

Dimensions in Chumash

Parshas Vayigash

Concept: Taamei Hamikra as Commentary

וַיִּגַּשׁ אֵלָיו יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי אֲדֹנָי

Yehuda approached him [Yosef] and said, "Please, my master..." (44:18)

Background:

One of the features accompanying the words of the Torah are the cantillation notes, known as *taamei hamikra* or trop. These notes indicate how the words of the verse should be sung, with each sign having its own distinctive melody. The *taamim* date back to antiquity; according to many opinions, they were given to Moshe together with the Torah at Sinai.¹

Taamim that Join and Taamim that Separate – Shem and Yefes

It is important to realize that in addition to the melodic aspect of the *taamim*, they also contribute to our understanding of the words themselves. The most obvious expression of this idea is the fact that some *taamim* join words together, while others separate them by denoting pauses of varying degrees. Clearly, the way in which we group the words will impact on our understanding of their meaning.

A simple illustration of this idea can be found in the verse² which describes Shem as "אָחִי יִפְתְּ הַגָּדוֹל". The word "הַגָּדוֹל" means "big" and denotes the eldest brother. The question is: Who *was* the eldest brother? To whom does the word "הַגָּדוֹל" refer? Does it qualify the word "יִפְתְּ", indicating that he was the eldest, or does it rather qualify the word "אָחִי", stating that Shem was the eldest brother? The answer can be derived from the *taamim* of these words. The *taam* under the

¹ See e.g. Kuzari maamar 3 sec. 31, Rabbeinu Bachye to Bereishis 5:29, Responsa Radvaz vol. 3 sec. 1068 and R' Yaakov Emden, Migdal Oz, Aliyas Hakesiva. According to other opinions, the *taamim* were added in the time of Ezra, see e.g. commentaries of Tosafos, Rosh and Ran to Nedarim 37b and Abarbanel, Introduction to Sefer Yirmiyahu.

² Bereishis 10:21.

word “אָחִי”, is known as a *tipcha*. It is – conveniently – shaped like a comma, and indeed, serves as a minor pause. On the other hand, the *taam* under the word “יִפְתֹּהֹ” is known as a *mercha* and serves to connect it to the word that follows – “הַגְּדוֹל”. Thus, the *taamim* are informing us that the way to read these words is that Shem was “the brother of (אָחִי) Yefes the eldest (הַגְּדוֹל).”³

Taamim that Emphasize – Pharaoh and Yaakov

A fascinating example of a more subtle type of meaning to be gleaned from the *taamei hamikra* can be found in our Parsha. When Yosef introduces his father Yaakov to Pharaoh, we find the following exchange between the two:

וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל-יַעֲקֹב כַּמָּה יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֶּיךָ. וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל-פַּרְעֹה יָמֵי שְׁנַיִם
מִגּוֹרֵי שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאֶת שָׁנָה מְעַט וְרַעִים הָיוּ יָמֵי שְׁנַיִם חַיֵּי.

Pharaoh said to Yaakov, “How many are the days of the years of your life?” Yaakov said to Pharaoh, “The days of the years of my sojourns have been a hundred and thirty years. Few and bad have been the days of the years of my life.”

Yaakov’s answer to Pharaoh’s question is somewhat mystifying. Having been asked by the latter as to how old he was, why did he not content himself by simply replying with his age, continuing instead to comment on the quality of his years?

One of the Rishonim, the Rashbatz,⁴ explains. Pharaoh’s words to Yaakov were not merely asked as a *question*; rather, they were said as an *exclamation*. Yaakov looked so worn and weathered Pharaoh could not help but wonder how old he was! This understanding, he adds, is indicated by the *taamei hamikra*. Had Pharaoh merely been asking “How old are you?” the *taamim* accompanying his words would have joined them all together as one. However, the *taam* on the word “כַּמָּה” is known as a *zakef*, and denotes a pause for emphasis. In this light, we now understand that Pharaoh was actually exclaiming “How *old* are you?” which is a somewhat different question, expressing his disbelief that a person could be as old as Yaakov looked. In response to this, Yaakov answered, first by

³ See Sanhedrin 69b, and Rashi to Bereishis ibid. For a similar discussion, see Chagigah 6b discussing the understanding of the verse in Shemos 24:5.

⁴ Rabbeinu Shimon ben Zemach Duran, Magen Avos vol. 3 p. 56a.

stating his years, and then by proceeding to explain how the difficulties of those years had given him such an aged appearance beyond their actual number.

The Commentary of the Taamim – Broken Ladders

Taking this discussion to a completely different level, we now come to an approach to *taamei hamikra* that is found in the writings of the Vilna Gaon.⁵ According to him, the *taamim* not only tell us how to *read* the words, but can themselves serve as a *commentary* on those words. Let us see one or two examples of this approach before returning to the opening verse of our Parsha.

The Gemara⁶ relates that on one occasion Rav Papa was ascending a ladder, when one of the rungs of the ladder broke and Rav Papa nearly fell and injured himself. Upon witnessing this, his colleague, Rav Chiya bar Rav commented, “Perhaps a poor person approached you and you did not respond adequately in giving him tzedakah?” Rav Papa reflected on recent events and realized that this had indeed been the case. The question is, of all the areas which may have been the cause for this near accident, what made Rav Chiya bar Rav think that it might be related to matters of giving tzedakah?

The Vilna Gaon⁷ explains that the source in the Torah for the mitzvah of giving tzedakah are the words: “כִּי־פָתַחַתְּפֶתַח אֶת־יָדְךָ לְאִוֶּן – For you shall surely open your hand.”⁸ The *taamim* under the words “פָּתַחַתְּפֶתַח” are called “*darga*” and “*tevir*”. The word *darga* relates to the word *madreiga* and means step, while the word “*tevir*” is Aramaic for “broken”. Hence, the Torah is indicating that the consequences for being remiss in the area of giving tzedakah are that a step might be broken. This, says the Gaon, was the basis for Rav Chiya bar Rav’s suggestion.

Leaving Egypt Early

There is a well-known question regarding the duration of the Jewish people’s stay in Egypt. On the one hand, Hashem foretold Avraham that his descendants would be strangers in a land which was not theirs for four hundred years,⁹ yet in the event, the Jewish people were in Egypt for only two hundred and ten years. How are we to understand this significantly shortened term? Among the many answers

⁵ In addition to the examples cited below in Kol Eliyahu, see also Aderes Eliyahu, Shemos 30:15.

⁶ Bava Basra 10a.

⁷ Cited in Kol Eliyahu to Parshas Re’eh.

⁸ Devarim 15:8.

⁹ Bereishis 15:13.

that are given is that the intensity of the suffering in Egypt resulted in four hundred years' worth of suffering being compacted into two hundred and ten. Here, too, the Vilna Gaon¹⁰ explains that this idea is contained within the *taamei hamikra*. The verse which describes how the Egyptians embittered the Jewish people's lives states: "וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת-חַיֵּיהֶם".¹¹ The *taamim* accompanying these words are known as "*kadma ve'azla*." The word "*kadma*" relates to the word "*kodem*" and means "early", while "*azla*" is Aramaic for "to go." As such, the *taamim* on top of the words which described the bitterness and intensity of the exile indicate that this resulted in the Jewish people "going out early," after only being there for two hundred and ten years.

Yehuda's Pledge

Returning to the beginning of our parsha, the Torah describes how Yehuda approaches Yosef to plead on behalf of Binyamin: "וַיִּגֵּשׁ אֵלָיו יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי אָדֹנָי". We note that Yehuda was not the oldest son; in fact, he was the fourth. Why, then, did he step forward to intercede on Binyamin's behalf? The answer is in last week's parsha, where Yehuda undertakes to look after Binyamin, pledging to Yaakov: "If I do not bring him to you and stand him before you, then I will have sinned to you for all days."¹² Commenting on the words "for all days," Rashi cites the Midrash which explains that Yehuda was referring to his share in the World to Come, which he was prepared to forfeit if he did not return Binyamin home safely to his father.

The *taamim* accompanying the first six words of our verse are: 1. *kadma* 2. *ve'azla*, 3. *revi'i*, 4. *zarka*, 5. *munach* and 6. *segol*. We have seen that *kadma ve'azla* means to go early; *revi'i* means fourth; *zarka* means to throw, *segol* relates to the word *segulah* which is treasure, and *munach* means set aside. With this in mind, the Vilna Gaon¹³ explains that the first three *taamim* are making an observation: "*kadma ve'azla revi'i* – the fourth preceded and went forth." They are noting that Yehuda, the fourth son (*revi'i*), preceded and went (*kadma ve'azla*) before his other brothers to plead with Yosef. Why is this so? To this question, the last three *taamim* provide the answer: "*zarka munach segol* – he was throwing away treasure that was set aside." As we mentioned, Yehuda had committed that if he did not return Binyamin to Yaakov, he would thereby be

¹⁰ Kol Eliyahu Parshas Shemos.

¹¹ Shemos 1:14.

¹² Bereishis 43:9.

¹³ Kol Eliyahu Parshas Vayigash.

throwing away (*zarka*) the treasure (*segol*) that was set aside (*munach*) for him in the World to Come. Hence, although he was the fourth, he went first to intercede with Yosef.

Truly a remarkable dimension within the aspect of Chumash known as *taamei hamikra!*