

## **Chapter Seven- Text and the Communal Context of its Interpreters: PSHAT.**

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## Introduction to Pshat

Torah text is the focus of a multivocal intergenerational conversation of those who treat it as a valued, divine canon. Joining the practice or discipline of commentating, arguing and seeking its best PSHAT these commentators stretch from Rashi and Mikraot Gedolot to modern university scholars like the JPS commentary. Parshat HaShavuah is often the social occasion for such PSHAT analysis. Studying Torah does not begin and end with the original. The interpreters are not valuable only in so far as they uncover the historical message but rather the interpretations have their own intrinsic value as Nehama Leibovitz has taught a generation of Torah students.

### The Commentators

Let us now turn to traditional parshanut - commentary - and try and understand something about the approach of traditional commentators to the text. We will use three traditional commentators in our examination of Gen.16:7-14. The three commentators are Rashi (Shlomo ben Yitzchak, [1040-1105] emphasis on derash and p'shat, France/Ashkenaz), Ramban, (Moshe ben Nachman [1194- c1270], rational p'shat with kabbalistic additions, Spain/Eretz Israel) and Malbim (Meir Leibush Malbim, [1809-1879] traditional derash orientated Eastern European). We choose them as examples of commonly quoted parshanim who have their own directions and inclinations.

Let us enter the world of commentary through the following introduction written by the American/Israeli scholar **Edward Greenstein**. The following piece is taken from his excellent introduction to medieval Bible interpretation in the well known book *Back to the Sources* (ed. Barry Holtz 1984).

*It is only in the Middle Ages that the genre of the running, direct commentary on the biblical text comes into its own as a major phenomenon. The great medieval commentaries continue to serve as the major companions to the Bible for those who study the text in the original Hebrew. The most distinctive personalities among the medieval commentators virtually sit in the room and share their opinions with the serious student. One encounters something odd or perplexing, and one turns to Rashi, to Ibn Ezra, to see what this or that one has to say about it. One becomes familiar with them, allowing for their idiosyncrasies and obsessions, learning when to consult this one and when to consult the other. Even when one understands, or thinks one understand the text, one often doesn't wish to proceed too far without checking in on the sensibilities of one or another of the medievals. Even where we may differ from them in our philosophical orientation, their commentaries function on the one hand as lenses through which we can see the facets of the text more sharply, and on the other as windows on some of the most interesting minds of medieval Jewry.*

*The label "medieval" often connotes the cloistered and reactionary, but in Jewish literature, for which there is no "Dark Ages", the Middle Ages symbolize a peak of scholarship, creativity, philosophy, and writing.*

Ed Greenstein

An additional insight into the experience of the traditional study experience comes from this piece by **Rav Joseph Soloveitchik**.

*Whenever I enter the classroom I ask myself, can there be a dialogue between young students and an old teacher? Between a rebbe in Indian Summer and boys enjoying the spring of their lives? Whenever I start the shiur, the door opens up and another old man comes in and sits down. He is older than I am. He is my grandfather - his name is Reb Chayim Brisker. Without him I cannot say my shiur. Then more visitors show up. Some of the visitors lived in the eleventh century and some lived in the twelfth century. Some lived in the thirteenth century and some even lived in antiquity: Rashi, Rabeinu Tam, Rashba ...*

*What do I do? I introduce them to my pupils and the dialogue commences. The Rambam says something and Rabeinu Tam disagrees. A boy jumps up - he has another idea. The Rashba smiles gently. I try to analyze what the young boy meant - another boy intervenes. We call upon Rashi to express his opinion and suddenly a symposium of generations comes into existence. We all speak one language. We all chat. We speak together. We discuss. We enjoy each others company. We all pursue one goal. We are all committed to a common vision and we all operate under the same categories. There is a collegiality, friendship, a comradeship between young and old, between antiquity and Middle Ages and modern times.*

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik.

Let us begin with some interesting comments made by our three commentators on a number of different phrases in the piece we are examining<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> We bring every comment of the three commentators on the relevant texts, apart from one or two comments of Rashi's which are more marginal. However we have taken out from all three which we deal with separately in the **פרשנים** commentators, the comments pertaining to the phrase next piece.

## #1 - Parshanut: Pshat or Drash? by Baruch Sienna

We have learned how to ask questions. Now what? Ask 2 Jews, get 3 opinions, right? I hope that it is clear by now that there will not be one 'right' answer to these 'Parshanut' questions. By definition, the questions that we have learned to ask in Module 3 do not have answers in the text. If they did, it would be a simple matter to research the answers. The whole point of these questions, is that **no one** (except Moses, perhaps) can claim that they have **the** correct interpretation.

The process of answering these questions is called 'Midrash.'

In this module, we are going to look at how Midrash works, how using [translations](#) can help/hinder us, and the four levels of [PaRDeS](#).

**Which approach - pshat or drash - do you prefer? or does it depend?**

**What do you think the relationship is/should be between Midrash and the Biblical text?**

**How 'far-fetched' do you think Midrash should be, or should it only resolve difficulties ?**

Midrash מדרש

**What is it?**

[A Short History](#)

[A Gallery of Midrashic Styles](#)

What is Midrash?

The word midrash, comes from the root **דרש** which means to seek out, or examine. It is found in the Bible with this meaning: (Seek Adonai...Isa. 55:6) The word 'midrash' is found twice in II Chronicles, and the [Septuagint](#) translates it as book, account. The word 'Bet Midrash' means House of Study.

Midrash is an answer to a question of Parshanut. Midrashim resolve difficulties in the biblical text. In other words, a midrash is an interpretation. The word midrash can refer to an explanation, a collection of explanations, or to the process itself.

Midrash is also a collective name given to midrashim, although there is actually no one book with the name 'The Midrash,' like there is the Talmud, even though people often say, 'The Midrash says...'. (Part of the confusion may come from Soncino Publisher's popular collection of Midrashim by the name of Midrash Rabba called in English 'The Midrash.' Other books also use the word 'The Midrash.') There are many different collections of midrashim, anthologies which

were put together by different editors at different times. Some of these collections are: Mekhilta, Sifra, Midrash Rabba, Tanhuma, and many others. Many midrashim are from the sixth - tenth centuries. Today, there are contemporary attempts to create 'midrash' such as 'Does God Have a Big Toe?'

Midrash can be divided into two broad categories:

- Midrash Halachah
- Midrash Aggadah

To be able to follow the Torah, its rules need to be interpreted. What are the kinds of 'work' prohibited on Shabbat. What are the four species for Sukkot? This is Midrash Halachah. Midrash Halachah has a set of principles it uses to derive its interpretations. Much of the Talmud contains Midrash Halachah. There is also a freer kind of Midrash, a kind of 'imaginative literature' that uses the text as a springboard for homilies, ethical teachings and stories. This is Midrash Aggadah. (Needless to say, these two types are interwoven in the Jewish classics, and much Midrash Aggadah is found in the Talmud as well).

The earliest Midrashim began as oral (what we would call) 'sermons.' These midrashim had a special form called in Hebrew 'Petichta' and in English '**Proem.**' (Yes, that is spelled correctly). Midrash that is sermon-like, a literary unity that hangs together on one topic, is called a homily. Midrash that provides a running commentary, verse by verse is called exegesis.

To summarize: a midrash always starts with a (textual, usually) problem. Each midrash has an answer, and uses one of several methods (see [Styles](#)) and often a proof-text. One last note: most Midrashim begin with a textual problem, such as we saw in Module 3. The Rabbis don't see them as a problem, they see them as an opportunity! A textual problem is the grain of sand in the oyster whose irritation creates the pearl. Sometimes, though, the Darshan, (midrash maker) has a non-textual issue/agenda and that he wants to say, and is simply looking for a textual hook to hang his teaching on. Reading a midrash is not always clear which it is.

PaRDeS פַּרְדֵּס

The word Pardes, (lit. orchard) is an acronym that was used in the Middle Ages to refer to four types of biblical exegesis:

**Pshat:** simple, plain, intended meaning (the opposite of Drash)  
(sometimes inaccurately referred to as the literal meaning- see below)

**Remez:** alluded meaning (reading between the lines). Remez in modern Hebrew means hint. Traditionally, remez referred to methods such as gematria (word-number values)

**Drash:** drawn out meaning. Homiletical or interpretative meaning. Not pshat.

**Sod:** (lit. secret). The mystical or esoteric meaning.

[Here is an example of analyzing the phrase: milk and honey according to the four models.](#)

However, there are really only two categories: Pshat (what the text says/meant) and Drash (interpretations). Professor Barry Levy, Dean of Religious Studies, McGill University, has suggested a different approach:

I prefer to talk about four other categories of analysis: **Text, Texture, Context and Pretext.**

**Text** concerns what the text is and what it says (that's close to peshat but I avoid the word because of all the ambiguities and problems alluded to above) .

**Texture** deals with the literary qualities of the text.

**Context** is the historical, geographic, and cultural settings of the text.

**Pretext** is using the text for purposes not specifically articulated in it.

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Why not only use Pshat? In a way, Pshat is what the biblical scholar is trying to do: determine what the TEXT really meant. Drash allows us to find new meaning and new ideas, answering the question, (not what did the text mean) but what does the text say to ME.

Pshat means the simple meaning of the text, but it is not so simple! First of all, we have to decide what is the Pshat. (One person's Pshat is another person's Drash). It has been apocryphally attributed to the great scholar of our generation the late Nehama Leibowitz that 'Peshat is what she thought the text meant and derash is what everyone else thought.' The problem is that every reading of 'Pshat' must also be an interpretation, just like every translation is (even though it doesn't MEAN to be an interpretation). Professor Barry Levy, Dean of Religious Studies, McGill University, writes,

Another issue is the number of possible peshats a passage may carry.

Some writers spoke of "the" peshat; others recognized a plurality of

peshats and limited discussion to "a" peshat. The interesting evolution of the word in Yiddish to peshettle shows that peshat came to mean only "an interpretation." The diminutive suffix gives the word a meaning something like "a little peshat" but actually it means "a derash."

Let's look at these examples:



Moses says: Give-ear O heaven that I may speak,  
Let the land hear the sayings of my mouth (Deut. 32:1)

Isaiah says: Hear O heaven, and give ear O land  
for the Lord speaks (Isa. 1:2)

(This is a good example of symmetry: Isaiah was probably using the language of Deuteronomy on purpose.)

Now Rabbi Akiva (2nd Century) interprets that **hearing** is something you do from far; **give ear** is something you do from close (like whispering in someone's ear):

This teaches that when Moses spoke the Torah he was in heaven... but Isaiah who was on land, began by saying **Hear** O heaven as it was far from him.

Ibn Ezra (medieval commentator, we'll be introduced to him more formally next module) says:

Now there is no distinction between Hear and Give-ear according to the Pshat method.

So the first problem is deciding what the Pshat is. Did the text mean to be interpreted?

## #2 COMPARATIVE MEDIEVAL COMMENTATORS

### Rashi:

#### Verse 8.

מהיכן באת - *from* - (literally, where is from this you have come: *this means*) - אי מזה באת - *where have you come?* - יודע היה (the angel) *knew (where she came from)*, אלא - *but (he asked the question nevertheless)* - לכנס עמה בדברים - *to give her an opening* - ליתן לה פתח - *by which he could enter into conversation with her.* - ולשון אי מזה - *and the meaning of "where is from this..." is* - אייה המקום - *where is the place,* - שתאמר עליו, - *about which you say,* - מזה, - *From this (place)* - אני באה - *I come?*

#### Verse 9

היה *for every statement* - על כל אמירה - *And an angel of God said to her, etc.* - ויאמר לה מלאך ה - *That is why it states "an angel" at each statement (four separate times the text says, "And an angel of God said to her" rather than simply saying "he said to her" every time apart from the first).* - מלאך אחר - *another angel,* - מלאך אחר *there was sent to her* - שלוחה לה

#### Verse 11

כמו, *is a command in the feminine,* (וקראת) - צווי הוא. - *And you shall call his name.* - וקראת שמו - *as you say for a man, i.e., in the masculine,* - שאומר לזכר - *And you shall call his name Isaac, using as a masculine imperative.* - "וקראת את שמו יצחק" -

#### Verse 13

*You are the God of vision. (The word ראי) is vowelized with a chataf kamatz* - מפני שהוא שם דבר - *because it is a noun.* - של עלובים *for He sees the affront* - שרואה בעלבון - *the God of Vision,* - ראויה הראיה - *means* - אל ראי - *of the affronted.* - *and* - ומשמע שהוא רואה הכל - *"You are the God of Vision,"* - "אתה אל ראי" - *Alternatively,* - דבר אחר *but nothing sees Him.* - ואין שום דבר רואה אותו - *This is an expression of astonishment. Hagar was saying,* - לשון תימה. - *Even here.* - הגם הלא - *that even here in the deserts,* - שאף הלא במדברות - *"Was I under the impression,* - וכי סבורה הייתי - *I would have seen the messenger of the Omnipresent,* - ראיתי שלוחו של מקום אחרי - *For there,* - ששם - *in the house of Abram?* - בביתו של אברם - *after my having seen them,* - רואי אותם - *You can know (with certainty)* - ותדע - *I was accustomed to see angels."* - שהייתה רגילה לראותם - *that she was accustomed to see them,* - שהייתה רגילה לראותם - *one time,* - פעם אחת - *(in the story in Shoftim 13)* - *for see that Manoah saw the angel* - ואמר - *saw* - ראתה ארבעה, - *(Hagar),* - *but this one,* - וזו - *"We will surely die."* - "מות נמות" - *and said,* - ולא חרדה - *yet she did not tremble with fear.* - זה אחר זה - *one after the other,*

#### Verse 14

כתרגומו - *The well of the living One appearing to me. This is to be understood* - באר חי לראי - *as Targum Onkelos renders it:* - דמלאך קימא אתחזי עליה - *the well at which a living angel appeared.*



**Ramban:**

Gen. 16: 9. RETURN TO THY MISTRESS, AND SUBMIT THYSELF UNDER HER HANDS. *The angel commanded her to return and accept upon herself the authority of her mistress. This implies that she will not go out free from her, as Sarah's children will ever rule over her children.*

Gen 16:11. AND THOU SHALT CALL HIS NAME ISHMAEL. *The angel informed Hagar that his name will be Ishmael...and he told her that she should so call him, and thus remember that God heard her affliction. Now Avraham either called him by this name on his own, with the intent that God hear him and answer him, or the Holy Spirit rested upon him, as Rashi has it, and he called him Ishmael because God had heard his mother's affliction, as the angel had said.*

*The correct interpretation appears to me to be that the angel commanded Hagar that she call him so, but she, being a concubine, was afraid to give a name to her master's son, so she revealed the matter to him, and Abram fulfilled the word of God. Scripture, however, did not need to delve at length into this matter.*

12. HIS HAND SHALL BE AGAINST EVERY MAN. *This means that he will be a highway man. AND EVERY MAN'S HAND AGAINST HIM. Everyone will hate him and attack him.*

*Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra said: HIS HAND SHALL BE AGAINST EVERY MAN in that he will be victorious at first over all nations, and afterwards, AND EVERY MAN'S HAND AGAINST HIM, meaning that he will be vanquished in the end.*

**Malbim:**

Gen. 16:8. HAGAR, SLAVE OF SARAI.

*He (the angel) reminded her that she was still Sarah's maidservant, as Sarah had not set her free. Consequently, take heed "where have you come from": so distinguished (Kadosh - sanctified) a place (as that of Avraham's home) - and "where are you going" ? To Mizraim, a place of defilement (tummah) and debauchery (zimah). His purpose was to stir her into returning by focusing on that which is good for her soul. But she did not respond to this, replying, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai"; (she answers) that the suffering she endured was sufficient reason for her having run away, and never mind the welfare of her soul.*

9-11. AND THE ANGEL OF THE LORD SAID TO HER.

*He then approached her with three other arguments. First - in the name of what is just and right: "return to your mistress, and submit to her affliction", since by law and justice you are obligated to work and to suffer. It was an attempt to move her by appealing in the name of goodness and fairness.*

*But when he saw that she took no heed of this, he tried a utilitarian argument: He said to her further, "(If you return) I will greatly increase your offspring and they shall be too many to count." Since a human being will acquiesce to suffering and troubles if thereby benefits will accrue to him in the future, the angel promised to increase her offspring, should she return.*

*And when she did not take this to heart either, he assured her that she would no longer be afflicted. He "said to her further ..."you shall call him Ishmael for the Lord listened to your suffering"" - and He will put it into Sarah's heart to afflict you no more... Because she did not heed the voice of the angel and return - neither out of consideration for the welfare of her soul, nor in the name of justice, nor out of self-interest - (these aspects of her behavior will be reflected, correspondingly, in her offspring).*

### **13. AND SHE CALLED.**

*It was then she understood that not through her personal merit and abilities had she deserved to be addressed by an envoy of the Lord. Rather, "she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, "You are Elroi"" : seeing this vision was not within my (Hagar's) personal power or deserts; it happened through the grace of El alone, without any qualifying preparation or merit on my part. For she said - and this on two counts, as she now proceeded to explain: 1) Had it happened while I was part of Avraham's house, I would have said that it was due to my being in the home of a man of Elohim. Yet how did I nevertheless come to see this vision here in the desert where I am far removed from the house of Avraham? 2) Had it been but one brief encounter, I might have ascribed it to my own power. But how is it that I have "seen after I saw" - that I saw the vision four times, one after another? As this could not have been due to my own power, it surely came through the grace of El who is El-roi - El (the Almighty) who was the cause of my seeing (ro-i) the malakh.*

### **EXERCISE: Commenting on Commentators - Examining Parshanut**

If the students are relatively unfamiliar with parshanut as a discipline, we suggest that you open up with a discussion of commentary using perhaps the quotes from Greenstein and Soloveitchik. Emphasize the point that both make about the richness of the traditional study experience as a conversation across time with familiar companions. Introduce the concept of p'shat and derash as different styles and modes of interpretation, and explain that different commentators at different times have been influenced by one mode or other. Mention also the idea of the comments as responding to questions that the commentator brings both to and from the text.

- Read carefully the text from verse 7 to verse 14. Compose three questions that you bring to or take out from the text. At least one question, if possible, should be related to the meaning of one of the words or phrases in the text.

We suggest now giving the above pieces from the three commentators to the students with the following questions. The questions should subsequently serve as the basis of a classroom discussion.

- Now take the three pieces of parshanut. Look up and note some biographical details regarding each of the three commentators. Read all the comments, by all three commentators. Now choose one of the three and go through the comments brought here. Choose the most interesting comment from your point of view. Explain what makes it interesting? Which question do you think lies behind the comment that the scholar is making here? What conclusion does he arrive at? Can you work out how he arrives at that conclusion? Can you tell

whether this comment is more midrashically influenced (derash) or more literal and rational (p'shat)? Do you like the answer or conclusion that the commentator has arrived at? Why? Why not? Did reading the story with the comments open up anything for you? Did it in any way change the experience of looking at the text? If so, how?

- Look at the comments of the three commentators. According to what you see, do the commentators tend to read each other? How do they relate to each other? What would be the cumulative effect of a thousand years of reading the same texts in this way?

Were any of the three questions that you yourself brought to the text, answered by the text? If any or all of them were, how do you feel about the answers you received?

### **# 3 - A Medieval Scholarly Discussion: Is Ishmael the "Wild Man" a Blessing or a Curse?**

1. In our consideration of the value of parshanut, let us now turn to a focus which is at once wider and narrower, the focus of a number of scholars on one question or phrase. Ed Greenstein gives us the following description of a studying experience.

*Let us imagine (a discussion regarding) for example, an enigma in Genesis 37:15. Jacob had sent Joseph, his younger, favored son, to find his brothers as they herded their flocks in the hills. Joseph was to locate them and bring back a report to their father. Dutifully, and perhaps naively, Joseph embarks on this mission, even though his brothers hate him and could conceivably take advantage of the opportunity to do him in. When Joseph doesn't find the brothers in Shechem, as his father had predicted, he began to meander. Suddenly, the text says, "A man found him". We might say: A man? Where did he come from? Who is he?*

*Rashi: He is the angel Gabriel*

*Ibn Ezra: What? Where'd you get that from?*

*Rashi: From Midrash Tanhuma. This is the tradition that our sages have handed down to us.*

*Ibn Ezra: Wait a second. Where does the text say anything about angels?*

*Rashi: You see, the verse says, "a man found him", and, as everyone knows, in the book of Daniel, Gabriel is referred to as "the man." Same word.*

*Ibn Ezra: You go to the Book of Daniel to explain this verse in Genesis? The p'shat meaning is clearly: he was just an ordinary wayfarer, just what the text says, a man.*

*Rashbam: I'm afraid you gentlemen are getting bogged down in the wrong, or at least a trivial, question. The interesting angle is: why does the text divert us from Joseph's*

*inevitable confrontation with his brothers by introducing this episode about the man giving directions?*

We: *Yeah, we were wondering the same thing. It creates suspense, doesn't it?*

Rashbam: *You moderns are too obsessed with technique. The episode teaches us the magnitude of Joseph's filial responsibility. Don't you think Joseph knew his brothers hated him?*

We: *Well..*

Rashbam: *Of course he knew. Yet, even after Joseph failed to find his brothers in Shechem, he made use of the wayfarer and asked him of his brothers' whereabouts. He persisted in fulfilling his father's request.*

Ramban: *Quite right, Rashbam. Joseph had good reason to give up the search, but he went out of his way to honor his father's wish. I don't think we should so glibly abandon the idea of the angel, however.*

We: *You're a philosopher, and you take angels seriously?*

Ramban: *Don't be simpleminded. Angels aren't fairies with wings. They are human agents of God, "messengers" of God, as the Hebrew puts it. By elaborating on this episode of the strange wayfarer the Torah calls attention to this fellow. Obviously God has provided him to guide Joseph on his journey. The episode shows how human affairs are orchestrated behind the scenes by God.*

We: *Oh. That does make sense. That guy couldn't have just flown out of the blue. So why didn't Rashi say all that?*

Ramban: *Rashi is very concise. You often have to reflect on what he's saying. It may sound simple, even silly at first, but don't be deceived. I assure you there's usually something profound behind our teacher's remarks.*

Ed Greenstein

## **פרא אדם**

We now bring the comments of several traditional parshanim on the phrase פרא אדם. We begin with the three commentators whom we have already met and add two more for extra variety.

### **Rashi**

**A WILD MAN.** *One who loves deserts (and) hunts wild animals, as it is written, (in the later episode regarding Hagar and Ishmael in chapter 21), "And he dwelt in the wilderness and became an archer." (Chapter 21:20). HIS HAND IN EVERYTHING. This means he will be a bandit. AND EVERYONE'S HAND AGAINST HIM. All will hate him—and attack him. AND HE WILL DWELL IN THE PRESENCE OF ALL HIS BROTHERS. This means that his offspring shall be great.*

### **Ramban**

*Rashi comments: "One who loves the deserts (and) hunts wild animals, as it is written, (in the later episode regarding Hagar and Ishmael in chapter 21) "And he dwelt in the wilderness and became an archer" (Chapter 21:20)". The correct interpretation is that pere adam is a construct form, meaning that he will be a wild-ass-man accustomed to the wilderness, going forth to his work, seeking for food, devouring all and being devoured by all. The subject concerns his children who increase, and they will have wars with all the nations.*

### **Malbim**

*Because (Hagar) did not heed the voice of the angel and return - neither out of consideration for the welfare of her soul, nor in the name of justice, nor out of self-interest - (these aspects of her behavior will be reflected, correspondingly, in her offspring). Unlike other men, Ishmael will not attain success as a content human being who desires what is good and advantageous. Instead, he will have "his hand in everything and everyone's hand against him" - a wild man who quarrels with everyone. And yet he will be the kind of man who "will dwell in the presence of all of his brothers": a sociable creature with his brothers and neighbors.*

### **Avraham Ibn Ezra (11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century, born Spain)**

*A free man as is referred to in the phrase "Who has sent the wild ass free?" (Job ch. 39:5). And the meaning is that no stranger shall rule over his family. And there are those who say that there is a ך (and) missing (and it should be written wild ass and a man) - in that he is a wild ass "his hand will be against every man" and in that he is a man, "every man's hand will be against him". In my mind, it is correct to say that he will be between a man and a wild ass in that he will be victorious against everyone through his strength, and afterwards he will be vanquished.*

### **Hizzkuni (Hezekiah ben Manoah, mid 13<sup>th</sup> century, France (?))**

*Wandering peddler who goes with his goods to great distances where no man knows him since it is written (in Genesis 37:25) "And behold, a company of Ishmaelites from Gilad with their camels, bearing gum, balm and laudanum going to carry it down to Egypt"... "his hand will be against every man" (should be literally understood) his hand will be in everything - all kinds of commerce, and "every man's hand will be against him" (should be literally understood) everyman's hand with his or in his, through negotiating over the price of goods. "And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brothers" - his lands will spread out throughout the whole area, through the greatness of his riches.*

Choose at least three of the commentators and try and create the same kind of conversation that Greenstein has developed for the phrase from Genesis 37, for the phrase in our story. Please put yourself in as one of the participants in the discussion in exactly the way that Greenstein has done.

## #4 THE COMMENTATORS SPEAK:

### *PARSHANUT AND DARSHANUT* by Steve Israel and Noam Zion

- Read carefully the comments of the midrashic source or Rabbinic commentary for the sentence. Précis the comments of each thinker or source into a couple of sentences which give the essential points that they think that God wishes to convey.
  - In search of logical coherence: What in the text bothered the commentator - technical issues like gaps, contradictions, strange grammatical formulations, repeated words etc.
  - In search of moral and religious coherence: What bothered the commentator in what the text seems to be saying? How did that violate his/her sense of what the Torah should be teaching?
  - How did the commentator close those gaps between the expected coherence and the text's surface meaning?
  - What do you think the particular comments of each thinker reveal about his own particular personality and viewpoint?
  - Add your own comments to each of the thinkers' ideas in a couple of sentences.
- In small groups, the students should now prepare a conversation between any two of the thinkers and a third figure, one of the students. The task is to prepare a small dramatic scene where the three scholars are discussing the interpretation of God's comment with the help of the contemporary student.

After some of the groups present their scenes, discuss what the students thought of the different approaches. Which, if any, were interesting to them and caused them to see the text in any new ways? Do they think that the different interpretations represent equally valid readings of the text?

## #5- How to Analyze a Rashi by Neil Scheindlin

Rashi's opening words - the specific words of Torah on which Rashi is basing his commentary. The perush is almost always connected to those specific words, but you must often read the whole verse and in fact more of the chapter to see the larger problem that arouses him. .

Chapter & verse: Genesis 1:27

Our EXAMPLE will be, "male and female He created them"

### Context:

This means the context of this phrase, not only in the verse, but in the story itself. CON = with. TEXT = comes from textile since books were often written on cloth, textiles. Textiles are made up of threads of varying colors and directions. So too a TEXT can be analyzed or dissected by removing individual threads and seeing how they are woven together. Often we will discover tensions or contradictions between these threads.

What is happening in the story, overall, when this verse or phrase appears?

It often helps to raise all your own questions/kushiot about the verse before reading Rashi. That will sensitize you to Rashi's issues and to the issues of other commentators. BRAINSTORM all your own concerns - irregularities, contradictions or incoherencies, superfluous phrases or unusual phrasing, objectionable values, surprising perspectives

### EXAMPLE:

On the sixth day of creation, God creates the humans in God's image. God creates them male and female.

### (The answer, that is, Rashi's commentary):

In this space, explain in your own words Rashi's commentary on those words. Do not simply copy Rashi's words. Find your own words to demonstrate your understanding of the commentary.

### EXAMPLE:

Rashi points out that in 2:21, the Torah describes God creating the woman from the man's rib, while here the Torah describes male and female created at one time. Rashi quotes a *midrash Aggada* saying that God first created one human with male and female sides, later splitting them in two. Rashi's second answer is that the Torah here tells us that both male and female were created on the sixth

day, without giving the details of how they were created.

In this space, indicate whether Rashi's PERUSH IS PSHAT OR DERASH. Briefly explain why. Those terms are not so simply distinguished but in general pshat is more closely tied to the original historical and literary context of the verse, while derash is more concerned about its message than its evidence and often more literarily inventive and playful than the strict pshat commentator. But both have a problem. The problem maybe an irregularity in the language or apparently superfluous words a seeming contradiction in the storyline or a discomfort between the commentator's values and worldview and what the text seems to be recommending.

**EXAMPLE:**

- - the second answer is *pshat*; Rashi writes, "the *pshat* of the verse..."
- - the first answer is a *drash*; Rashi labels it as a *midrash aggada*

**KUSHIYA -(The question: What was Rashi's question about the text?):**

To fill in this space, you have to work backwards: if this is Rashi's answer, what was the problem that triggered his response? It's like "Jeopardy": Rashi gives the answer and you have to figure out what the question was. What did Rashi ask about the Torah text? What issue triggered his response? Note that Rashi may be solving more than one question at the same time.

**FORMULA:** Always start your formulation of Rashi's kushiya with the phrase "Why does the Torah say such a surprising thing. . ."

**EXAMPLE:**

Why does the Torah say such a surprising thing?  
Why does it offer two, apparently different, accounts of the creation of man and woman?

**How does the perush answer the kushiya?**

In this space, explain how Rashi's perush responds to the kushiya you identified.

**EXAMPLE:**

1. The first response says that God originally created a being who was both male and female. In chapter 2, God splits them into separate persons.
2. The second response suggests that 1:27 gives a general description of the creation of the humans, while chapter 2 adds details to the story.

Why is it important?



In this space, try to identify a larger idea or lesson that Rashi's commentary teaches.

**EXAMPLE:**

*Rashi hints at two different ways of understanding the relationships between men and women. If male and female were created together, they appear more equal. If the woman was created from the man's rib, the man may be (in some way) superior to the woman.*

## **To Understand Pshat**

**by Ruth Bergman, Aviva Scheuer and Noam Zion,**

### **Stages:**

#### **A. Deciphering Pshat:**

Learn to parse the verse identifying phrases, subject, verb (tense/.singular/plural, causative, passive), direct, object (syntax). Look for ambiguous referents.

Translate at home before coming to class using BDB dictionary but never using translation.

Divide verse by using taamei mikrah of Tiberian Masoretic text and compare to your translation.

Optional: compare your translation with various English translations (check special website with all these translation?)

#### **B. Problems identified**

Identify any problem you find in grammar, syntax, meaning, narrative order etc.- lack of internal consistency in text , gaps etc -

Identify problems between your expectations and the text (such as moral or theological or psychological phenomena that disturb you)

#### **C. Solutions proposed:**

Try to explain pshat in terms of its context -historical, narrative unit, philological, theological etc. Discuss with out using commentaries and without correcting student but asking for proofs from text and asking for other student's disagreement or agreement and further support.

How does grammar support your translation or interpretation? What literary features support your view? What contextual evidence helps your view?

Read commentaries: Rashi/Rashbam/Ramban identifying their historical background and their conception of pshat. Translate their commentary using Jastrow and then explain in your own words. Then what is their problem and how do they solve it? Do they agree in identifying problem and in solving it.

**D. Literary features you identify:**

milah mancha/ pace/resumptive repetition, scene changes, dialogue, midrash shem etc

What is message of the Torah?

Genre and title: what kind of text is this? What theme does it present?

For example, is this history or fable? Is this about leadership or about theology?

**TANAKH BKIUT - Eric Grossman - Jewish Academy Detroit**

Upon entering class, the first seven minutes read any portion of Tanakah in English and three minutes to journal about what you read, what questions of insights came up.

Ten minutes to raise random questions of interest for teacher.

Goal: student initiative to explore. Larger view of Tanakh to balance narrow concentration on a few verses at high level of analysis.

## #6 Modern Commentators – New Questions?

If we say that each commentator brings their own questions both to and from the text, it is clear that although certain kinds of questions can remain the concern of commentators in every generation, others will be likely to be influenced by the sensibilities of specific generations. Nowhere is this more evident, for example in the development of feminist commentary and midrash over the last generation. <sup>2</sup>

But feminist concerns are only one example of new perspectives that modern times have brought to the study of the Biblical narratives. A loosening of the traditional perspectives regarding God and God's natural beneficence has also made its way into the stories' examination, leading to critical questions regarding God's role in specific stories. There is more of a willingness to bring God to account and to demand answers to questions regarding divine behavior. These questions have been asked before. They are, to be sure, not entirely new. Nevertheless, what is new is the ability to ask these questions in a truly open way. All answers are now possible: this makes the pursuit of such questions, and the study of the insights offered, particularly rewarding. It is to one such question that we turn to now.

### God's Role in Hagar's Oppression

In order to examine this idea, let us bring to the text a question that very few of the traditional commentators have asked, but which to the modern mind seems so clear. ***Why does God – through the angel – send Hagar back to Sarah's jurisdiction although it is clear that things are going to be extremely difficult for her?*** Even the angel recognizes and conveys to her that she will return to a life of suffering and hardship, but nowhere is there any explanation given for this suggestion or command. Interestingly, the medieval commentators almost ignored this question. Those who asked it appear to have done so more to explain something that was self evident rather than to explore in an open manner, a truly problematic question. Radak (David Kimche, 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century, Narbonne, Provence) for example responds that the angel instructed Hagar to return because only through the merits of Avraham would she become the mother of a great people. Of our three commentators, Ramban, as we have seen, merely comments that this shows that Sarah's children will forever rule over Hagar's children, while Malbim takes as self-evident the fact that "by law and justice, you are obligated to work and suffer" and therefore the demand was "just and right". Rashi does not even see a question here that is worth relating to.

For modern commentators, this is precisely the kind of question that needs to be addressed. Whatever the answer arrived at, one that criticizes or vindicates the Divine

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<sup>2</sup> Such commentary, arising out of a new woman's consciousness applied to what was traditionally, primarily a male oriented text, has yielded both new questions and new answers, new insights and ways of looking at the text. This consciousness, of course, while perhaps originating with women, is by no means restricted to them. The great thing about perspectives that develop among one sector of the population is that they often become part of the communal property of the people. It seems that this is what is happening to feminist perspectives in Torah study.

action, modern commentators will more commonly recognize that this is indeed a real question, and an answer needs to be found. Here we bring three different responses to the question.

1. *Hagar having caught a glimpse of self-autonomy, is not willing to return to her former status. She runs away into the wilderness. Just as she had threatened Sarai's importance in the family, Hagar now temporarily usurps her place in the narrative's spotlight. We follow Hagar to a spring of water where an angel of God finds her and instructs her to return.*

*God's message is both good and evil. "Hagar, maid servant of Sarai", he calls her, in seeming collusion to put her in her place, "go back and suffer further abuse under the hand of your mistress." (God has much to learn about liberation!)*

*But although she is told to return to an oppressive mistress and an indifferent master, she is also given a promise. Avram is not the only one destined to have a mighty lineage. God has heard of her humiliation and she will be recompensed for it. She will bear a son and name him, "God hears". Indeed, when the time comes, she does bear a son to Avram, who names him Ishmael, "God hears".*

*The promise to Hagar is an ambivalent one. "The Divine promise of Ishmael means life at the boundary of consolation and desolation".*

Dana Fewell and David Gunn<sup>3</sup>

2. *The angel of the Lord counsels Hagar to return and subject herself to Sarai, her old mistress from whom she has been liberated. Indeed! Counsel of the Lord! God on the side of the oppressors, she might think, and so might we. Understood in this manner, it simply doesn't go with the text. God's plans are not for Hagar to return to the oppression... What God wants is that she and her child should be saved, and at the moment, the only way to accomplish that is not in the desert, but by returning to the house of Avram. Ishmael hasn't been born. The first three years of life are crucial. Hagar simply must wait a little longer, because Ishmael must be born into the house of Avram to prove that he is the first-born (Devarim ch. 21, vv 15-17) and to enter into the household through the rite of circumcision (Genesis 17). This will guarantee him participation in the history of salvation, and will give him rights of inheritance in the house of Avram.*

Elsa Tamez<sup>4</sup>

3. *Why does the angel send Hagar back to Sarai, when it is clear what will happen to her there? In the Bible, suffering under a tyrant...is not always a punishment. Sometimes it represents a kind of birth-pang prior to the exodus towards liberation and redemption. Sometimes we are witnessing cleansing torments for which the sufferer will receive the great Divine blessing. The angel of God explains to Hagar explicitly how she will win the divine blessing in exchange for her suffering. Perhaps there is something in the experience (of suffering and torment), an important message that can only be internalized through experience. This is the way of Divine education - descent in order to ascend, suffering in order*

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<sup>3</sup> From "Gender, Power and Promise". p. 47

<sup>4</sup> From "Helpmates, Harlots and Heroes" p. 76

*to flower...According to the Divine plan in the Bible, suffering is a necessary step in the natural process of the evolution of the human fate.*

Noam Zion

## #7 – Pshat: Metaphors versus Literalism

by Baruch Sienna –Kolel Tanakh Website Course

What about metaphors? [Is that a Pshat approach? Isn't Pshat literalism? The plain meaning? No, not really].

By definition, a metaphor is a kind of **figurative** speech. (I just hate it when people say, for example, 'When she walked into the party wearing the same dress, I was so embarrassed, I just literally died.' NO, I SCREAM, you metaphorically died! That's the whole point of a metaphor- it isn't **literal**.) I wish just once some roofer would fall through a hole in the ceiling- then he could say, 'I **literally** went through the roof.' But most people don't literally go through it when they're angry, they metaphorically go through the roof.

So when the God says in the Torah, I took you on eagles' wings, even the most fundamentalist, literalist reader would (probably) admit that this is a metaphor. In other words God didn't take them on actual eagle's wings, but took them with the meaning of the metaphor of eagle's wings: strongly, quickly, etc. (My favorite: a grade 5 American student (thinking of a bald eagle, symbol of America and freedom) suggested, 'It means God took them to freedom.') In other words, by definition, the 'Pshat' of a metaphor needs to be interpreted. To take a metaphor literally would itself be quite an interpretation, indeed! And who is to say that one person's interpretation of the metaphor is more correct or authentic than another's?

The first problem is to interpret the metaphor. But the second question is, IS it a metaphor?

Look at the passage: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid." (Is. 1:16) Most commentators see the Pshat as literal: natural enemies will no longer have animosity towards each other; even the prey of carnivores will live in harmony with their predators. Not so, says Maimonides (13th century Spanish philosopher, legalist and physician). This is a metaphor. Pshat cannot mean that lambs will lie in safety with wolves, because such a thing can never happen. This is not the 'simple' meaning. In other words, in these two examples, Pshat here IS metaphor.

One last example: Exodus 13:9, in discussing Passover says, It shall be as a sign on your arm and 'totafot\*' between your eyes so that the instruction of Adonai will be in your mouth...

\*this word is difficult; scholars have suggested: remembrance?

The question is does it mean literally or figuratively? Those who see the Pshat as literal, say that tefillin are meant (the black boxes worn by some Jews in morning weekday prayers).

Rashbam, (Rashi's grandson- and no slouch) says: as a sign on your arm: According to the actual Pshat sense of the verse this means it shall be a constant remembrance to you, **as if** it were written on your arm (like tying a string on your finger). It is like the verse from Song of Songs, 'Set me as a seal upon your heart.' In other words, according to Rashbam, wearing Tefillin is a Drash on the verse!

Just because one believes the Torah is True, and takes the Torah seriously, doesn't mean the Torah must be literal. All the famous (read: unbelievable) stories: Jonah and the great fish, Jacob and the wrestling angel etc. may not even have been meant to be taken literally. Why can't God can use metaphors, dream sequences, imagination. Some commentators suggest the book of Job is only a story to make a point- that there never was such a person.

The best example of all, though is the Song of Songs. Read literally, it is erotic love poetry. The Rabbis believed it was an allegory of the love between God and the people Israel. (It is only because of this allegorical interpretation that this book was included in the Canon).

Your two breasts are like two young roes\* that are twins which feed among the lilies (4:5)

**Rashi:** two breasts: this is Moses and Aaron; (and some say the two tablets)

\*(Parenthetically, here is a problem in translation: the Hebrew tzvi is today identified by scholars as the gazelle. Rashi identified it as the ibex; his grandson, Rabbenu Tam suggested deer.)

Not surprising, then, Artscroll in the introduction to its translation states: "the only 'literal\*' translation of Shir HaShirim is allegorical...[sometimes] **to the interpret [the Torah] literally is to misinterpret it entirely.**" [emphasis added]

(\*I assume they mean here 'Pshat'.)

So what do we have here?! A claim that sometimes the literal reading is an 'interpretation,' and it is the interpretation that is actually the 'Pshat.' So one person's Pshat might be another's Drash.

(Of course, the Rabbis teach (Shabbat 63a) that a verse **never** departs from its direct meaning. In other words, although you might find meaning in a 'drash,' the verse also must always also retain its meaning on the Pshat level.)

## Appendix:

### **Protestant versus Jewish *Parshanut* by Gregory Mobley Uncovering the Historical Original Story of the First Generation or Generating Many Stories and Entering a Conversation with all the Generations?**

#### **What I Learned ... from Inter-faith Bible Study<sup>5</sup>**

There are varieties of Jewish and Christian interpretation ... and I cannot speak for all Jewish or Christian interpreters. **The Bible, for better or for worse, belongs to all human beings on the planet Earth. Serial killers read the Bible and cite it in threatening notes reassembled from cut-out newspaper copy; saints read it and it inspires in them heroic virtue and humanitarianism. I exercise no control over the dynamics of how human individuals and groups interact with the Bible. The Bible has inspired virtue and beauty; it has also inspired cruelty.**

Let's start with **how Christians read the Bible**, and, more specifically, with how Protestant Christians read the Bible. Ever since the **Protestant Reformation** in 16th-century Europe, Protestant Christian biblical interpretation has been characterized by the conceit that interpreters had entered a **Time Machine**. It is imagined that the interpreter has left his or her age and has returned to the biblical era. Bible study begins with the biblical text, and is animated by the idea, however false, that the reader reads without any intervening authority or tradition.

As a result, when denominations proliferate in Protestantism, reformers almost always argue that their new group is more biblical, more New Testament, more like Jesus, more primal, closer to the pure Water of Life. Never mind what every pilgrim to the Holy Land knows: the Jordan is always muddy.

So Protestant biblical study, whether it is done well or poorly, is intensely or myopically focused on the biblical text. Roman Catholic and Orthodox biblical interpretation are far more respectful of tradition, and in these confessions, biblical study is guided both by fresh readings of the Bible but also by the historic traditions within each communion. As for **traditional Jewish interpretation**, the picture is different, or so it seems to me, based on the experience of studying the Bible in an interfaith context. The biblical text, as I observe, is obviously important but it is no more important than the accumulated conversation about the Bible that has taken place among the rabbis whose writings have been granted authoritative status.

In other words, take the example of the book of Ruth. **Protestants want to know**, and only know, about the Ruth and Boaz and Naomi in the biblical book. **Jewish readers want to know** about Ruth and Naomi and Boaz but they are equally interested in the midrashim and traditions about them as they are in the story in the canonical book of

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<sup>5</sup> from a talk on May 19, 2004 meeting of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue sponsored by the American Jewish Committee and the Massachusetts Council of Churches at Temple Mishkan Tefila in Newton, MA. The author is Associate Professor of Old Testament at Andover Newton Theological School, and an ordained American Baptist minister.



Ruth. The book of Ruth is their starting point, but it simply opens a door into a centuries-old conversation among Jewish people about the book of Ruth. And all elements, all participants in that conversation, are important.

Another thing: the primary **Christian** media of interpretation have been formulaic, issued in **theological statements and creeds**. The **Jewish** media have been primarily **narrative and disputational**. **Christians**, in each generation, have imagined that they are **uncovering the real story**, the truth. **Jewish** readers have imagined that they are **entering a debate and listening to stories**.

The **American Protestant Christian** mode produces winners and losers. Our faith is very voluntaristic, and we are competing against each other to convert souls to our version of the story. **We need to get it right, and uncover the Real Truth because we have got to be a little better than the competition.**

The **Jewish** mode, in contrast, produces solidarity of faith and of peoplehood. Biblical interpretation is about how to live- and how to understand God and the world, but it also produces an ages-old culture of folks in dialogue and debate with each other. **The goal is not so much to uncover the truth as it is to be part of this conversation, in solidarity with the Jewish people through the ages.**

This is **the genius of Jewish midrash**: that by packaging biblical interpretation in story and anecdotes about the rabbis, human imagination and creativity are honored. There is **a playfulness to Jewish biblical interpretation**.

I think about a motif in some of the Second Temple biblical books that emerged in the Persian period when Jewish people in the East lived under the Persian empire. In Daniel and in Esther specifically, the biblical writers refer to "the law of the Medes and Persians." By that they mean an idea about **law that is inflexible and absolute**. These laws of Medes and Persians create plot complications in these Diaspora folktales, as some befuddled tyrant is manipulated into issuing a Draconian edict by some conniving vizier, and now the story must find some way around this legal roadblock. The way the biblical writers use this motif, you can tell that such a philosophy is foreign to them. For them, for the **Judahites** in Yehud and in the eastern Diaspora, the Torah, **the law, was never inflexible. It was not flimsy and disposable, but it was malleable to humanitarian reinterpretation in every age. The Torah isn't like the laws of the Medes and Persians, these ancient authors imply. The Torah has some give in it. It can be reinterpreted. It cannot be discarded but it can be adjusted.**

So from the beginning, the genius of the Jewish conception of scripture, of Torah, or law, has been that it was never, even five minutes after Moses spoke it, set in concrete, even though, according to the story, it was etched in stone. The law as given in Exodus and Leviticus, in story time at the beginning of the wilderness experience, already sounds different in Deuteronomy, set a mere 40 years later.

Now, just so it doesn't sound like I am romantically idealizing Jewish tradition ...there is, in traditional Jewish interpretation, certain **respect accorded to certain interpreters**. Who picks those interpreters? Who's to say that Rashi, of blessed memory, had it right? What about Rashi's wife? We don't hear from her.

So I still believe that the **Protestant mode**, that has dominated Western intellectual and academic life since the Enlightenment, has its place. The **historical study of scripture** offers the possibility of **enlarging the conversation** so that it does not merely include our revered ancestors but others too: the Mesopotamians, the Egyptians, the Canaanites. Say what you want but a conversation about Noah's ark that includes what Rabbis and Church Fathers wrote through the centuries but doesn't include the Enuma Elish and the Atrahasis Epic, both from ancient Iraq, rings a little bit hollow to me.

Contemporary Jewish scholars are at the forefront of this kind of historical study and have been since Spinoza. And some Christian scholars, like Brevard Childs at Yale, do their Protestant scholarship in a Jewish way, asking about what Augustine and Luther said about a text. So I am generalizing.

A related anecdote: one Jewish student in the class was mystified by my approach to the Bible. She assumed that Christian biblical interpretation would be more Jewish in style, that I would talk about Thomas Aquinas and Luther and Calvin, as she was talking about Rabbi Akiba and Rambam. It makes me think that the real dialogue would be between traditional Jewish interpretation and Christian historical theology.

Let me put it this way: biblical interpretation always involves a conversation. .. When Jewish readers study the Bible, the table is filled with Rabbi-this and Rabbi-that. When Catholic readers study the Bible, the teaching office of the Papacy has a place at the table. When crazy scholars like me read the Bible, we leave some chairs for the writers of lots of ancient texts, in dead languages, who speak for the cultures surrounding the biblical world. In an ideal world, all of these participants are valuable contributors. But no one ensemble of office furniture can accommodate so many different eras, and no one conversation can accommodate so many different voices. So each of us chooses who is at our table.

Protestants like me, for better or for worse, don't pay the same respect to our ancestors. We say, cut the crap; they had it wrong. Here's the truth of the matter.

Here's another way I thought about it: pretend biblical interpretation is a basketball game. Protestant interpreters, essentially, record only points scored on the stat sheet. Jewish interpreters keep track of assists.

I was confused and imagined that the goal of dialogue among Jews and Christians was to agree, and to harmonize our teachings and traditions. I now see something different, namely that knowing Judaism might make me a better Christian and that knowing Christianity might make my sisters and brothers better Jews. For I absolutely believe that we, **Judaism and Christianity, are like biological twins**. And that we each needed to individuate in our childhood and adolescence. I'm a twin so I know about this. If Jeff put on blue jeans that morning, I put on corduroys. Because I had to, and he had to, establish our own identities. But now that we are more settled and know who we are, we can see that there were parts of our respective identities that we each suppressed merely to be different.

The Christians grabbed eschatology; the rabbis downplayed it. The Pharisees took the practice of faith into homes and family Seders and kitchen holiness once the temple was destroyed by the Romans; they decentralized it. The Christians eventually said they didn't need a temple - Jesus made the final sacrifice-but then built great cathedrals,

new temples, and recentralized it. Jewish culture, perennially in danger, de-emphasized conversion but prized neighborliness and righteous living among others. Christians pronounced that their faith was for everyone, and sought to convert, but then used tenets of that faith to oppress those who were different.

Interfaith dialogue, then, can be a *tikkun*, as we recover lost fragments of our respective faiths that the sibling faith preserved, for them, but also, it turns out, for us too.