YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS**

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**Lecture #22:**

**The Ralbag**

1. **Introduction**

R. Levi ben Gershom (1288-1344) lived in Provence, and he was a dominant and famous figure in his era not only in the Jewish community and not only because of his Torah-based writings. He was also known for his contributions to the fields of philosophy, science, [[1]](#footnote-1) mathematics[[2]](#footnote-2) and astronomy,[[3]](#footnote-3) and he even composed a number of academic treatises in these disciplines. Some of the Ralbag’s scientific writings were translated from Hebrew to Latin, so that they could serve the non-Jewish intelligentsia.[[4]](#footnote-4) One indication of the great importance of his biblical commentaries is the fact that his commentary was chosen to be one of the first books to be printed in Hebrew.

Like R. Yosef ibn Caspi, whom we dealt with in the previous lesson, the Ralbag dedicates a significant portion of his commentary to *Sefer* *Bereishit*. A large part of his commentary, mainly the chapters of *Bereishit* which deal with creation, is focused on his philosophical approach. Despite this, there is a great difference between the two exegetes: the Ralbag uses philosophical principles taken from physics and metaphysics, while ibn Caspi uses mainly the discipline of logic.

This is an interesting phenomenon of two scholars exploring *Tanakh*, living in the same time and same area, and having a similar style. However, while one (Ralbag) became famous and accepted, the other (ibn Caspi) was almost unknown, and his writings were not studied. It seems to me that a comparison of the two personalities yields the following explanation. The Ralbag was a scholar who was not only expert in the Written Torah, but also in the Oral Torah, and was a well-known halakhic authority. This is not true of ibn Caspi, who declares that he is not a halakhic expert;[[5]](#footnote-5) in his compositions, he conspicuously avoids delving into halakhic topics. In addition, understanding the Ralbag’s commentaries generally does not require prior knowledge, while understanding ibn Caspi’s commentaries requires prior knowledge not only in philosophical logic, but also in biblical exegesis. While a reader who is not totally well-versed in the philosophical world of the Middle Ages will have some difficulty in understanding the commentary of the Ralbag as well, there is no doubt that understanding his commentaries is a much simpler task than understanding ibn Caspi.

1. **Structure of the Commentary**

The Ralbag divides the portion into a number of subtopics: each subtopic is considered an independent literary unit, which he calls a *parasha*. The Ralbag divides his commentary into three separate parts, each of which deals with another discipline, and together they constitute a comprehensive exegetical system. The three parts are: the lexicon (*bi’ur* *ha-milot*), the exegesis (*bi’ur* *ha-parasha*), and the values (*to’alot*).

*Bi’ur* *ha-milot* is a short commentary on words that require definition. This commentary is structured according to the standard template, each entry followed by its definition. The lexicon is significant as part of the comprehensive explication of the entire unit, and is relevant in terms of framing the general context of the unit.

The second part, *bi’ur* *ha-parasha*, is a comprehensive commentary, which recapitulates the words of the Torah while adding exegetical addenda in the style of a lecture, without dividing it into verses.

The third part, *to’alot*, explains the meanings, morals, and messages that come out of the *parasha*. These values are divided into three segments: metaphysical (*de’ot*), moral (*middot*), and mitzva-related. The first of these relates to philosophical issues that emerge from the unit; the second deals with behavioral and ethical issues that arise from the unit; and in the halakhic portions of the Torah, the third examines the contents and meanings of the commandments. The Ralbag expands on the significance of these three categories in his introduction to his commentary on the Torah:

It is crucial to divide the Torah, by courtesy, into these three parts, because human perfection cannot be realized without achieving the perfection of *middot*…

According to the view of the Ralbag, these *mitzvot*, *de’ot*, and *middot* are three categories in which human beings must reach for perfection. Perfection, after all, is the aim of creation, as the Ralbag continues to explain, delineating the great gifts God gave to man:

Indeed, He guided his reality[[6]](#footnote-6) in this wondrously providential way, crafting his limbs and their powers and their instruments, all of which He gave to him to maintain his reality. He did not hesitate to give him direction and guidance towards the true perfection, which is the entirety of man’s yield… This He accomplished by giving him this divine Torah, which is the nomos[[7]](#footnote-7) which all may follow, thereby reaching perfection and true success.

In other words, just as God creates the mechanism of the human body in a way in which a person can survive, similarly God creates a mechanism that allows each person to achieve perfection, which is the ultimate goal of man in this world. This manual is the Torah, and those who follow the Torah will reach true perfection. This direction is given both through the commandments of the Torah and through the biblical narrative.[[8]](#footnote-8) Indeed, the Ralbag consistently explains the Torah according to this conception.

Analyzing the entirety of the Ralbag’s metaphysical values will give the reader a comprehensive picture of his philosophical world. In these *to’alot*, the Ralbag expands on many topics such as prophecy, providence, reward and punishment, etc. In his commentary on *Tanakh*, the Ralbag reveals that he is, on the one hand, as a man of faith who sees himself as bound by what he perceives as basic beliefs of the Jewish religious tradition, and on the other hand as a man of science and philosophy who tries to enhance these beliefs with explanations in the philosophical and scientific frameworks, based on Aristotelian thought.

An example of ethical values may be seen in *Bereishit* 43:11-14. In these verses, the Torah describes Yaakov’s preparations for sending Binyamin to Egypt with the brothers:

Then their father Yisrael said to them, “If it must be so, then do this: Take some of the choice fruits of the land in your bags, and carry a present down to the man, a little balm and a little honey… Take double the money with you… Take also your brother, and arise, go again to the man. May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man…”

These verses are clear and understandable, requiring no explanation, but the Ralbag’s view is that the details in the story come to teach us rules of behavior (not only ethical behavior, but intelligent and socially acceptable behavior):

The fifteenth value is in *middot*. It is not appropriate for someone whose master suspects him of a bad thing to be excessive in offering a generous gift, because this will seem to indicate that the suspicion is actually true. Thus, one will find that Yaakov does not act excessively at this point by offering a generous tribute, while one may see that he gave a generous tribute to Esav. Rather, it was a minimal amount that he sent to him: “a little balm and a little honey…”

We learn from this that Yaakov prefers to give a mistrustful person a small gift, as exaggeration in this realm will only serve to bolster the other’s concerns.

From these same verses, the Ralbag also extracts a metaphysical value:

The sixteenth value is in *de’ot*. This informs us that when a person is concerned about some evil, he should not rely solely on praying to God; rather, it is worthwhile to exert efforts according to all the reasons[[9]](#footnote-9) that are feasible in order to save himself, and he should juxtapose this to his prayer to God Almighty. God Almighty will assist those who attach themselves to him and He will show them providence, but His desire is that they juxtapose this with the appropriate reasons… Furthermore, if the perfect one will rely only on praying to God, this may result in an irreplaceable loss; should this perfect one not receive his heart’s desire, his faith will be reduced, which is in itself the reason for a lack of achievement…[[10]](#footnote-10)

We learn here of the relationship of the Torah to a person’s effort and initiative. Yaakov does not suffice himself with prayer alone; in addition, he also uses natural tools, namely, the gift which he sends to the viceroy.[[11]](#footnote-11) The importance of the natural effort is twofold: God’s desire is to show providence using natural tools (“the appropriate reasons”), not miracles; furthermore, the person who relies on prayer alone can be damaged theologically if his prayer is not accepted.

1. **Innovative Explanations**

In light of his view that one must learn rules of behavior from biblical narrative, the Ralbag believes that the story of Avraham going down to Egypt (*Bereishit* 12) portrays him as a positive role model. The Ralbag praises Avraham for leaving the Land of Israel in light of the famine and not staying put in obstinacy:

The first value is in *middot*. This teaches us the diligence required for one to maintain his body and give it all that it needs. One may see this in Avraham; despite the fact that God Almighty had already ensured that he would succeed financially, he arose, because of the famine which occurred in the Land of Canaan, to go to the Land of Egypt. He did not hold himself back because God Almighty commanded him to settle in the Land of Canaan. God Almighty’s command is solely designed to benefit man, not to bring about his death. Therefore, Avraham knew that it was God Almighty’s will that he should depart from there in order to seek sustenance…[[12]](#footnote-12)

**D. Attitude towards Miracles**

The Ralbag has a complex approach to the limitations of miracles. In accordance with philosophical considerations — although this is not the forum to elaborate on them — in his book *Milchamot Hashem* (VI, 2:12), he determines three principles relating to miracles:

A) There are no constant miracles. Exceptions to the rules of nature can exist in a miraculous way temporarily, but not in a permanent way.

B) The magnitude of the miracle correlates to the greatness of the prophet. Miracles happen only by way of prophets, and their scope is dependent on the prophet’s level.

C) Miracles cannot happen for heavenly reasons. This principle compels the Ralbag to explain that miracles which appear ostensibly to be based in cosmic causes in fact happen without any intervention of heavenly reasons.

An additional principle appears in a number of places in the Torah commentary of the Ralbag:

D) The miracles are done “with the appropriate reasons”: God minimizes His interference in the order of the natural world.Exceptions to the rules of nature take place only if they are required to achieve the relevant benefit.[[13]](#footnote-13)

For example, as an instance of the third rule, one may note the original explanation of the Ralbag for the miracle of the sun’s standing still at Givon (*Yehoshua* 10:13), which appears to directly contradict this principle. The Ralbag explains that the verses are not describing a change in the natural position of the sun, but rather describe the dramatic success of the Jewish army; in a very small amount of time, even before dark, they achieve victory in combat.

What Yehoshua’s statement means is that before the sun could pass over Givon, and the moon arrive in the Ayalon Valley, the nation took its vengeance from its enemies…

Now, this was a wondrous matter: not only did Israel manage to avenge themselves of their foes, but they managed to avenge themselves of their foes completely and conclusively in a relative short amount of time.[[14]](#footnote-14)

As an example of the fourth principle, we may turn to the Ralbag’s commentary on the following verse (*Devarim* 7:22):

Lord your God will clear away these nations before you little by little. You cannot make an end of them at once, lest the wild beasts grow too numerous for you.

The Ralbag explains:

Even though God Almighty is in control of doing whatever He wants and whatever He desires, He will seek the reasons which are as appropriate as possible. Moreover, He will not innovate a wonder unless the situation compels it. For He does not hate nature; indeed, He made it!

Therefore, He does not subvert it except in a time of need and in the most minimal way that it is possible to do so. This is why it says, “Lord your God will clear away these nations before you little by little. You may not make an end of them at once, lest the wild beasts grow too numerous for you.” Indubitably, God Almighty could destroy them quickly and guard Israel against the wild beasts, so that they could not overwhelm them; nevertheless, He chose not do this, because it was possible for Israel to achieve the goal without this.

In other words, God could have helped the Jewish nation to conquer the Land of Canaan swiftly, but He holds Himself back from doing so because there was no essential need for a miracle of this sort. God avoids subverting the natural law because “He does not hate nature” — He loves His world as He created it, and therefore His interference in the laws of nature will be as minimal as possible.

E. Attitude towards Halakhic Midrash

In the halakhic portion of the Torah, the Ralbag has an innovative approach to studying the laws of the Oral Torah. Up to his time, biblical exegetes fall into one of two groups. One group (Rashi, Ramban, et al.) cites Midrashic material dealing with halakhic topics and (generally) explains the verses in keeping with these sources. However, most exegetes are in the second group, dealing only with analyzing the verses, whether in terms of their halakhic content (ibn Ezra) or in an independent way (Rashbam). Regardless, they do not deal with all the details of halakhic Midrash.

The Ralbag, in his introduction to his commentary on the Torah, explains his relationship to halakhic Midrash:

Now, when we explain the commandments and the roots from which all of the laws emerge, as explained by Talmudic wisdom, do not expect us to juxtapose those roots with the sites utilized by our Talmudic sages, via one of the thirteen attributes, according to their custom. This is for the following reason: they juxtapose these accepted and true things concerning the Torah’s commandments to those verses, but only in order to utilize them as allusions and supports; they do not really intend to extract these laws from these sites…

We, on the other hand, will juxtapose them to the simple meaning of the verses, so that it is possible for laws to come out of them, for by this, the soul will be more thoroughly satisfied. This is not veering from the way of our Rabbis, of blessed memory, for as we have said, they never intended that these laws should really be extracted from these sites to which they are juxtaposed. Rather, they have a direct oral tradition, man to man, going back to Moshe Rabbeinu, peace be upon him, so they merely seek an allusion from the verse…

The Ralbag accepts the laws that emerge from halakhic Midrash as genuine and binding, but he believes that the form of studying Halakha is not obligatory; it only serves an *asmakhta*, a support. In other words, when the Sages expound a verse and, as it were, derive laws from there, the verse expounded is not the source of the given law. Rather, the Sages hold it is a legal tradition from Mt. Sinai, and they seek a verse that may serve as an *asmakhta* for some laws — the verses are the frame on which to display the laws.[[15]](#footnote-15) Since this is true, the derivation of any given *asmakhta* is not obligatory; the Ralbag may use an *asmakhta* which differs from that of the Sages, and he uses different tools than what they use.

For example, while the Sages may find allusions or supports using the thirteen attributed by which the Torah is expounded, the Ralbag composes other logical rules for the “sites”,[[16]](#footnote-16) which are designed to be a substitute for the thirteen attributes of the Sages. The Ralbag stresses that he does not argue with the Sages, because they themselves never meant for the types of derivation utilized in halakhic Midrash to be obligatory.

The Ralbag sees great significance in his approach for two reasons. First, it is satisfying to the soul — ideas are more acceptable and pleasing if they are studied in a more logical way. The second reason is that the easiest way to commit the laws of the Oral Torah to one’s memory is to connect the laws to the verses, as the Written Torah is familiar to all.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Thus, for example, the Ralbag derives the prohibition for one to judge his relative from *Shemot* 32:27-29, wherein Moshe orders the Levites to kill those who have served the Golden Calf:

“Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and his fellow and his kinsman… You have been set apart to the Lord today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and He has blessed you this day.”

Ralbag points out:

From the fact that he makes a point that today they should not hold back from executing justice upon a sinner who is their son or their brother, it is possible for us to that a judge cannot sit in judgment of his relative.

1. Main Contribution of the Ralbag

We should see the essential contribution of the Ralbag to the Torah as a contribution to the sphere of Jewish thought. However, even in the sphere of biblical exegesis, the Ralbag is very innovative, and most of his innovations are found in his “values.” The Ralbag’s worldview in terms of the Torah’s aim motivates him to find as many relevant messages and morals as possible through the Torah’s narrative and laws.

We will conclude with a nice quote from the Ralbag, who characterizes his outlook of Torah study thusly:

The greatest joy is in the acquisition of spirituality, and this is quite understandable, because we will rejoice more, beyond measure, when we grasp an intellectual matter, than we will rejoice over the acquisition of anything physical.(Commentary to I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 16).

Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch

1. His most famous invention is the "Jacob's Staff," a navigational tool which served sailors for hundreds of years and is even in use today; see, for example, <http://ascscientific.stores.yahoo.net/precjacstaf.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. His innovations in this area were integral to the development of trigonometry. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Due to the Ralbag’s great contributions to the discipline of astronomy, a lunar crater is named after him: Rabbi Levi, 34.7°S 23.6°E. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [In 1342, Pope Clement VI](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Clement_VI) had the Ralbag’s astronomical work, based on the great [Arab thinkers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab), translated into Latin. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Sefer Ha-Musar*, p. 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This refers to the psychology and physiology of man. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is the Greek term for a system of laws. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Ralbag expands on the importance of biblical narrative for human perfection in his commentary to *Devarim* 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. These are the possible causes and factors. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See also his commentary to *Shemot* 1:

    The fourth value is in *middot*. This teaches us that a person should not rely on a miracle, because everything that he does should be motivated by fear of God. It is appropriate that one try, to the best of his ability, to distance himself from any evil that may befall him… [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is also mentioned in the *midrash* cited by Rashi (*Bereishit* 32:9)concerning Yaakov’s preparations from his encounter with Esav:

    He prepared himself for three things: for tribute, for prayer and for battle. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In a similar way, the Ralbag praises Yosef’s act of trying to escape the guardhouse by appealing to the chief butler (see Ralbag, *Bereishit* 40) as opposed to Rashi there (following *Bereishit* *Rabba* 89:2-3), who criticizes Yosef. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. We may view this principle an expansion of the first principle: not only does God not make miracles happen in a permanent way, but even when He makes them happen in a temporary way, they will happen in a way as minimal as possible. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See also Naava Eckstein’s essay, *“Gishat Ralbag Le-Nissim Ba-Mikra: ‘Yasad Eretz al Mekhoneha’”* in *Ha-Reneh: Asufat Ma’amarim* (Ulpana AMIT Noga, 5771), pp. 100-107. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See the view of the Rambam about this in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishna*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. These are types of claims. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The Ralbag puts it this way:

    There is value in our juxtaposing these laws to the simple meaning of the verses, for the laws may then be more easily recalled in our souls. The verses of the Torah may be easily remembered, because we read them constantly. Thus, if we derive the explanation of these commandments from the simple meaning of the verses, this will be the reason to remember the explanation of the commandment when we recall these verses. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)