EIN MIKRA YOTZEH MIYDEI PESHUTO: THE RAAVAD'S APPROACH

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There are a number of commentaries on the Torah that are based on a plain literal reading of the text (*pshat*). This approach views the function of words remains static and fixed, like numbers and other intelligible indicators. Based on this methodology of interpretation, words must not change according to the wishes of the reader; rather they relate the message of the author to readers, according to the manner in which words are commonly understood to the public of the time of the text’s composition (unless indicated otherwise).

One luminous legal figure who is not generally grouped with the famous *pashtanim* is the underappreciated Provençal scholar, R. Abraham b. David (Raavad, c. 1125 – 1198). In his glosses to the widely recognized legal work, the *Mishne Torah* of Maimonides, Raavad notes his disagreements with some of Maimonides’ opinions and adds some additional legal insight that he might have omitted. Among these glosses, we can detect Raavad being guided by an approach of the plain reading of the verses in a number of different contexts.

**PHILOSOPHICAL**

Raavad famously applied his approach to the question of whether anthropomorphism is considered heresy. Maimonides’ position regarding the anti-anthropomorphic nature of God, and that belief otherwise is heresy, is the most commonly accepted position on the matter in contemporary times, but this was not always the case. As Raavad records in his glosses to *Mishne Torah* (Laws of Repentance 3:7), there were men of his time who took a more literal approach to anthropomorphic biblical terminology: “And why does he refer to such [an individual] as a heretic? For many [sages] greater and better than he (Maimonides) followed this train of thought according to their view of the Scriptures…” While Maimonides might categorize those who proclaim anthropomorphic qualities of God as “heretics”, following

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Raavad’s theory, there would be no violation in professing one’s belief in a physical hand, eye, or finger of God, even if such a view is, in fact, incorrect, since that person is simply following the pshat meaning of the verses.

In another case of a philosophical matter judged according to the plain meaning of the text, Raavad disagrees with the view of Maimonides regarding the Messianic era. Maimonides, based on TB Sanhedrin 91b and 99a, records that the Messianic era will fundamentally differ with all the eras that precede it only insofar as there will political tranquility in the Land of Israel and general peace and enlightenment. Verses relating to supernatural phenomena or changes in nature during this era, for Maimonides, are metaphoric. The plain reading approach, as adopted Raavad, states otherwise. In his glosses (Laws of Kings and Wars 12:1) he remarks: “But does the Torah (Lev. 26:6) not state: and I shall terminate harmful beasts from The Land?, a change of the current natural order. Although this verse does not explicitly refer to the Messianic days, it is possible that Raavad derives this notion from the beginning of that verse, And I shall deliver peace amidst your Land, and you shall dwell and will not tremble [in fear]. Contextually, “peace” likely refers to political tranquility, which Maimonides associated with the Messianic era. Isaiah the prophet makes similar remarks about such times (Isa. 11:6): The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

LEGAL MATTERS
Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, 1085-1158), a pshat oriented commentator to the Torah, writes in his introduction to Parashat Mishpatim (Exodus 21), “Wise people, you should know and understand that I have not come to explain the halakhot, even though they are the most important. As I explained in Genesis (1:1), the halakhot and aggadot are learned from extra [words or letters] in the text, and you will find some of these in the commentaries of my maternal grandfather, Rashi. However, I have come to explain the simple meaning of the verses. Thus I will explain the laws and the halakhot according to common sense. Nevertheless, the halakhot are of primary importance.” He distinguishes between the plain meaning of the text
and the way the Rabbis interpreted the text in terms of legal practice. Rashbam would not use the *pshat* meaning to determine the actual law.

Raavad, however, applies his approach to more explicitly legal matters as well. Exodus 22:1-2 briefly outlines the right to self-defense in the case of burglary: *If the thief shall be found in a tunnel, and he is smitten and dies; he has no blood. If the sun shall shine on to him, he has blood.* . . . Based on the exegetical Talmudic reading of this verse, Maimonides (*Mishne Torah*: Laws of Theft 9:8) states that if a burglar’s entry is as clear as the sun of the day to be non-lethal, one may not kill in self-defense. As in the case of a father who burglarizes his son’s home for provisions, it is known that the father’s mercy towards his son is overwhelming thus removing probable suspicion of lethal intent. On the other hand, Raavad in his glosses there is adamant that while this exegetical approach holds true, one may not depart from the plain reading of the verse: “I will not refrain from recording my opinion, for it seems to me, that despite the Sages expounding on this verse… in a metaphoric manner… nonetheless, the verse may not be displaced of its plain meaning. [Thus], in the day, one may not kill him, since thieves only come [to steal] minor objects during the day and flee immediately. They do not remain stationary to steal large sums of money; to stand over the owner to kill him [as they do at night]…”

Maimonides and Raavad are dealing with the moral issue of under what conditions does self-defense justify homicide? Both agree that moral principle demands that there be evidence of violent intent on the part of the intruder. Ravaad accepts the legality of the approach of Maimonides but notes that one must not then simply gloss over the plain meaning here, which is also in accordance with the moral principle.

Raavad also uses *pshat* as a guideline for the issue of generalization, how far can one generalize from a verse regarding halachic matters?

Upon the sudden deaths of Aaron the Priest’s sons, Leviticus 10:7 instructs a series of mourning practices to the priestly family, including the following provision: *And from the entrance of the Tent of Meeting they (the priests) shall not leave, lest they die, for the Anointing oil of The Lord is upon them*… The priests are told not to abandon their service whilst in the initial stage of mourning. Maimonides (*Mishne Torah*, Laws of Entering the Temple 2:5), in line with the opinion of the Sages, does not limit the application of this
verse to priests of the ancient inauguration period alone; he applies it to priests of all generations. Raavad in his glosses dissents by noting: “This is a major bewilderment, as that verse was only stated regarding that time [of the Tabernacle’s inauguration], for his (Aaron the priest’s) sons were anointed [for service].” Raavad applies the passage and the punishment of divine death penalty only to the sons of Aaron, the priests; the ones anointed with the Anointing Oil, and thenceforth only to High Priests who themselves have been anointed with oil, but not to all priests. Of course, the question of generalization is a familiar halachic problem, here Raavad brings the plain reading of the verse to support his view against the opinion of Maimonides.

Among the myriad of tithes and taxes of produce that were separated for Levites and Priests by Israelite farmers, Maimonides (Mishne Torah: Laws of Tithes 1:9) records an exemption for carobs and other uncommonly eaten produce from the biblical tithing requirements. However, Raavad in his glosses points to an even more lenient exemption, based on the plain reading of several verses: “Also, all [produce] of trees other than grapes and olives [are exempt]…” Evidently, Raavad strictly construed tree tithing requirements to what the text of the Bible specifically lists: olives and grapes (Numbers 18:12, 24, 27, Deuteronomy 14:23). Here again, Raavad takes the position of non-generalization based on the plain reading of the verse.

Lastly, Maimonides (Mishne Torah: Laws of Ṭumat Tzara’at 1:6) classifies all skin diseases as part of the biblical list of such diseases, so long as the color of the patch of skin is brighter than the skin color in which it is found, noting the deviation this classification presents against the clear reading of the verse.9 Raavad there notes: “This [rule] was only stated by baheret, but regarding se’et, its pigmentation is darker than [the surrounding] flesh; for se’et is [textually] defined by its darkness.”10 Again, the issue is generalization, but the defense of his position is based on what is stated according to the plain meaning of the verse.

CONCLUSION

The Raavad is not generally considered an exegete, as he did not write a commentary on the Bible, and for this reason, is left off of lists of the famous pashtanim. However, a careful examination of his glosses to Mishne Torah shows that Raavad was guided by the idea of a pshat reading of the text in
numerous instances. Raavad goes beyond the classical pshat based commentators, as it is rare to find recognized Jewish legal authorities who have used this approach to Jewish law in practice.

Raavad demonstrates what for many traditional Jews today amounts to a fresh perspective to biblical legal practice. Although Raavad's text-based rulings are far from what is accepted by the consensus of Jewish legal norms, we are reminded to be aware of both layers of biblical reading, the plain, literal meaning of the text as well as more metaphoric interpretations. Both are indispensable when studying the Bible and understanding its message for us.

NOTES
1. The legal status for all such “heretics” in this chapter is applicable only to those who publicly pronounce such beliefs: “Those who pronounce...” Rabbinic law does not restrict the beliefs of one’s unuttered conscience. See the precise language in Mishne Torah, Laws of Repentance, 3:15-7 for further analysis of this view.
2. See Exodus 8:19, ibid 13:3, Deuteronomy 15:5, Psalms 34:15, Proverbs 15:3, etc. R. Abraham the son of Maimonides makes note of this reality in his lifetime in his Epistle, Milchamot Hashem (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1953), p.52, sharply referring to those European Jews who embrace these literal views of God’s personifications as “embracing the impurity of Idol Worship.”
3. R. Solomon of Chelme (Mirkevet ha-Mishne, Laws of Kings and Wars, ibid) astutely notes that Raavad is making a more subtle point than what might appear at first glance. For Raavad, while prophecies in the Prophets and Writings may be taken allegorically, the same does hold true regarding prophecies of the Pentateuch. He states: “See the [Raavad's] Glosses, for his intent is to [demonstrate] that the [prophetic] words of the Pentateuch may not be interpreted hyperbolically (as is the case with the words of other Prophets), for there is no verse in the Pentateuch that leaves its textual intent. And [in reality], there is no discrepancy here, for the verse For I have given you their fear and trepidation... (Gen. 9:2) applies when Israel dwells upon their land and while the land [of Israel] is situated; the beasts will flee from the settlements, but if [Israel] acts rebelliously, then "you will flee even when no one is chasing [...] (Lev. 26:37)," "and the land will be desolate..." So the land [of Israel] will be full of the beasts of the field via natural means. And this [interpretation] is straightforward."
4. “Having” or “not having” blood is a euphemistic equivalent of being guilty of the killing or not. See Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, Exodus 22:1.
5. This is the rabbinic rule of biblical interpretation known as Ein Mikra Yotzeh Miydei Peshuto. See TB Shabbat 63a, TB Yevamot 24a.
6. It is improbable that the verse restricts priests from leaving only while physically in a state of having oil upon them, as the oil dissolves within minutes after contact with human flesh. An alternative approach is also held by Maimonides (Mishne Torah: Laws of Temple Entering 2:5).
7. The full text of this discussion may be found in Torat Kohanim, Shemini § 43.
8. Various grains are obligated to be tithed as well.
9. See Leviticus 13:9-10. See also Isaiah 2:14, pertaining to the root-word analysis of se’et.
10. The Mishna (Nega’im 1:1) defines these forms of skin disease as follows: “The appearances of diseased patches (nega’im) are two which are four: Baheret is bright like snow, its subcategory is like the lime of the Temple. And se’et is like the membrane of an egg, its subcategory is like white wool. [These are] the words of R. Meir. And the Sages state: Se’et is like white wool, its subcategory is like the membrane of an egg.” Based on the textually loyal reading of the appropriate verses in Leviticus 13, Raavad does not rule in accordance with any opinion in this Mishna or with the renditions presented in the Talmud (Shevuot 6b). In fact, the only supporting views for Raavad’s rendition may be found in Targum Onqelos’s rendition to Leviticus 13:2 and in the Sifra (Tazria:1:4).