YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The teachings of the Maharal**

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**Shiur 06: Methods of Aggadic Interpretation:**

**The Maharal and the Rambam**

In this *shiur*, we will continue our study of the principles guiding the Maharal's interpretation of Aggada by raising the question: Did the Maharal build his novel approach, which reveals deeper layers in the interpretation of Aggada, entirely on his own, or did someone else precede him?

To a certain extent, the Maharal's approach is rooted in the teachings of the Rambam.

The Rambam discusses his approach to the study of Aggada in his introduction to the tenth chapter of tractate *Sanhedrin*, chapter *Chelek.* In his famous words there, he divides those who study the *aggadot* of *Chazal* into three groups:

And it is part of that which you must know that [with regard] to the words of the Sages, may their memory be blessed, people are divided into three groups:

The first – and it is most of what I have seen and of the compositions that I have seen and of what I have heard about – believes them according to their simple meaning and does not think they have any sort of esoteric meaning. For them, the impossible things must correspond to reality. But indeed, they do this as a result of their not understanding wisdom; they are far from the sciences, and they do not have wholeness [of intellectual achievement] so as to be roused on their own and they did not find someone to awaken them. [These people] think that the Sages, may their memory be blessed, only intended, in all of their straight and proper words, what [this group] understood from them according to their intellect, and that they are according to their simple meaning – and even though that which appears in some of their words is disgraceful and that which pushes the intellect away, to the point that if it would be recounted to the unlettered, and all the more so to the wise, they would wonder in their pondering over them and say: How is it possible that there is someone in the world who thinks like this or believes that it is a correct belief, and all the more so, that it is good in their eyes? And one should be pained about the foolishness of this group of simple-minded ones, as according to their opinion, they are honoring and raising the Sages, but they are [in fact] lowering them to the lowest depths, and they do not understand this. And as God, may He be blessed, lives, this group destroys the beauty of the Torah and darkens its splendor, and makes the Torah of God the opposite of its intention. As God, may He be blessed, said in the perfect Torah: "that they will hear all these statutes and they shall say: This is certainly a wise and understanding people, this great nation!" (*Devarim* 4:6). And this group recounts the simple words of the Sages, may their memory be blessed, such that when the other nations hear it, they say: "This is certainly a foolish and silly people, this small nation." And the ones that do this the most are the preachers, for they explain and inform the masses of the people about that which they [themselves] do not know. And if only it would be that since they did not know and understand, they would be quiet, as it is stated "Would that you would be silent, and it would be [considered] wisdom for you" (*Iyov* 13:5), or that they would say: We do not understand the intention of the Sages in this statement, nor how it is to be explained. But [instead], they think they understand it, and they attempt to inform and to explain to the people what they themselves [thought they] understood – not that which the Sages said – and they preach at the heads of the people the homilies from tractate *Berakhot* and from the chapter [entitled] *Chelek* and from others, according to their simple meanings, word for word.

And the second group is also numerous, and they are the ones who saw the words of the Sages or heard them, and understood them according to their simple meaning, and thought that the Sages did not intend in them anything more than that which is indicated by the simple [understanding]. And they come to make them foolish and to disgrace them and to bring ill-repute to that which has no ill repute, and they mock the words of the Sages. And [they believe that] they are more refined in their intellect than [the Sages], and that they, peace be upon them, were stupid, simple-minded fools regarding all of existence, to the point that they did not grasp matters of wisdom in any way. And most of those who stumble in this error are those who attach themselves to the medical sciences and those who carry on about the laws of the constellations, since they are wise in their [own] eyes, and sharp, and philosophers. And how far are they from humanity, according to those who are truly wise and philosophers. Rather, they are more foolish than the first group, and many of them are idiots. And it is an accursed group, since they question great and lofty people, whose wisdom was already made clear to the wise. And were these idiots to exert themselves in the sciences, to the point that they would know how it is proper to organize and write things in the science of theology, and things which are similar to it, for the masses and for the wise, and they would understand applied philosophy; then they would understand if the Sages, may their memory be blessed, were wise or not; and the matter of their words would be elucidated for them.

And the third group is, as God lives, very small, to the point that is not fitting to call them a group except in the same way as one says about the sun that it is a species [though it is in fact unique]. And these are those people to whom the greatness of the Sages, may they be blessed, and the quality of their intellect, has been made clear from what was found among their words, [things] that indicate matters that are very true. And even though [these things] are few and scattered in different places in their compositions, they indicate their wholeness [of intellect] and that they grasped the truth; and that the impossibility of the impossible and the necessity of that which exists was also clear to them. And [the members of the third group] knew that [the Sages], peace be upon them, were not saying jokes, and it became established for them that [the Sages'] words have a revealed and a secret meaning, and that in everything they said about things that are impossible, they were speaking by way of a riddle and a parable, since this is the way of great wise men. (Rambam, Commentary to the Mishna, introduction to *Perek Chelek*)

The first group is comprised of people who understand *aggadot* in their plain sense, and do not recognize at all the existence of a deeper layer. According to them, everything described in the stories related by the Sages happened in accordance with their plain sense, precisely as written. According to the Rambam, these people are foolish and gullible. The second group of people also understand *aggadot* in a superficial and simplistic manner, but because they are themselves educated people, they look down on the world of *Chazal.* The Rambam's criticism of them is harsher. Their education is truly superficial, and their arrogance is great. They do not understand how to write things in the science of theology, and therefore they read *Chazal*’s *aggadot* superficially and are arrogant about them.

The third group, the smallest in number, are those who recognize the deep level found in the *aggadot.* They understand that there is a gap between the simple meaning of their words and the deeper contents that are encoded in them, and therefore they humbly examine the matters in a careful manner, in order to penetrate their depth and not get stuck on to their plain meaning.

The Rambam explains why *Chazal* conceal the deep contents of their *aggadot*, rather than writing them openly and clearly. First, because of the gap that exists between our simple understanding and the depths of the Torah, these contents will naturally be hidden from our eyes and from our normal world of concepts. In addition, it is necessary to proactively hide the deep layers, because there are contents that are not intended for the masses. For those who have not delved into wisdom, it is better that they don’t know certain things. In other words, in addition to the natural concealment that exists on its own, there was also a deliberate intention to hide the deep meanings.

In *Be'er ha-Gola*, which was meant to serve as a response to claims brought against the *aggadot* of *Chazal*, the Maharal mentions the Rambam and his approach. It should be noted that he makes no mention of him in the introduction or in the first few sections of the book, but only in the fourth section. This section deals with *aggadot* that seem problematic, according to their plain meaning, from an intellectual or philosophical perspective – for example, those that attribute human qualities to God. In his introduction to the section, the Maharal writes:

And behold, the great rabbi who was filled with wisdom as the sea with all the natural, divine, and learned sciences, namely, the Rambam, may his memory be blessed, in the introduction to the order of *Zera'im*, elaborated on precious matters, teaching the people according to the greatness of his wisdom on this subject, and opened for us a portal to wisdom, to inform us that all their words are treasures, and they are the foundations of wisdom, and they spoke about them as it is appropriate for wise men to conceal the hidden matters. All of his words, in general and in detail, do not require bolstering, support, or foundation, for who can support or bolster a great tree, all of whose words are rooted firmly, and who spreads out his roots by the river, and regarding whose words nothing may be diminished or added? Indeed, his words are known to all, and whoever wishes to delve into his words can find them accessible to every person.

And because the rabbi spoke only in general terms, to show the nations [that it is] not as they think, that there are matters in their words that have no substance, heaven forbid – this is not the case at all. However, concerning specific statements, he did not explain them for two reasons: First, due to the length of the matter. Undoubtedly, if he were to explain their wisdom, even for just one order, [even] a long time would not suffice. Second, it is appropriate to exercise caution and not contradict their words; seeing that they concealed and hid them thoroughly, how could he reveal them, and thus lead to sin and guilt…

However, the skeptics will not heed these words, and they still rise vigorously to dispute. Therefore, it is fitting to add more, to clarify justice through clear testimony, to bring evidence and reliable testimony, and to examine justice and truth, to quell the complaints with clear matters, regarding certain things that appear more strange and distant from knowledge, and these will serve [as guidance to] examine other matters, all of which are precious things. For if those matters which are more distant are [seen to be] words of delight and value, all the more so those matters that are not subject to such disdain. With this, the complaints of these people will be silenced. The matters that we will explain are those that are found in books of wisdom, hidden and concealed. Concerning those matters, we will neither add nor subtract; we will only add clarification to those matters that are hidden and concealed, until one will [be able to] acquire understanding about them. And not that we should glorify ourselves with such matters, for these matters are only suitable for wise men with hearts as vast as the sea, and not for people like me. (*Be'er ha-Gola*, Well IV)

The Maharal praises the Rambam, but notes that he spoke "in general terms." Indeed, though the Rambam built and presented a fundamental approach, he did not write a book explaining *aggadot* or explain how we are to understand each particular *aggada*. He did mention, in his introduction to the Mishna, his intention to explain the *aggadot* of *Chazal*, but in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, he wrote that he did not merit doing so. The Maharal explains why he did not do this: first, due to the abundance of *aggadot*, which would require a very lengthy composition to explain them all; and second, due to the need to conceal their profound contents. The need for concealment creates a complex situation: on one hand, we do not want to expose deliberately concealed contents, but on the other hand, if we don’t clarify these contents, severe criticism will continue to be heaped upon the words of *Chazal*. The Maharal concludes that derogatory remarks about the words of *Chazal* must be countered and the *aggadot* must be explained; regarding the length, he writes that he will explain only select *aggadot*, from which we can learn about the rest.

The Maharal then turns to his readers with a plea:

And lo, I prostrate myself to the ground, with outstretched hands and legs before the reader, and I ask to be treated graciously regarding two matters: First, that if he reads these words and they do not enter his heart, he should read them again and examine them further. For these matters will only enter the reader's heart with very deep contemplation, since this is the nature of all words of truth and righteousness – they appear distant at the beginning of contemplation, but ultimately, they become revealed and shine like the sun at noon. The second request is that if after all this, the words [still] do not enter his heart, then let these things be as if they were never said at all. And let him not say that even though an explanation has been given to these words, the explanation does not enter the heart of one who contemplates it, and no further explanation can be given – and thus, heaven forbid, attribute a shortcoming to the words of the Sages. In such a case, our attempted correction would be a failure, causing him to think poorly of the words of the Sages. It is possible that this is the reason the ancients did not want to reveal the words of the Sages, out of fear that if the explanation did not enter the heart of one who contemplates it, a shortcoming would be attributed to the words of the Sages, heaven forbid, saying that this explanation is unacceptable and that there is no other explanation. Therefore, they left the matter sealed, so that he who contemplates it would say that the words of the Sages are like a sealed book and cannot be comprehended, like all sealed matters. For this reason, I ask and implore that I be granted this matter, that if after contemplation, one does not accept the words – he should dismiss my words, and they should be to him as if they were never said at all, and the words of the Sages should be to him as a sealed book, just as they were to him before these words were spoken. (Ibid.)

The Maharal asks his readers in advance that if they find his interpretations unacceptable, they should dismiss not the words of *Chazal*, but only his interpretations. The words of *Chazal* are certainly profound, and if they appear difficult even after the interpretation, the problem lies with the interpretation, not with the words themselves.

From what we have seen thus far, it may appear that the Maharal's attitude toward Aggada is built on the principles set down by the Rambam, with the only difference between them being that the Maharal brings examples and actually interprets *aggadot*. In truth, however, there are several more fundamental differences between the Maharal and the Rambam.

**Two Types of Parables**

In his introduction to the *Guide for the Perplexed*, the Rambam writes about parables in the words of the prophets:

The wise one has said: "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver" (*Mishlei* 25:11)… in a saying that has two meanings – he means an external and an internal one – the external meaning ought to be as beautiful as silver, while its internal meaning ought to be more beautiful than its external one, the former being in comparison to the latter as gold is to silver. Its external meaning also ought to contain in it something that indicates to someone considering it what is to be found in its internal meaning, as happens in the case of an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes. When looked at from a distance or with imperfect attention, it is deemed to be an apple of silver; but when a keen-sighted observer looks at it with full attention, its interior becomes clear to him and he knows that it is of gold. The parables of the prophets, peace be on them, are similar. Their external meaning contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies, as is shown by the external meaning of *Mishlei* and of similar sayings. Their internal meaning, on the other hand, contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is. Know that the prophetic parables are of two kinds. In some of these parables, each word has a meaning, while in others, the parable as a whole indicates the whole of the intended meaning. Though many things are included in [the latter type of] parable, not every word adds something to the intended meaning. They serve rather to embellish the parable and to render it more coherent, or to conceal further the intended meaning; hence, matters proceed in accordance with everything required by the parable's revealed meaning. Understand this well. (*Guide for the Perplexed*, section 1, introduction)

If this is true with respect to the *aggadot* of *Chazal* as well, then they too include two layers of meaning. On the simple level, they appear as useful teachings for human life, but they have a deeper layer that deals with essential spiritual content. This principle appears in the words of the Maharal, inspired by that same verse, as distinguishing between the words of *Chazal* and the wisdom of the scholars of the nations:

And behold, this matter is also found, that the wise ones of the ancient nations, whose words were also very veiled, until they revealed interpretations of their words. This is evident to anyone who has seen their words in their books. So why should they place blame on the words of the Sages? And the words of the Sages are of higher value, for when the wise ones of the nations spoke their words in riddle and parable forms, there was no interpretation or revealed benefit for anyone who does not understand their riddles. But the words of the Sages follow the words of the Torah and the words of the prophets, which have both a revealed and a concealed aspect; they are compared to "apples of gold in settings of silver," (*Mishlei* 25:11), where the internal meaning is compared to gold, and the external to silver, both being precious. Thus, the words of the Sages have both a revealed and a concealed aspect, the concealed being precious in wisdom, and the revealed being pleasant and good to behold. (*Be'er ha-Gola* 5, 1)

*Chazal* speak in dual language – simple and profound – and they do so intentionally. Their goal is that every Jew should be able to understand their words on the revealed level, while those scholars who wish to delve deeper can examine and reach the deeper levels. Both levels are genuine and valid.

The Rambam, however, goes on to divide the parables into two groups: parables in which every detail has a corresponding message, and parables that add and expand around a central point. The latter are intended to express one principle, but for the sake of embellishment and artistry, additional details are added that complete the picture of the parable but that do not have real meaning for the message. The Rambam does not explain how we are to know which parables belong to the first type and which to the second type. Nor do we have any way of knowing, with regard to the parables of the second type, which details are essential to the message and which do not teach anything.

In contrast, the Maharal argues that all the words of *Chazal* belong to the first type of parable. As we have seen, the Maharal maintains that every detail in the words of *Chazal* is deliberate, and no component is insignificant. As he writes:

For there is no doubt that the words of the Sages are very profound, and that the words of the Sages were not said as an estimation or a suggestion, as some think and interpret the words of the Sages. Rather, all of their words are exceedingly profound words of wisdom. Therefore, the interpretation of their words as well requires great understanding and study. (*Derekh Chaim*, end of the introduction)

**Distinguishing Between Different Types of Aggada**

An example of the Rambam's method of interpreting Aggada does appear in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, with regard to the reason for the mitzva of the four species taken on Sukkot:

As for the four species of the *lulav*, the Sages, may their memory be blessed, have set forth a bit of reason for this in the manner of *midrashim* whose method is well known by all those who understand their discourse. For these [namely, the *midrashim*] have, in their opinion, the status of poetical conceits – not that this matter is the meaning of the text in question. Accordingly, with regard to the *midrashim*, people are divided into two divisions: one division imagines that [the Sages] have said these things in order to explain the meaning of the text in question, and the second division holds [the *midrashim*] in slight esteem and holds them up to ridicule, since it is clear and manifest that this is not the meaning of the [Biblical] text in question. The first class strives and fights with a view to proving, as they deem, the correctness of the *midrashim* and to defending them, and think that this is the true meaning of the [Biblical] text and that the *midrashim* have the same status as established legal decisions. But neither of the two groups understands that [the *midrashim*] have the character of poetical conceits whose meaning is not obscure for someone endowed with understanding. At that time this method was generally known and used by everybody, just as the poets use poetical expressions. Thus [the Sages], may their memory be blessed, say: "Bar Kapara teaches: 'And you shall have a peg [*yated*] among your weapons [*azenekha*]' [which is used to cover excrement] (*Devarim* 23:14) – do not read *azenekha*, but *oznekha* [your ear]. This teaches us that whenever a man hears a reprehensible thing, he should put his finger into his ear" (*Ketubot* 5a). Would that I knew whether, in the opinion of these ignoramuses, this *Tanna* believed this to be the interpretation of this text, that such was the purpose of this commandment, that *yated* [peg] means a finger, and that *azenekha* [your weapons] refers to the two ears. I do not think that anyone of sound intellect will be of this opinion. But this is a most pleasant poetical conceit by means of which he instills a noble moral quality, which is in accordance with the fact that just as it is forbidden to say something shameful, so is it forbidden to listen to it; and he props it up through a reference to a [Biblical] text, in the way of poetical parables. Similarly, all the places in the *midrashim* enjoining, "Do not read thus, but thus," have this meaning. (*Guide for the Perplexed*, III, 43)

Here the Rambam deals with a different type of midrashic exposition than he discussed in his introduction to *Perek Chelek*. There, he addressed expositions dealing with God and using metaphors or images which, if understood literally, would be tantamount to anthropomorphism or personification. Here he deals with midrashic expositions whose difficulty is not theological or philosophical, but exegetical. The Rambam maintains that these expositions are not really connected to the verses; rather, *Chazal* use them in a creative manner as a "poetical conceit."

The Maharal disagrees with this position. In his view, *Chazal*’smidrashic expositions do have a substantive connection to the verse being expounded, and are not merely a "poetical conceit." This is how he formulates the principle in the first section of *Be'er ha-Gola*:

As for the *mitzvot* which are themselves words of the Sages, but they bring proof and midrashic derivation from the Torah, and they say about this that the mitzvais Rabbinic, and the verse is merely a support – many mistakenly think that there is really no connection at all between that mitzva and the Torah, only that they gave the mitzvaa midrashic derivation from the Torah, as if it were merely a poetical conceit. Those who say this are in error and do not understand their words, for God forbid that there should be one word of theirs said for the sake of linguistic amplification and embellishment of speech. Rather, all their words are true. And when they say, "From where is this matter derived?" and bring a proof from a verse, there is indeed proof to their words from the verse. And it will be explained through a few [examples], and they will serve as witnesses for the rest. (*Be'er ha-Gola*, Well1, p. 14)

In the third section, he addresses the midrashic exposition brought by the Rambam and confronts his position. He alludes to the Rambam's words without mentioning him by name – apparently out of respect – and says: "And many will be astonished by this statement, which is far from the plain meaning of the verse," and then he proceeds to explain the connection between the two. He concedes that it is not the plain sense of the verse, but explains that it reveals a deep layer that emanates from it. He clarifies the essence of each of the components of the verse, and the relationships between them, and thereby demonstrates a direct conceptual connection between the content of the verse and the content of the midrashic exposition, and opposes the view that the connection is merely poetic or artistic. Due to the length and complexity of his words, I will not reproduce them here in their entirety, nor analyze them at length. I will quote just one passage and ask the reader to pay close attention, in order to see the principles by which the Maharal operates here, and how they relate to what we have seen so far.

Indeed, when you search within their words, you will find that all their words are wisdom. This is because the ear [*ozen*]is a receiver, and therefore all hearing, because the words enter the ear, is translated in the sense of receiving. And because the peg [*yated*] is inserted in the thing into which it enters, and plugs it, it is written: "And you shall have a peg among *azenekha.*" Why does the Torah write this? It should only have written: "And you shall have a peg," and I would certainly know that the pegis inserted into something. Rather, it comes to teach you that a person needs a plug for that which receives, i.e., his ear also, so that no despicable ideas will enter into it. And even though it is written in the Torah not *oznekha*, but rather *azenekha*, nevertheless there is here a play on words. For this *parasha* says: 'And you shall have a peg among *azenekha* [your weapon], and the pegenters into the hole and plugs that which receives, and it is ready to dig a pit and cover that which is reprehensible, namely, the excrement. And similarly, it is fitting that you should have a plug on the receiver, which is the ear, so that it will not receive the vileness of filthy speech. And therefore it is written: *azenekha*, as it should have sufficed to write: "And you shall have a peg." Only because man must plug his ears so as not to hear something reprehensible, and here it speaks also of plugging so that there will be no slander, he wrote these words: "And you shall have a pegamong *azenekha*." This is clear, and is not a far-fetched interpretation, but it is close and good. There is no doubt that the Torah hinted at this with the wording that it used, saying "And you shall have a peg among *azenekha.*" And it hinted at this as we said above. Be precise about this matter, and you will find a very remarkable matter. (*Be'er ha-Gola*, Well 3, p. 40)

**Summary**

We have seen that the Rambam teaches that there is a deep level to the words of *Chazal*, but he does not always explain it. He says some elements of certain *aggadot* are not essential, and sometimes says about an entire midrashic exposition that it is an *asmakhta* – a mere support – and not connected to the verse in an essential way. It would seem that the Rambam establishes a method for understanding the words of *Chazal*, but he does not always follow it to its logical conclusion. When we look for the places where the Rambam is faithful to his method, it seems they are primarily *aggadot* that describe God, or that deal with other fundamental issues of faith and philosophy. Regarding these *aggadot*, it was important to the Rambam to make clear that *Chazal* did not anthropomorphize or personify God, and therefore he emphasized that their words have a profound meaning. Regarding other *aggadot*, such as the exposition regarding the four species, or the exposition about the care that must be taken not to hear indecent things, the Rambam had no need for deep interpretations.

It is not by chance that the Maharal cites the Rambam specifically in the fourth section of his book. As noted, this is the part where the Maharal deals with *aggadot* that seem to anthropomorphize God. Regarding *aggadot* of this type, the Rambam wrote that they must be understood on a deep level, and therefore the Maharal cites him in this context. However, the Maharal takes the Rambam's method far beyond where the Rambam took it, and uses it to explain other types of *aggadot* as well. According to him, all of *Chazal's* *aggadot*, relating to all subjects and realms, contain layers of depth, and each and every component in them bears special meaning and significance.

(Translated by David Strauss; edited by Sarah Rudolph)