

WHAT IS THE PSHAT OF A METAPHORICAL MITZVAH?

G-D: *“DON’T SEETHE A KID IN IT’S MOTHER’S MILK!”* (Shemot 23:19)

Mosheh: *“I see – You forbid us to cook the meat of any domestic mammal in the milk of any domestic mammal.”*

G-D: **NO**, I SAID *“DON’T SEETHE A KID IN IT’S MOTHER’S MILK!!!”* (Shemot 34:26)

Mosheh: *“Now I see – it’s not only cooking, You also forbid us to eat the meat of any domestic mammal that has been cooked in the milk of any domestic mammal.”*

G-D: NO, I SAID *“DON’T SEETHE A KID IN IT’S MOTHER’S MILK!!!”* (Devarim 14:21)

Mosheh: *“Ok, now I get it – it’s not just eating, You also forbid us to derive any benefit from the meat of any domestic mammal that has been cooked in the milk of any domestic mammal.”*

The old (ancient?) joke above captures a classic Rabbinic response to Biblical repetition; if the Torah says something twice, it must intend something beyond the literal meaning. Repetition is not merely for emphasis. (It is true that Yosef tells Pharaoh that he dreamed of both cows and corn for emphasis, but see Malbim – perhaps Yosef oversimplified for Pharaoh.)

Another model Rabbinic response is to capitalize on subtle differences among the supposed repetitions.

Now the command to put some set of words or ideas on our arms and foreheads appears four times in the Torah – Shemot 13:9 and 13:16, Devarim 6:8 and 11:18. In Devarim 6 the core referent is the command to love G-d; in Devarim 11 the consequences of mitzvot; and in both Shemot contexts the referent appears to be the Exodus. The Rabbis respond by requiring all four contexts to be inserted in writing into tefillin.

There are also subtle differences among the commands:

שמות יג:ט, טז						
בין עיניך	ולזכרון	ידך	על	לאות	לך	והיה
בין עיניך	ולטוטפת	ידכה	על	לאות		והיה
דברים ו:ח						
בין עיניך	לטטפת	והיו	ידך	על	לאות	וקשרתם
דברים יא:יח						
בין עיניכם	לטוטפת	והיו	ידכם	על	לאות	וקשרתם

- a) In Shemot (twice) *“it will be a sign”*; in Devarim (twice) *“you must bind them as a sign”*
- b) Shemot 13:9 *“it will be for you a sign”*; Shemot 13:16 leaves out *“for you”*
- c) Shemot 13:9 *“as a mnemonic”*; Shemot 13:16, Devarim 6:8, 11:18 *“as totafot”*
- d) Shemot 13:9, *“on your hand”*; Shemot 13:16 spells *“hand”* with an extra *“hay”*; Devarim 6:8 has *“hands”*, spelled the same as *“hand”* in Shemot 13:9
- e) Devarim 6:8 spells *totafot* without a vav; Shemot 13:16 and Devarim 11:18 spell it with
- f) Devarim 11:18 uniquely has *“your (plural) hands”* and *“your (plural) eyes”*;

but the Rabbis, so far as I can tell, have no systematic account of these differences, especially no explanation of why each variant happens in its particular context. This seems a missed midrashic opportunity, and I welcome correction or explanations.

What about the pashtanim? Rashbam makes a striking comment to Shemot 11:9:

– "לאות על ירך"
לפי עומק פשוטו
יהיה לך לזכרון תמיד
כאילו כתוב על ירך,
כעין "שימני כחותם על לבך" (שיר השירים ח:ו)
– "בין עיניך"
כעין תכשיט ורביד זהב שרגילין ליתן על המצח לנו:
"It will be for you a sign"-
According to the **depth of its pshat**
'it will be for you a constant mnemonic
as if it were written on your hand,
similar to "*place me as a seal on your heart*" (Shir haShirim 8:6)
"*between your eyes*" –

in the manner of the adornment and gold band that they regularly place on the forehead for beauty

The "depth pshat" here is that 11:9 is not referring to tefillin, but rather refers to "them" being metaphorically on hands and foreheads: "as if". Note that Rashbam imports זכרון/mnemonic from the second phrase to the first, and feels compelled to add "as if written on your hand" to make the metaphor work.

Ibn Ezra in both his commentaries rejects this interpretation, but with significantly different rhetoric. Here is the "Short" commentary:

ובעבור שהעתיקו כן חז"ל –
בטל הפירוש הראשון,
כי אין עליו עדים נאמנים כמו שיש לפירוש השני:
Since Chazal adopted so (the literal approach) –
the first (metaphorical) interpretation is a nullity
since it does not have reliable witnesses like those for the second interpretation.

The objection seems to be one of authority – Ibn Ezra provides no substantive literary or theological grounds for rejecting the metaphorical interpretation.

But here is the "Long" commentary:

יש חולקין על אבותינו הקדושים,
שאמר כי "לאות" "ולזכרון"

על דרך

"כי ליות חן הם לראשך, וענקים לגרגרותיך" (משלי א:ט),

גם וקשרתם לאות על ידיך (דבר' ו:ח) כמו קשרם על לוח לברך תמיד (משלי ו, כא),

גם וכתבתם על מזוזות ביתך (דבר' ו:ט), כמו כתבם על לוח לברך (משלי ג:ג).

ומהו שיהיה לאות ולזכרון?

שיהיה שגור בפירך כי ביד חזקה הוציאך ה' ממצרים.

ואין זה דרך נכונה,

כי בתחלת הספר כתוב משלי שלמה,

והנה כל מה שהזכיר הוא דרך משל,

ואין כתוב בתורה שהוא דרך משל – חלילה! רק הוא כמשמעו,

על כן לא נוציאנו מיד פשוטו,

כי בהיותו כמשמעו איננו מכחיש שקול הדעת כמו ומלתם את ערלת לבבכם (דבר' י, טז)

שנצטרך לתקנו לפי הדעת

There are those who dispute with our holy ancestors

saying that "as a sign" and "as a mnemonic"

follow in the way of

"for they are a gracious accompaniment for your head, and necklaces for your throat" (Mishlei 1:9)

also that "you must tie them as a sign on your hands"

is like "tie them on the tablet of your heart continually" (Mishlei 6:21)

is like "write them on the tablet of your heart continually" (Mishlei 3:3).

What (acc. to them) is the (actual) sign and mnemonic?

That it should be fluent in your mouth "that with a mighty hand Hashem took you out of *Mitzrayim*".

But this is not a correct path,

because in the beginning of the book (Mishlei) it is written "*the meshalim/allegories of Shlomoh*",

making clear that everything he mentions is by way of allegory,

but it is not written in the Torah that it is by way of allegory – *chalilah!* rather it is literal

therefore we will not remove it from its *peshat*,

because its being literal does not contradict rational judgment

as does "and you will circumcise the foreskins of your hearts" (Devarim 10:16),

which we must 'correct' (i.e., understand metaphorically) to accord with reason.

In this iteration Ibn Ezra argues that the default setting of a Torah interpreter, unlike a Mishlei/Proverbs Interpreter, is to understand things literally; we resort to metaphorical interpretation only when the literal meaning seems not to accord with reason – for example, when it seems to mandate open-heart surgery as a spiritual remedy.

Ibn Ezra's second approach seems to place all literal meaning on the same footing as Rambam placed creation ex nihilo – true unless absolutely impossible. This is not my approach to Chumash at all; I prefer instead my 11th grade rebbe, Rabbi Shelomoh Danziger, who told us that "anyone who can't see that the Garden of Eden is a metaphor is an idiot". I prefer to allow literary context or tradition (as in

the Short commentary) to decide the issue. Note that Dr. Lockshin suggests several historico-polemical contexts that help explain why Ibn Ezra chose otherwise.

Ibn Ezra's first approach runs right into the teeth of Rashbam's famous "double-truth" claim that multiple contradictory interpretations can be true so long as they are arrived at via different epistemologies. In other words, that the "depth peshat" is metaphor does not prevent the "hints of peshat" from literally mandating the wearing of tefillin.

Both Ibn Ezra and Rashbam are presumably aware that the classic Talmudic phrase (Shabbat 63a) "Scripture does not exit its *pshat*" refers in context to a claim that Tehillim 45:4 is *literally true even though intended metaphorically*, specifically that one can only use wearing a sword as a metaphor for dressing up if wearing an actual sword is considered dressing up. (My analysis, with specific reference to Rashbam, can be found [here](#).) Applied here, that might mean that the Torah could only speak of having words on one's arm and forehead as mnemonics if those were normal memorial modalities. In other words, the metaphor makes sense only for a population that literally wears tefillin – who else wears signs on hands, and memorials on foreheads?

But Rashbam clearly rejects this possibility – he understands the metaphor as "**as if written**" on hands, rather than as if words were bound to them, and to a gold band on the forehead. Perhaps he reasons that this is the first of the verses referring to arms and foreheads as sign-locations, and so cannot rely on the still-to-come literal commands for tefillin (but perhaps the wearing of tefillin-like mnemonics preceded the commandment?). Note again that each of these analogies requires a forced reading of the text.

Dr. Lockshin in his translation/commentary on Rashbam cites Eliezer Touitou as arguing that Rashbam agreed that at least the verses in Devarim were literal commands. I'm not sure why Devarim specifically – perhaps the verb "you must tie"? – as it seems to me plausible that Rashbam also understands 11:16 as literal. This, as he notes, strengthens the possibility that Ibn Ezra is not responding to Rashbam, but rather to those who understand all four verses metaphorically and reject the literal mitzvah of tefillin *in toto*.

It turns out, then, that Rashbam's position here may have no theoretical significance – since Chazal do not systematically utilize the four verses, he may feel that interpreting one of them metaphorically has no halakhic impact. He would still need to account for the physical presence of Shemot 13:9 in tefillin, but that does not strike me as hard to do.

For my money, however, the mystery is why Rashbam thinks that this verse is plausibly metaphorical. Here is the entire sentence of Torah:

והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר
בעבור זה עשה ה' לי בצאתי ממצרים:
והיה לך לאות על ידך ולזכרון בין עיניך

למען תהיה תורת ה' בפיוך
כי ביד חזקה הוצאך ה' ממצרים:
ושמרת את החקה הזאת למועדה מימים ימימה: ו

You must tell your son on that day:

For the sake of this Hashem did for me when I departed Mitzrayim
and it will be for you a sign on your hand and a mnemonic between your eyes
so that the Torah of Hashem will be in your mouth
that with a mighty hand Hashem took you out of Mitzrayim.

Is it not clear that it would be illegitimately chaining metaphors to say that they should be *as if* written on your **hand** *so that* they can be in your **mouth**?

On the other hand – doesn't Ibn Ezra have to concede that "so that the Torah of Hashem will be in your mouth" is a metaphor? So why does he insist on taking the hand as literal?

What seems missing throughout both Ibn Ezra and Rashbam is the recognition that actions can be simultaneously literal and metaphorical - we put on tefillin *because* the arm and the head *symbolize* action and thought; and *because* the arm *reminds* us of the **metaphorical** "mighty arm" with which G-d took us out of Egypt.

So what am I missing that they saw? I look forward to your replies and suggestions.

Shabbat shalom

Aryeh Klapper