

Serious readers are constantly caught between the Scylla of underreading and the Charybdis of overreading. Deborah Klapper provides the beautiful analogy that Midrashists see Torah as the only letter received from the love of one's life; would one not read it over and over, seeking to make sure that one has captured every nuance of meaning? But this would be a poor way of reading technical manuals, especially those GoogleTranslated from Mandarin. Pashtanim are constantly alert lest their thoughts replace those of G-d, but they run the risk of mistaking a love letter for a manual. I would go further and say that underreading is not just a matter of missing nuance, but of misreading (as the pashatanim often point out in their critiques of each other).

This week I will offer first a paragraph from Ibn Caspi, perhaps the greatest of philosophic pashtanim, and ask you to judge whether he is underreading, and if yes, what the costs are of that underreading. I'll follow that with a light Channukkah piece, not on Chumash but on Channukkah, which should suffice to show that the midrashic impulse applies to Rabbinic literature as well, and be interested on comments regarding overreading.

Here is Ibn Caspi:

אמנם אחר שזכר נותן תורתנו שאמר יוסף "אחיכם האחד יאסר", זכר שלקח את שמעון ולא באר לנו הסבה מה שבחר בו, ומי ינבא. אמנם אין ספק לנו שעזיבת זכרון זה היה, אם כי לא תצא לנו תועלת בזכרונו, אם לבחירת הקצור. לכן אין עלינו לטרוח לדעת סבת זה הייחוד, ואולי יוסף או אחד ממשרתיו לקחוהו ע"פ הגורל, אך על צד ההזדמן, ואולי שמעון רצה זה על עצמו, או אחיו חלו פניו על זה, או אולי לא היה סבה לזה דבר מכל מה שזכרנו אבל סבות אחרות, וכבר הודעתך כי אין לדיין אלא מה שעיניו רואות. וכן באמרו "ויפתח האחד את שקו וכו'", ולא באר מי היה זה, וגם למה לא פתחו האחים שקיהם עד בואם לארץ כנען, כמו שמפורש, כי לכל זה יתכנו סבות רבות מתחלפות, היו נודעות בלי ספק אצל נותן תורתנו, אבל רצה לעזוב זכרם או להיותם מותר וקליפות, אם לבחירתו בתכלית הקיצור.

However, after the Giver of Our Torah mentioned that Yosef had said "one of your brothers will be imprisoned", He mentioned that (Yosef) took Shimon, but He did not explain to us any reason for (Yosef) choosing Shimon, and who can prophesy it? However, we have no doubt that omitting any mention of this (reason) was either because we would derive no useful lesson from it being mentioned, or else out of His choice of concision. Therefore we have no obligation to expend effort to know the cause of (Shimon) being singled out – perhaps Yosef or one of his aides selected him via lottery, or perhaps out of convenience, or perhaps Shimon wished this upon himself (i.e., volunteered), or perhaps his brothers persuaded him, or perhaps the reason for this matter was not one of those we have mentioned, but rather other reasons, and I have already informed you that 'a judge can judge only in accord with what his own eyes see'. Similarly, when (the Torah) says "One of them opened his sack etc.", and didn't specify who it was, and also why the brothers did not open their sacks until they came to the Land of Canaan, as is explicit, all these have multiple difference possible reasons, which were undoubtedly known to the Giver of Our Torah, but He wished to omit mention of them either because they were superfluous and mere shells, or because of His choice of ultimate concision.

And here is my Channukkah piece:

The second chapter of **מסכת שבת** is **במה מדליקין**, literally "With what do we light?" The Mishnah begins with a list of the oils and wicks that may not be used for Shabbat candles because they do not generate a consistent, unwavering light, and therefore we might be tempted to adjust it on Shabbat, which would

be a violation of הבערה. The Talmud on Shabbat 21a-b records a three-way מחלוקת as to whether these oils and wicks can be used to light חנוכה candles, whether on a weekday or on Shabbat.

According to Rav Huna, one may not light with them either on a weekday or on Shabbat;
according to Rabbi Zeira in the name of Rav Matnah (according to some in the name of Rav),
one may light with them either on a weekday or on Shabbat;
and according to Rav Chisda, one may light with them on a weekday, but not on Shabbat.

What is the explanation of this machloket? The gemara explains that
regarding Shabbat, the basis of the machloket is whether or not one is permitted to use the light
from the חנוכה candles;
and regarding weekdays, the basis of the machloket is whether or not, if the candle goes out
before the end of its allotted time (in the time of the Mishnah from sunset until the end of
pedestrian traffic in the market) , one is obligated to relight it.

If one is permitted to use the light, then it is forbidden to use these oils and wicks on
Shabbat, as regarding the חנוכה candles, just as regarding the Shabbat candles, there is
room for concern lest one adjust the flame;
and if one is obligated to relight, it is forbidden to use these oils and wicks on a
weekday, lest they be extinguished while you are inattentive, with the result that you
will not fulfill your obligation.

But what lies behind these secondary machlokot? In other words, why is there a dispute as to whether
one must relight a חנוכה candle that goes out early, and why is there a dispute as to whether one may
use the light of a חנוכה candle?

Rashi explains that using the light was banned to symbolically demonstrate that these are mitzvah
candles, and plausibly, we can say that the dispute as to whether one must relight depends on whether
the mitzvah is to light the candles, or rather to arrange for the candles to be lit.

However, we still can ask: Is there a connection between these two machlokot? Do the three halakhic
positions stem from different visions of the mitzvah in its entirety?

I think yes, and here they are:

According to Rav Huna, it is very important to emphasize the difference between Shabbat
candles and חנוכה candles;
according to Rav Zeira, the commonalities;
and according to Rav Chisda, both the differences and the commonalities.

Why?

According to Rav Huna, we emphasize the miracle of the Hasmonean victory, which came about
through human effort, unlike Shabbat, which comes about on its own;
according to Rabbi Zeira, we emphasize the miracle of the oil, which came directly from
Hashem;
and according to Rav Chisda, we should not give one miracle precedence over the other.

Practically - we rule like Rabbi Zeira, perhaps because after the Churban, the significance of the victory
diminished, whereas the miracle of the oil turned into a symbol of the capacity of the light of Judaism to
remain lit through all the years of this long Exile.

However – the RAMO brings that it is permitted for a person to impose stringency on himself and to
relight a candle that extinguished before its time, albeit without a blessing. It seems to me proper to do

this, as in our time the meaningfulness of the victory has returned, at least partial – we have independence but not a Temple - via the State of Israel. But it is still not clear that this is a historically necessary return rather than an accident in the history of the Jewish people, and therefore one should not make a blessing. But one should strive to ensure that in the end it will become clear that it would have been proper to make the blessing.

Shabbat shalom veChannukkah Sameiach!

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