



## **Teaching Parshanut**

### **Rivka Kahan**

In this course, we will analyze the writings of eight major Biblical commentators to understand their unique approaches to determining the meaning of the Biblical text. We will pay attention to the ways in which the commentators integrate both tradition and innovation, and will analyze their works to understand the methodology and ideology that inform each thinker's approach. This course is designed to enrich classroom teaching, and as such the course will include ideas and approaches for activities to engage students in the study of Biblical commentary, as well as discussion of fundamental educational goals. In each unit we will make intensive use of primary sources in addition to the secondary sources that are included in this syllabus.

### **Course Requirements and Grading**

This course has been structured so that each unit builds on the ones that precede it. Since we will be building our knowledge of parshanut and comparing commentaries to each other, it is important that students **complete all the assignments, including the exercises in each unit**. I strongly urge you to keep up with the pace of the course, as the work tends to pile up very quickly, making it harder to complete the course successfully. Feel free to contact me with any special problems.

#### **The grading scale is as follows:**

Automated questions: 35% of the final grade.

In-person Zoom meeting: 5%

Questionnaires and blog entries: 30% of the final grade.

Final assignment: 30% of the final grade.

#### **Office hours**

I am happy to communicate by email or to set up a time for a Zoom meeting with any student who would like to discuss the course or teaching Tanakh and parshanut in general. I can be reached at [rivka.kahan@gmail.com](mailto:rivka.kahan@gmail.com). Feel free to contact me!



## Course Units and Readings

### **Unit 1: : לִּישׁוּב הַבְּכוּרָה: Fundamentals of Perush Rashi/The Mind of Rashi**

This unit will analyze Rashi's original exegetical approach, including defining the notion of אגדה through analysis of Rashi's commentary. Through this study, we will develop an understanding of Rashi's approach to *peshat* and *midrash*, as well as his foundational role and innovation in the history and development of *parshanut hamikra*.

#### Readings:

Angel, Hayyim. "The Paradox of Parshanut: Are our Eyes on the Text, or on the Commentators? Pirkei Nehama: Nehama Leibowitz Memorial Volume Edited by Moshe Ahrend, Ruth Ben-Meir, and Gavriel H. Cohn." *Tradition* 38:4 (Winter 2004).

Cohen, Mordechai Z. "'Reproducing the Text': Nehama Leibowitz on Traditional Biblical Interpretation In Light of Ludwig Strauss's Literary Theory." *The Torah U-Madda Journal* Vol. 17 (2016-17), pp. 1-34.

Grossman, Avraham. *Rashi*. Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012.

### **Unit 2: The Heart of Rashi**

This unit will explore the core values and religious concepts that emerge from Rashi's commentary, with the goal of helping students understand Rashi not only as a commentator but as an educator, and developing an appreciation of Rashi as Rabban Shel Yisrael. In both Units 1 and 2, we will learn about Nehama Leibowitz's distinctive approach to Rashi as well as other approaches.

#### Readings:

Grossman, Avraham. *Rashi*. Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012.

### **Unit 3: Fundamentals of Perush Rashbam**

This unit will analyze the Rashbam's approach to *peshat* and *midrash* in his commentary on narrative and halakhic sections of Humash. We will analyze his *perush* to determine the criteria he developed to arrive at his understanding of *peshuto shel mikra*.

#### Readings:

Cohen, Mordechai Z. 2008. "Rashbam Scholarship in Perpetual Motion," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 98: 389-408.

Kislev, Itamar. תשס"ד. "Whoever Has Heeded the Words of Our Creator' — Rashbam's Methodological Preface to Leviticus and the Relationship between Rashi's and Rashbam's Commentaries." *Tarbiz* 73: 225-237.

Touitou, Elazar. תשמ"ב. "Peshat and Apologetics in the Rashbam's Commentary on the Biblical Stories of Moses." *Tarbiz* 51: 227-238.

#### **Unit 4: Midrash in the Writings of Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and Radak**

In this unit, we will shift our focus from the French to the Spanish school of *parshanut*. This unit will consider how the Spanish *pashtanim* related to Midrash in their *parshanut* on both narrative and halakhic sections of Humash. We will consider both the ways in which they seek *peshat* over *derash* as well as cases in which they embrace and even amplify midrashic readings of Biblical narratives. Some of the topics considered will be Ramban's approach to *maasei avot siman lebanim* and Ibn Ezra's approach to Shir HaShirim.

##### Readings:

Bernstein, Moshe J. and Maori, Yeshayahu. 1984. "The Approach of Classical Jewish Exegetes to Peshat and Derash and Its Implications for the Teaching of Bible Today." *Tradition* 21:40-53.

Funkenstein, Amos. 5740. "Parshanuto Ha-Typologit shel Ramban." *Zion* 45:35-39.

Sklarz, Miriam. 2014. "Nachmanides' Exegesis of Midrash in His Commentary on the Torah." *Snaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 23: 243-262.

#### **Unit 5: Approaches to Peshat in the Commentaries of Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and Radak**

This unit will explore definitions and criteria of peshat in the Spanish school of *peshat parshanut* through analysis of sections of the commentaries of Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and Radak. We will consider exegetical criteria such as context, use of Biblical parallels, literary structure, and conceptual simplicity in determining peshat. We will consider cases in which these three mefarshim disagree about peshat and consider the root of their disagreement.

##### Readings:

Cohen, Mordechai. "The Best of Poetry . . .': Literary Approaches to the Bible in the Spanish Peshat Tradition." *Torah U-Madda Journal* 6: 15-57.

Levine, Michelle. "Nahmanides' Literary Approach to Biblical Narrative: Varied Repetition in the Joseph Story." *Torah u-Madda Journal* 13: 88-127.

Mondschein, Aharon. 2000. “‘Only One in A Thousand of his Comments May Be Called Peshat’: Toward Ibn Ezra’s View of Rashi’s Commentary to the Torah” [Hebrew]. In *Studies in Bible and Exegesis V: Presented to Uriel Simon* [Hebrew], ed. M. Garsiel et al. Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press. Pp. 221-248.

Septimus, Bernard. 1983. “Open Rebuke and Concealed Love: Nahmanides and the Andalusian Tradition.” In: *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides: Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Pp. 11-34.

### **Unit 6: Biblical Personalities and Human Psychology**

This unit will consider how Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and Radak approach analysis of Biblical personalities, and how this reflects their general understandings of *peshat* and the purposes of Tanakh study.

#### Readings:

Levine, Michelle. 2009. *Nahmanides on Genesis: The Art of Biblical Portraiture* (Providence, RI 2009).

### **Unit 7: What is the Purpose of Studying Tanakh with *Parshanut*?**

We will draw upon what we have learned, as well as considering new sections of the commentaries, to consider the *mefarshim*’s underlying assumptions about the purpose of Tanakh study in intellectual and personal *avodat Hashem*. We will explore how the *mefarshim* attempt to achieve that purpose through their *parshanut*, and how the religious and intellectual goals of *parshanut* might inform our classroom teaching. This is a synchronous Zoom lesson.

### **Unit 8: Fundamentals of Perush Ha-Abarbanel**

This unit will analyze the commentary of Abarbanel, considering both how he builds upon and branches away from the commentators who preceded him. We will consider fundamental methodological and conceptual topics within Abarbanel’s commentary, such as his approach to literal versus allegorical Biblical readings and his understanding of individual and communal responsibility. We will also compare and contrast his commentary on key Biblical narratives to the commentaries of earlier *mefarshim* in order to understand the ways in which he represents both a continuation and a new beginning in the development of *parshanut*.

#### Readings:

Angel, Hayyim. 2009. “Abarbanel: Commentator and Teacher: Celebrating 500 Years of His Influence on Tanakh Study.” *Tradition* 42:9-26.

Lawee, Eric. 1996. “From the Pages of Tradition: Don Isaac Abarbanel: Who Wrote the Books of the Bible?” *Tradition* 30:65-73.

### **Unit 9: The Commentary of Rav Hirsch**

This unit will explore Rav Hirsch's goals, ideology, and methodology as they emerge through his perush on the Torah. Through selected passages of his commentary, we will develop an understanding of Rav Hirsch's theology, ideas about human nature and *avodat Hashem*, and exegetical objectives, and will consider his thought within his historical context.

#### Readings:

Chertok, Ted. 2011. "Person, Family and Community — The Individual and the Collective in Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's Biblical Commentary." *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 18:4, 402-420.

Ganzel, Tova. "Explicit and Implicit Polemic in Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's Bible Commentary." 2010. *Hebrew Union College Annual* 81:171-191.

Kurzweil, Zvi E. 1960. "Samson Raphael Hirsch: Educationist and Thinker." *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 2:2, 286-303.

### **Unit 10: Fundamentals of Perush HaMalbim**

This unit will explore the unique conceptual approach of the Malbim, which embraces both tradition and innovation. We will analyze the structure of his commentary, his focus on *peshat*, his understanding of Biblical parallelism, the linguistic and psychological lenses through which he interprets Tanakh, his use of sources, and his exegetical goals. We will consider the relation of the Malbim's commentary to his historical, religious, and intellectual context.

#### Readings:

Alter, Robert. 1985. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. New York: Basic Books, pp. 3-61.

Berlin, Adele. 1985. *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 1-30; 64-102; 137-141.

Gruber, Mayer. 1993. "The Meaning of Biblical Parallelism: A Biblical Perspective." *Prooftexts* 13:3, pp. 289-293.

Kugel, James. 1981. *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 1-58.

### **Unit 11: Major Disagreements Among Mefarshim**

This unit will present several major exegetical disagreements among the *mefarshim* on specific Biblical narratives and explore how to understand the roots of those disagreements in light of

what we have learned about the approaches of the *mefarshim*. The goal is to be able to analyze exegetical disagreements with knowledge of the *mefarshim*'s fundamental exegetical premises.