

There is a lot of confusion in the general world about the definition of pshat and the relationship between midrashim and "pshuto shel mikra".

We will start with Rashi who explains what happened when Bas Pharaoh retrieved Moshe's basket from the Nile. The posuk uses the word "amosoh". It could mean her servant and Chazal say it means her arm. Bas Pharaoh stuck out her hand and it kept moving and moving and extended in a miraculous fashion till it reached the basket. Rashi notes that the way the midrash interprets the word, according to the rules of dikduk, there should be a dogesh in the mem and there isn't.

את אמתה. את שפחתה. ורבותינו דרשו לשון יד, אבל לפי דקדוק לשון הקודש היה לו להניקד אמתה מ"ם דגושה. והם דרשו את אמתה את ידה, שנשתרבה אמתה אמות הרבה:

Rashi does not mean that Chazal were wrong or that they didn't know dikduk. We know that is impossible. From everything we know about Rashi through his commentaries on Tanach and Shas, we understand that he is not dismissing Chazal.

How do we understand pshuto shel mikra as understood by Torah Shebaal Peh?

There is a posuk in Mishpotim we are all familiar with: "ayin tachas ayin". Taken literally it means that beis din should remove the eye of the one who removed the eye of the other. Rashi explains that the one who removed the eye replaces it with money. Is that pshuto shel mikra?

The Rambam in Hilchos Chovel U'mazik says that when the Torah says "eye for an eye" it doesn't mean you literally do it. It means it is what he really deserves, but you only make him pay money instead. Even though there are indications from the pesukim themselves that only money is paid, the way we really know what the Torah truly intended is from direct information we received from Moshe about the meaning of this verse. You only take money for chavoloh. This is how every beis din paskened from the time of Moshe and Yehoshua. The posuk is only telling you what he really deserves. There is no real monetary equivalent for losing a limb.

רמב"ם הלכות חובל ומזיק פרק א

הלכה ב- נזק כיצד: שאם קטע יד חברו, או רגלו – רואין אותו כאילו הוא עבד נמכר בשוק, כמה היה יפה וכמה הוא יפה עתה; ומשלם הפחת שהפחית מדמיו: שנאמר "עין תחת עין" ... (שמות כא, כד; ויקרא כד, כ) – מפי השמועה למדו שזה שנאמר "תחת", לשלם ממון הוא.

הלכה ג- זה שנאמר בתורה "כאשר ייתן מום באדם, כן יינתן בו" (ויקרא כד, כ) – אינו לחבול בזה כמו שחבל בחברו, אלא שהוא ראוי לחסור אבר או לחבול בו כמו שעשה; ולפיכך משלם נזקו. והרי הוא אומר "ולא תקחו כופר לנפש רוצח" (במדבר לה, לא), לרוצח בלבד הוא שאין כופר; אבל לחסרון אברים או לחבלות, יש כופר.

הלכה ו- אף על פי שדברים אלו נראים מעניין תורה שבכתב, כולן מפורשין הן מפי משה מר סיני, וכולן הלכה למעשה הן בידינו; וכזה ראו אבותינו דין בבית דינו של יהושע, ובבית דינו של שמואל הרמתי, ובכל בית דין ובית דין שעמדו מימות משה ועד עכשיו.

There is a very important gemara in Yevamos which says that out of the entire Torah, there is only one place where the mikra deviates from pshuto shel mikra. This means the pshuto shel mikra of ayin tachas ayin is also considered pshuto shel mikra. It can mean the literal translation and it could mean the definitive pshat that we received from Moshe

at Har Sinai.

Often, Rashi uses midrashim in his commentary. It could mean he is bringing it as pshuto shel mikra, and it could be brought as an additional interpretation that is not pshuto shel mikra.

Regarding midrashim, aggados, etc., the Rashba in his Peirush Aggados introduces his sefer by giving guidelines as to when aggados in Shas are to be taken literally and when not. As a rule, the midrashim on Chumash are to be taken literally as pshat in the pesukim. The Torah Shebaal Peh tells us how to understand pesukim. No-one disagrees with this yesod.

There is a discussion among rishonim regarding the importance of determining the literal understanding of the pesukim independent of Chazal's pshat in the pesukim. No-one is saying Chazal's pshat is wrong. Rashi's commentary incorporates many midrashim in his pshat commentary. The Rashba says some midrashim are allegorical, but all the narratives in Chumash and Novi actually happened. While many pesukim are to be interpreted on multiple levels and besides the pshuto shel mikra, there are allegories that are also valid. There is no pure allegory in Tanach with the exception of Shir HaShirim.

One example of an allegorical midrash given by the Rashba is the midrash that Og Melech HaBoshon picked up a mountain in order to bury Klal Yisroel under it. This is allegorical – the message is that Og wanted to uproot the zechus of Avrohom Ovinu and make them vulnerable to destruction. But when Chazal say there was a nes of oil on Chanukah, it really happened.

When Rashi brings midrashim, it is usually being used to explain the pshat of the pesukim. Here in Shemos, Rashi is saying he can't fit this particular midrash of the posuk into the words. This means it is not the pshat in the posuk. There is a true message in this midrash but it doesn't fit into the pshat of the posuk.

We need to appreciate the relationship between Torah Shebichtav and Torah Shebaal Peh. We need Torah Shebaal Peh to help us appreciate what is really happening in the stories of Chumash. Chazal teach us through midrashim on pesukim who the Ovos and the shevotim were. They existed on a totally different level. The Ovos were on such a high level that they brought the Shechinah into this world. Moshe was the greatest novi who ever lived. So when we talk about personalities in Chumash and Novi, we need to keep in mind what kind of stature they had and never reduce them to the level of ordinary human beings. This is part of the mesorah we have from Chazal about how to understand Chumash.

Chazal say Dovid Hamelech never sinned with Bas Sheva. They said this because they appreciated who Dovid Hamelech really was. Of all the Jews in history, only Dovid Hamelech and Moshe Rabbeinu were called avdei Hashem. Dovid Hamelech had ruach hakodesh and composed the Sefer Tehillim! We need to understand that these were all superior human beings who had very slight, subtle flaws that the Torah is highlighting and magnifying. This means we then need to go back to the pesukim and understand them in this light.

If people are incapable of accepting Chazal's description of the greatness of the Ovos and Moshe and Dovid and Shlomo, it is probably because they never saw greatness themselves in anyone around them. They have no role models from their own experience by which to appreciate the greatness of the personalities of Tanach.

The major problem we have in yeshivos today is that talmidim are no longer talmidim of specific rebbeim. They are products of institutions. Until now the mesorah of Torah in Klal Yisroel was transmitted from a rebbe to his talmid going all the way back. The talmid makes a personal connection with a major talmid chochom who is living his life in a superior way. It shouldn't be that you learn from someone who merely knows more than you and is just furthering you along in yedias haTorah. That isn't getting a mesorah of Torah. You are simply accumulating Torah knowledge.

We have a mesorah of how to understand Torah and how to understand the people described in the Torah.

Hashem has no problem making miracles. If He created the universe yesh me-ayin, there is no issue with changing it and breaking the laws He created. Only those who believe in kadmus like Aristotle and his followers had problems with miracles. So Rashi has no issue in principle to saying Bas Pharaoh's arm extended supernaturally. Rashi is only telling us what fits in the pshat of the posuk and what doesn't. He isn't contradicting Chazal or denying the possibility that it could have happened. If this midrash should be taken literally or metaphorically depends on whether it fits in the words of the pesukim.

There is a new literature of interpreting the Torah that has sparked

much controversy. When people complain about certain seforim, the critique can be valid on two levels. It could be that someone is trying to determine the definitive meaning of pesukim in Torah Shebichtav without any guidance of Torah Shebaal Peh. This is unacceptable. Very often Chazal tell us what the proper pshat in a posuk is.

It could be someone trying to understand personalities in Tanach on a superficial level without accepting how Chazal elevated these people on a pedestal way above the level of ordinary human beings. Chazal say Eisov was a rosho – Lovon was a rosho – Bilaam was a rosho. There is no way to negotiate around this. The Ovov and Moshe Rabbeinu were the merkovo of the Shechinah. Dovid Hamelech was a unique eved of Hashem. These are simply the facts that we cannot question, and we need to view the pesukim through the prism of these facts.

People who have difficulty with these facts and can only see ordinary human beings in Tanach is a result of a breakdown of the mesiras haTorah. They are lacking a rebbe who occupied a different madreigah in his havonos haTorah and how he led his life. The rule is that the Torah is supposed to elevate and uplift a person beyond the pettiness and smallness of ordinary human beings. If you see a rebbe who is petty and small – do not learn Torah from him!