

Rabbinical Exegesis

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We cannot attempt in this place to give a complete account of the principles of Rabbinical exegesis, or of the rules to be observed in deducing Halachah from texts of Scripture. It will be enough to give some examples of the methods which were in use, and to refer the reader for fuller details to more extensive works upon this subject.

It was distinctly asserted, as a fundamental principle, that Scripture employed only such modes of expression as were common in ordinary language, and only rarely was it admitted that mere figures and illustrations were introduced. For clearness' sake. Scripture sometimes repeats or adds, what might otherwise have been inferred, as in Deut. 24:16 ; but if a statement is simply repeated, the repetition indicates that something additional was now meant to be conveyed.

Inferences may be drawn from the juxtaposition of laws on subjects vastly different ; and often a word or verse is explained by a parallel passage in which the same word occurs. Thus, Ex. 12:19, the word used for found "no leaven shall be found " occurs in Gen. 44:12, as : "he searched and found " ; and again, the word used for searched occurs in Zeph. 1:12, as : "I will search Jerusalem with candles." Hence leaven (Exo. 12:19) must be searched for with candles.

Rules were laid down for cases where different provisions of the law came into conflict, and for solving apparent contradictions. If one command ran contrary to another, i.e. could not be executed at the same time with the other, the more comprehensive, the more frequently recurring, or the more holy and important, took precedence.

Where a command ran contrary to a forbid, the command set aside the forbid, provided it was not necessary to transgress a forbid before the command could be obeyed ; nor might it run contrary to two forbids, or to a forbid with a command attached to it, unless the forbid was particular, while the command for which it was to be set aside was general, or else the forbid was one of which the neglect involved the Divine threat of "being cut off".

[When two passages of Scripture seemed entirely to contradict one another, it was held that if one of them confirmed the injunction contained in the second, while the second appeared to annul the injunction of the first, the second passage was to be rejected. Thus in Lev. 6:14 it was inferred that the injunction "before the Lord," i.e. before the Holy Place, or on the west, overrode the injunction " before the altar," i.e. on the south.]

If, however, there was only a partial contradiction between two passages, it was necessary to wait till a third verse was found which reconciled them. So Exo. 40:35 and Num. 7:89 are reconciled by means of Exo. 40:34,

Again, careful distinctions are drawn between the different modes of deducing logical conclusions from one or more passages of Scripture, If a legal determination applies to a less important object or relation, it of course equally applies to a more important cognate object or relation. This mode of conclusion is termed "Kal Ve-Chomer" (light and heavy). A well-known instance of this occurs in Num. 12:14. By the "Gezerah Shavah", or same class, it is meant that one or more words of the same kind occurring in two texts indicate that they belong to the same class, and hence are subject to the same legal provision.

[For example, from the mention of the "right foot" in Lev. 14:17, the conclusion was drawn that a widow should draw off the right shoe of her brother-in-law, who refused to perform his duty as next-of-kin (Deut. 25:9).]

¹ Edersheim, Alfred, *History of the Jewish Nation after the Destruction of Jerusalem under Titus*, Appendix VII. *Rabbinical Exegesis*

However, the application of this mode of inference required the sanction of tradition. The "Hekesh" differed from the Gezerah Shavah in that the latter proceeded upon the analogy of the words, the former upon that of the contents of the two passages. Thus, as in Deut. 15:12, male and female slaves are placed in the same category, it is inferred that the laws applying to the one apply also to the other. Hence, as a female slave becomes the property of the purchaser merely by payment, a male slave is subject to the same regulation, etc.

In a fourth mode of reasoning, a common quality which was found in one or more clauses was elevated into a general principle, and the legal determinations applicable to one case became in consequence applicable to all analogous cases. Thus in Lev. 15:4, every bed and every chair of him that has an issue is declared unclean. From the special mention of these two objects, which belong to two different classes of one genus, it is inferred (by a comparison of the two) that the quality common to both is that the party affected rests on them ; and the legal inference is, that all things which serve for resting are unclean. This method of combination and deduction is termed "Binjan Av " (the building or structure of the father), and may either be a simple Binjan Av, or a combination from two verses.

Another group of exegetical principles was derived from the pleonastic structure of whole sentences. If in a sentence a general expression occurred, followed by a particular one, or vice-versa, one of these was apparently superfluous, as the general naturally included the particular. These expressions were then combined into one sentence, the first expression being the subject, the second the predicate.

The general expression was termed "Kelal", the particular "Perat" ; and the rule was, that the predicate modified the subject, so that the object of the law was general or particular according as the predicate was general or particular. We have thus two exegetical

principles, Kelal and Perat, and again Perat and Kelal.

We give an illustration of each. In Lev. 1:2 it is commanded to "bring an offering of beasts (in our version, cattle), of the herd and of the flock". The expression "beasts" is the Kelal, "herd" and "flock" the Perat ; and the interpretation Kelal and Perat, namely, that only such beasts as belonged to the herd, or to the flock, were to be brought.

Again, when in Num. 6:3, 4, the Nazirite is interdicted from partaking of wine, vinegar, etc., and from eating anything made of the vine, we have Perat and Kelal, and accordingly the inference that nothing coming from the vine, not even leaves or stalks, were to be used by the Nazirite. If a sentence consisted of more than two members, various combinations of general and particular terms might occur, but the only one of importance is that termed Kelal, Perat, and Kelal. In this case the Kelal was first absorbed into a Perat, and then again swallowed up into the Kelal.

While the Perat was thus generalized, it still retained many of its peculiarities, as its properties were specified, and the legal determination extended to all that shared these properties. Thus in Deut. 14:26 we have a Kelal, Perat, Kelal : "Thou shalt bestow that money for whatsoever thy soul lust after, for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or for whatsoever thy soul desires"

In order to generalize the Perat in the above text, its essential qualities, namely, that it is fruit from fruit ("seed from seed"), and produced from the earth, are first selected. Its non-essential quality is, that all these objects were originally formed from the ground, not from water, etc. According to the prevailing opinion, the non-essential qualities determined whether an object came within the range of that legal determination. Thus in the above case it was ruled that birds or fishes were not to be bought with that money. The general exegetical principle was expressed as follows : "Kelal,

Perat, and Kelal you can only infer that which is like to the Perat”.

Talmudical ingenuity traced many modifications of the general principles. Thus there was “the Kelal which requires the Perat”, and “the Perat which requires the Kelal”. The rules of Kelal and Perat might also be applied to clauses, or even verses, in their mutual relation.

If a general legal determination was followed by a kindred particular, the latter modified the general, either in the way of determining it more particularly, or of limiting it. Thus, when it was in general forbidden to work on the Sabbath, while in Exo. 35:3 it was particularly added that no fire was to be kindled, the latter more clearly determined that not only working in general, but particularly every kind of work, was interdicted.

On the other hand, as the statement that redemption was not to be taken for a murderer was needless, it was meant to indicate that redemption might be taken in cases of inferior importance, such as in that of an “eye for an eye.”

[These different methods of drawing inferences from the statements of Scripture were not all of equal value, and some were only to be used with caution. Especially the argument from analogy underwent in the course of time numerous modifications and limitations. Rab, indeed, restricted its use altogether to cases in which the two passages compared dealt with the same subject-matter. An important distinction was drawn between proof proper and a mere reference. There were numerous Halakhah which, though generally received, rested only on custom and tradition, and could not be proved from Scripture. In such cases the attempt was made to connect the traditional usage with the sacred text, by discovering some hint or support for it in Scripture through methods which often seem to us entirely valueless and arbitrary.]

Thus, if an acknowledged Halakhah could be established by an alteration of the vowelpoints

of the text, such a change was unhesitatingly made. Anything unusual in the language indicated a special meaning, since Scripture contained nothing that was not absolutely necessary. Letters might be drawn from the end of one word to the beginning of another, or words thrown out of their natural order, to establish a Halakhah. Similarly, sentences and whole sections might be interchanged.

In order to reconcile the Halakhah with the sacred text, it became necessary to seek in the latter indications for enlarging technically called “increasing” and for limiting its provisions. The particles “and, also, that,” belonged to the first class; “only, merely,” etc., to the second. Some, such as the article, the suffixes, etc., enlarged or limited according to circumstances. But if the connection between a Halakhah and a text was deemed certain, almost anything might be employed for proving all the details of the former. Thus the verb “he shall be” was, according to the value of its letters in numerals, made to indicate that a vow, not otherwise limited, extended over thirty days. Naturally, in deductions of this character, great weight was attached to the authority of celebrated Rabbins as warranting certain interpretations, which might again be used for involving other inferences. Thus the Halakhah continually increased, in agreement with the principle that “every point was a hill and mountain” (of laws).

This sketch will enable the reader to form a tolerably accurate idea both of the method and of the results of Rabbinical studies. It will also enable him to understand the controversies to which we have partly referred, and to appreciate the extant monuments of Jewish exegetical investigations. When the elders of Bethera confessed their inability to decide the question of the occurrence of the Passover on the Sabbath, it is said that Hillel had endeavored to prove it by a Hekesh, by a Kal Ve-Chomer, and by a Gezerah Shavah, but that he was unsuccessful until he referred to a tradition from Shemajah and Abtalion. From this we gather that at that time the Middoth or

exegetical rules had not yet been received by the Synagogue. To Hillel, Jewish historians ascribe the following seven Middoth :

1. Kal Ve-Chomer, *inductio a minore ad majorem*. Tosefta Sanli. vii.
2. Gezerah Shavah, verbal analogy.
3. Binjan Av from one verse, or deduction by combination from one verse.
4. Binjan Av from two verses.
5. Kelal and Perat, generalization and particularization.
6. Hekesh Mah Mazinu, analogy of the contents of a verse, " as it results from one passage."
7. Inference from the context.

These Middoth, in their development, gave rise to certain controversies in which Nahum of Gimso and Nechuniah the son of Hakanah distinguished themselves on opposite sides ; the former asserting that the particles "only, also", were meant to extend or limit the meaning of the text, the latter denying it.

These two sages were followed by Akiba and Ishmael, of whom the former adopted, enlarged, and elaborated the views of Nahum, the latter those of Nechuniah. Akiba carried the principles of Nahum to their utmost consequences, and would even have made his interpretations the basis of other deductions. Ishmael resisted these attempts, and propounded thirteen Middoth, which are only a logical explanation of the seven Middoth of Hillel. Middoth

3, 4, and 6 were contracted into one, Middah 5 was divided into eight separate Middoth, something was added to Middah 7, while Middah 13 is entirely new.

The 13 Middoth of Rabbi Ishmael, whose authority was universally acknowledged by the Synagogue, and which were inserted into the prayer-book, are:

1. Kal Ve-Chomer

2. Gezerah Shavah
3. Binjan Av from one, and Binjan Av from two verses
4. From Kelal and Perat
5. From Perat and Kelal
6. Kelal, Perat, and Kelal infer only what is similar to the Perat
7. Kelal which requires a Perat, and Perat which requires a Kelal
8. If anything contained in the Kelal is singled out (particularized) for a decision, this is done not in order to decide about itself, but about the Kelal
9. If anything contained in the Kelal is singled out to impose a new obligation which is related to the general obligation of the Kelal, it has been singled out in order to lighten, but not to increase the burden
10. If anything that is contained in the Kelal is singled out to impose a new obligation which is not related to the general obligation of the Kelal, it has been singled out both in order to lighten and to increase the burden (it is entirely independent of the Kelal)
11. If anything contained in the Kelal is singled out in order that a new matter may be attached to it, the latter may not again be ranged with its Kelal, unless Scripture itself expressly range it again with the Kelal
12. Something may be learned from the context of a verse and something from its own bearing
13. When two verses exclude (contradict) each other, we wait till a third verse is adduced which decides between them.

The school of Shammai differed from that of Hillel in its refusal to acknowledge the validity of the Middoth. It simply referred the Halakhah to the authority of tradition. But it has to be

remembered that while the teaching of Hillel was generally received, that of Shammai was not wholly repudiated.
