midrash* comes as a critique of our ingratitude towards God; it comes to teach us to show Him our gratitude.

**2. Yitzchak's Blindness**

I have proposed three different possibilities for understanding the *midrash* about Noach's injury, each one connected with broad messages. Let us now turn to another *midrash*, on a different *parasha,* and see how there too, a concise sentence can contain profound messages on different levels.

In the introduction to the account of the blessings received by Yaakov and Esav, the Torah mentions that when Yitzchak grew old, his eyes dimmed (*Bereishit* 27:1). In the wake of various *midrashim*, Rashi (ad loc.) brings several explanations about what caused Yitzchak's blindness.

First, Rashi explains based on *Midrash Tanchuma* (ed. Warsaw, *Toledot* 8) that Yitzchak’s eyes dimmed "through the smoke raised by these women [= the wives of Esav mentioned at the end of the previous chapter]." That is, he was blinded due to the incense Esav's wives offered to their idols.

Although this explanation is not particularly detailed, upon further consideration, it is evident that the *midrash* comes to answer a major question: Did Yitzchak really not have a problem with the level his son Esav had reached? Did he really not care? We are told that "Yitzchak loved Esav because he ate of his venison" (*Bereishit* 25:28), but it is difficult to believe that Yitzchak, with all his greatness, did not notice or care how far his beloved son Esav had deteriorated. In the wake of this *midrash*, the answer becomes clear: Yitzchak certainly cared, to the point that his knowledge of Esav's spiritual state – the idolatry in his household – was killing Yitzchak from within.

Rashi also offers an alternative explanation, from another *midrash* (*Bereishit Rabba* 65,6): Yitzchak's eyes dimmed in his old age because the ministering angels wept during the *Akeida* and their tears fell into Yitzchak's eyes.

Here too, a brief midrashic sentence conceals a much broader message: The *midrash* implies that the *Akeida* was not a test that was stopped at the last moment, but rather a test that continued until the bitter end, and only afterward did God correct its results. In accordance with the idea found in *Chazal* in other places as well (*see Zevachim* 62a, where it speaks about "the ashes of Yitzchak"), this *midrash* assumes that Yitzchak really died at the *Akeida.* Although God resurrected him, something of that death stuck with Yitzchak forever. For this reason, Yitzchak's eyes dimmed in his old age – because a blind person is considered as if he were dead (see *Nedarim* 64b). Yitzchak's dimmed eyesight is not only a symbol of the death that Yitzchak experienced at the *Akeida*, but also reflects a real process: The Yitzchak who went up to Mount Moriya is not the same Yitzchak who came down after the *Akeida.* He experienced something there that changed him in an irreversible way, and suffered the consequences for the rest of his life.

**Summary**

We saw various messages that can be gleaned from Midrash both about Noach's injury and about Yitzchak's blindness. Now it can be stated with a full heart that not only do *midrashim* offer beautiful stories that will endear the Torah to those who study it, but they also add an important level of messages to the level of *peshat*.

Internalizing the importance of the midrashic layer is especially important in our community, as quite a few people tend to avoid Midrash and focus on seeking explanations that accord with the plain sense of the text. The place of *peshat* is not in doubt, but Midrash must also be given a place of honor. It is worthwhile to open one's eyes and ears to the world of Midrash, to what the *midrashim* are trying to teach us, and to the profound messages that they express.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein on Shabbat *Parashat Noach* 5782.]

1. Editor’s note: Much has been written in analyzing Rashi’s words: *aggadah ha-meyashevet et divrei ha-mikra davar davur al ofnav*. The translation provided here should be taken as a general idea of Rashi’s meaning. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. To illustrate, the Ramban comprehensively analyzes the character of Esav and notes the different sides of his complex personality. Such an analysis is simply not suitable for children. This stands in contrast to Rashi's descriptions, for example, which intensify and exaggerate both the righteous and the wicked, thus creating a clear world where everything is either black or white. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Accordingly, after the flood, Noach's sons reproduce, something that is not mentioned about Noach himself – and in a short time, Noach is completely out of the picture. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)