

# Is Dialogue Possible?

## Rashi on Genesis 3:8

There are many Aggadic midrashim, and our Sages already arranged them in their proper order in Genesis Rabbah and in other midrashim, but I have come only [to teach] the simple meaning of the Scripture and such Aggadah that clarifies the words of the verses, each word in its proper way.

## Rashi on Exodus 6:9

Therefore I say that the verse should be explained in accordance with its plain meaning, each word being understood in its context, while the midrashic interpretation may be expounded upon, as it is written, 'Is My word not like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer shattering the rock?' (Yirmiyahu 23:29) – i.e., God's word is like the splintering of a rock into many sparks."

## Ibn Ezra on Genesis 22:5

Our Sages taught that Yitzchak was 37 years old when he was bound upon the altar. If this represents an accepted tradition, we accept it. According to reason, however, it seems improbable, for [if so] it is proper that Yitzchak's righteousness should be apparent, and his reward should be double that of his father, for he gave himself willingly to be slaughtered, but the text says nothing about [this act of supreme religious devotion on the part of] Yitzchak...It seems reasonable that he was close to the age of 13, and his father forced him and bound him against his will. This is evidenced in the fact that his father hid this secret [the object of their journey] from him, saying, 'God will provide Himself a lamb' – for had he told him, 'You yourself will be the sacrifice', he would probably have fled.

## Saadia Gaon Haemunot Vehadeot, treatise 7, the Resurrection of the Dead Chapter 2

Every statement 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: It may, for example, either be rejected by the observation of the senses...Or else the literal sense may be negated by reason... Again [the literal meaning of a biblical statement may be rendered impossible] by an explicit text of a contradictory nature, in which case it would become necessary to interpret the first statement in a non-literal nature... Finally, any biblical statement to the meaning of which rabbinical tradition has attached a certain reservation is to be interpreted by us in keeping with this authentic tradition.

## רש"י בראשית ג:ח

וישמעו: יש מדרשי אגדה רבים וכבר סדרום רבותינו על מכונם בבראשית רבה (י"ט ו) ובשאר מדרשות ואני לא באתי אלא לפשוטו של מקרא ולאגדה המישיבת דברי המקרא דבר דבור על אופניו:

## רש"י שמות ו:ט

לכך אני אומר יתיישב המקרא על פשוטו דבר דבור על אופניו, והדרשה תדרש, שנאמר (ירמיה כג כט) הלא כה דברי כאש נאם ה' וכפטיש יפוצץ סלע, מתחלקת לכמה ניצוצות:

## אבן עזרא בראשית כב:ה

ורז"ל אמרו שהיה יצחק כאשר נעקד בן שלשים ושבע שנים. ואם דברי קבלה נקבל. ומדרך סברה אין זה נכון, שהיה ראוי שתהיה צדקת יצחק גלויה, ויהיה שכרו כפול משכר אביו שמסר עצמו ברצונו לשחיטה, ואין בכתוב מאומה על יצחק. ואחרים אמרו שה' בן חמש שנים, גם זה לא יתכן, בעבור שנשא עצי העולה. והקרוב אל הדעת שהיה קרוב ל"ג שנים, והכריחו אביו ועקדו שלא ברצונו. והעד שאביו הסתיר הסוד ממנו, ואמר אלהים יראה לו השה, כי אילו אמר לו אתה העולה, יתכן שיברח:

## ספר האמונות והדעות מאמר ז

כל אשר בספרי הנביאים, הוא כאשר נראה ממשמעו והידוע ממלותיו, אלא מה שהנראה והידוע ממנו, מביא אל אחד בארבעה דברים, אם להכחיש מוחש... או להשיב מה שיש בשכל, ...או לסתור דבר אחר כתוב... או להכחיש מה שקבלוהו קדמוננו

## **Azzan Yadin, Scripture as Logos: Rabbi Ishmael and the Origins of Midrash pp 7-8**

Consider the phrase, "Politics Dressed Up as Law," the headline of an op-ed essay that appeared in the New York Times on August 24, 1998. The informed reader recognizes this phrase as an op-ed headline because it appears in a large font on the recto of the last page of the first section of the newspaper, the page that carries the "op-ed" banner. There are other indications as well: the brief statement of the author's occupation and qualifications at the bottom of the column (absent from articles written by reporters), the more personal tone of the essay, perhaps an adjacent essay arguing the opposite view, and so forth. The op-ed essay is a journalistic genre-it obeys a set of conventions that distinguish it from other texts in the newspaper (news stories, stock quotes, obituaries, advertisements, and so on), each of which has its own conventions. The competent newspaper reader recognizes these conventions, identifies the text as an op-ed piece, and interprets its headline accordingly. Recognizing this phrase as an op-ed headline still allows for different interpretive responses: one reader may wonder which political events are "dressed up as law," another might surmise the events in question but wonder about the author's views, while a third reader may question how the position expressed in the headline compares with an op-ed piece in, say, the Washington Post. But while different, these interpretations are all determined by the reader's implicit understanding of the institution of the journalistic op-ed piece.

If the same phrase, "Politics Dressed Up as Law," were encountered at the center of an otherwise empty page in a poetry journal, the reader would reasonably assume it is a poem and subject to very different types of interpretation

### **Ibid p 9**

This hermeneutical holism-the impossibility of fully grasping the parts (interpretation of verses) divorced from the whole (the underlying notion of Torah)-radically qualifies Halivni's claim that the Rabbis are guided by textual cues. The claim is true, but only if we recognize that the fore-understanding of Torah determines what constitutes a cue and that, as a result, cues will vary from one interpreter to another. Stylistic variance, orthographic irregularity, the numerological value of a word: Are they cues? Can an interpreter legitimately use these phenomena to interpret a biblical verse? There is no single answer: any textual characteristic may or may not be a cue, depending on the interpreter's understanding of the Torah, the Hebrew language, the nature of divine speech, and so forth.

### **Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book* p 24**

The book of Ecclesiastes, which not only contradicts the beliefs represented in the Bible but also expresses a radically different temperament and consciousness, is bound together with the rest of the Bible...When Ecclesiastes was introduced into the body of the Scriptures, however, it was required to give up its unique and heretical message. The moment it became part of the scriptural canon, the exegete was obligated to make it consistent with the rest of the Scriptures. This new reading means implicitly that its original meaning will be lost.

### **Ibid p 26**

The canonization of a book is not tantamount to an acceptance of its meaning as authoritative. The inclusion of the Song of Songs in the canon does not give courtship and love the status of an obligation. Rather, the canonical position of this poem compels a metaphorical reading of it, making the love described there a metaphor for the relationship between man and God.

### ***Metaphors We Live By* by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson p 165**

There is no such thing as a meaning of a sentence in itself, independent of any people. When we speak of the meaning of a sentence, it is always the meaning of the sentence to someone, a real person or a hypothetical typical member of a speech community.

[I]t should come as no surprise that nowadays many find in him (Abraham) a focus of Jewish-Christian commonality. That Abraham, or Ibrahim in Arabic, is a person of high importance in the Qur'an and the continuing Muslim tradition adds to his luster as a figure on whom those who seek peace and inter-communal reconciliation can focus.

**Ibid**

[I]f we compare Abraham as he is presented in Genesis with the figure of the same name as he is reinterpreted in post-biblical Jewish sources, it is not at all clear that Jews and Christians are talking about the same figure.

**Genesis 12:1-3**

The LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land, from your kin-group, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation. And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you And curse him that curses you; And all the families of the earth Shall bless themselves by you."

**בראשית יב:א-ג**  
וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ מֵאֶרֶץ  
וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאֲרֶץ אֲשֶׁר  
אֲרָאָה:  
וְאֶעֱשֶׂה לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְאַבְרָכְךָ וְאֶגְדַּלְהָ שְׁמִי  
וְהָיָה בְרָכָה:  
וְאַבְרָכְהָ מְבָרְכֶיהָ וְמַקְלָלָהּ אָאֵר וְנִבְרַכְוּ  
בָךְ כָּל מִשְׁפְּחוֹת הָאֲדָמָה:

**Rashi ad loc.**

A man says to his son, "May you be like Abraham!" And this is so in every case of those words "shall bless themselves by you" in the Bible, and here is the proof: "By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.'"

**רשי שם**  
זֶהוּ פְּשׁוּטוֹ, אָדָם אוֹמֵר לְבְנוֹ תְּהֵא  
כְּאַבְרָהָם, וְכֵן כָּל וְנִבְרַכְוּ בָךְ שְׁבַמְקָרָא,  
וְזֶה מוֹכִיחַ בָּךְ יִבְרַךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֹמֵר יִשְׁמַךְ  
אֱלֹהִים כְּאַפְרַיִם וְכַמְנַשֶּׁה

If Rashi and those who follow him have understood the verse correctly, what God promises Abraham in Genesis 12:3 is that he shall become a byword of blessing. In other words, it is by reference to him that members of the families of the earth shall give blessings. It is as if someone were to say, to use American analogies, "May you make money like Rockefeller!" or "May you dunk like LeBron!"

The traditional Christian interpretation moves in the opposite direction. For Christianity has long seen in the election of Abraham the beginning of a movement that reaches fruition only with the incorporation of all the nations of the world into the Abrahamic promise. In this reading, the Jewish people are—or, to be more precise, were—a prototype for the Church, a multi-ethnic body that early on made a claim to be the true Israel. For many Christians, the new relationship initiated with God's call and commission of Abraham involves a dramatic movement away from particularism towards universalism, away from a particular land and a particular people and towards the salvation of the entire world. As for the call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3, this interpretation places the greatest emphasis, not surprisingly, on that final clause, rendered as, "in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." For Paul, the Jew who after the death of Jesus became his "apostle to the Gentiles," these words became the proof-text for a theology that insisted that the blessing in question falls on the Gentiles and not only on the Jews (and perhaps not on the Jews at all).

**Ibid**

If an appeal to Abraham simply invokes his name in pursuit of inter-communal peace and harmony but disregards the teachings with which these three communities associate him, it can only be shallow and self-defeating.

**The Heart and the Fountain: An Anthology of Jewish Mystical Experiences by Joseph Dan pp3-4**

The belief in the ability of human beings to communicate with each other is based on our faith in the common nature of our sensual and intellectual experience. If we believe that our eyes perceive colors in the same way, and that our minds grasp syllogisms in an identical way, then we can use these shared perceptions to give words meanings that will bridge one mind with another. If, on the other hand, we do not believe that the senses and logic penetrate into the real truth that is hidden from us, we are unable to communicate, at least concerning meaningful and important things.

**The Heart and the Fountain: An Anthology of Jewish Mystical Experiences by Joseph Dan pp 11-12**

When God said, "Yehi or," he did not only convey the message "Let there be light," he actually uttered these syllables, and as a result there was light. God's utterance was not a semantic one: There were no people, nobody could be listening, it could not be an order because there was no one to carry out the order. The very utterance was the deed, the cause of the emergence of light. ... The syllables yehi or include not only a sound, but also a picture of six letters of the Hebrew alphabet. They include vocalization marks (nekudot) and musical signs (teamim). The letters are decorated by little crowns (tagin). The letters also include a numerical value, because writing words and numbers was done in Hebrew (as in Arabic, Greek, and Latin) by the letters of the alphabet. It could also be an acronym, possibly of the names of the letters-yod he yod aleph vav resh-which are also derived from divine wisdom, because they preexisted in God before the creation. Each of these components could be the decisive one in the creation of light. We can never know their hierarchy of importance and meaningfulness because we cannot introduce such a hierarchy into divine, infinite wisdom. All we can know is that the totality of the linguistic phenomenon-the sound, the picture, the music, the "decorations" (the term indicates that this is a secondary element, which of course cannot be within divine infinity), and all the other elements combine into the essence of language as a creative - rather than communicative - instrument.

When yehi or is translated into any language carrying the semantic message "Let there be light," all these elements are lost. There are no vocalization marks, crowns, or musical signs. The sound is now different, and the shape of the letters is different. The numerical value is changed.

**From the Protocols of the Conference of 1845 (Frankfurt)**

Zecharias Frenkel: They ask, Is prayer in Hebrew an objective necessity? Clearly, the Talmud itself permits prayer in any language. But Hebrew is intertwined with the essence of Judaism; it is the "Holy Tongue." For the Jew, the Hebrew name of God, "Adonai," expresses much more than the German name, "Gott."

Reiss dissented from the report by claiming that the precept that "it is forbidden to change the form into which the sages have arranged the blessings" (Maimonides, Laws of Blessings 1:5, sic!) involves a prohibition to eliminate Hebrew and particularly the forms of the benediction which can be reproduced exactly in no other language.

David Einhorn: Hebrew is the language of the study of Torah, but it is not the organ wherewith to express the feelings of the people. In the past, prayer was only a cry of pain; a scarcely intelligible expression sufficed for this; but now people need a prayer that shall express thoughts, feelings, sentiments; this is possible only through the mother tongue.

Abraham Geiger: The speaker considers it desirable to pray in the mother tongue, which is the language of the soul. Our deepest emotions and feelings ... find their expression in it. He feels compelled to admit that as regards himself, ... a German prayer strikes a deeper chord than a Hebrew prayer.

The introduction of the vernacular into the service, it is claimed, effects the disappearance of the Hebrew language and thus undermines the foundations of Judaism. To this objection the speaker replies that anyone who imagines Judaism to be walking on the crutches of a language deeply offends it.